

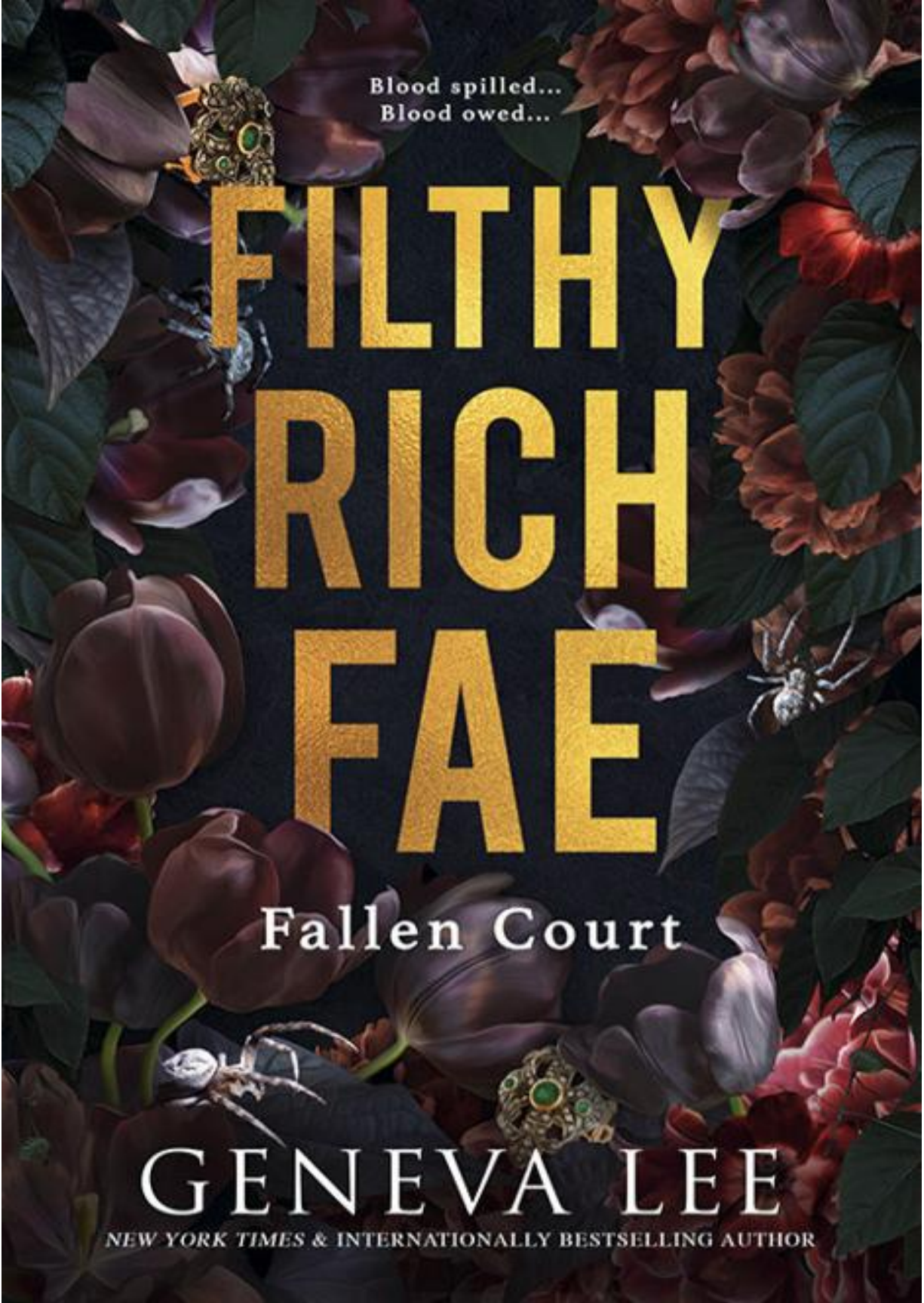
Blood spilled...
Blood owed...

FILTHY RICH FAE

Fallen Court

GENEVA LEE

NEW YORK TIMES & INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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Fallen Court is a dark and sexy urban fantasy about obsession, captivation, and sacrifice. As such, the story contains elements that might not be suitable for all readers, including death, violence, blood, gore, injury, suicide, gun violence, sexual activity, substance and alcohol use, medical treatment and emergencies, and physical assault on the page. Loss of family, child abuse in a foster home setting, rape, and genocide are discussed in backstory. Readers who may be sensitive to these elements, please take note, and remember: the only thing worse than making a bargain with the fae is breaking one...

To Becca, who taught me how to love myself.

Chapter One

Lach

Death waited on our every street corner.

It had followed me most of my life, allowing itself to be borrowed as needed. It saw the blood on my hands no matter how often I washed them. There were eight million souls in New York City, but death watched every step I took, biding its time until its turn to collect.

Any day now.

The city had changed since the last time I stepped foot in it. The sandstone and masonry giants of old were dwarfed now by towering glass-and-steel monoliths. Lurid billboards flashed advertisements, their light shimmering on the rain-slicked sidewalks. A damp earthiness from today's afternoon shower nearly masked the scent of rotting garbage and exhaust fumes. Under it all was that humming energy that never slept—but even this felt different than it had before the war.

Then, with Earth's magic cursed, I had been one of the most powerful creatures to stalk these streets. Now, magic simmered, hanging in the air like the ever-present sounds of traffic and chaos, and the city was once again a melting pot of creatures. Vampires, werewolves, witches—most with their own agendas and all vying for power—brushing shoulders with clueless mortals, the line between worlds blurring like ink on wet paper.

I kept to back alleys and side streets, using a system of portals hidden in plain view of the city's human population. I turned my collar up to block the misty rain but didn't slow my pace. I'd been in the city for two days, and the chill October evening only made me miss the Louisiana heat more. The thought elicited a pang of longing that had nothing to do with New Orleans.

It had been two days since Cate disappeared. Two days of waiting for an explanation from her foster brother, Channing, about his involvement with her kidnapping. Two days of being stuck in my sister Fiona's tiny apartment

while her girlfriend, Romy, consulted grimoires and called in favors to try to remove my newest tattoo—the mark on my neck that branded me a dead man walking. Two days of waiting for news out of the Infernal Court. Two days of silence from my own court as they dealt with the fallout of me killing MacAlister. *Two fucking days*, and I was losing my gods-damned mind.

A car horn blasted as I passed the western edge of Washington Square Park. My pace quickened as I reached Third and spotted a forlorn alley that extended only a few feet past the main thruway. I hesitated before ducking in, but no one noticed. Just as they didn't notice as I vanished past where it—and the modern world—ended and continued into long-forgotten Amity, the magical enclave tucked into a pocket of Greenwich Village.

It hadn't always been the case. When New York renamed the neighborhood streets to align with the grid and erased others from existence, Amity had hidden itself away from the city's human inhabitants and continued with its way of life as best it could while magic slumbered.

But even with newly awakened magic seeping into its cracks and crevices, the city's creatures were still ones of habit, so it was no surprise to find a green light still glowing above a battered black door nearly a century later. I rapped once, the knock deliberate but discreet, and a peephole slid open.

A pair of glittering black eyes stared out at me, but their owner didn't speak.

"I'm here to see Durant." My resolve hardened around the hole in my heart. There was no point in introductions. That would only get me killed. I just needed to get past the gatekeeper.

"Durant isn't taking visitors," she said in a rough whisper and slid the peephole shut again.

So, that's how it was going to be.

I cracked my knuckles once before nipping—snapping my fingers and rematerializing—into the vestibule, a choice I had no doubt I would pay for shortly. The owner of the glittering eyes, a woman in a tight leather dress that showcased her ample curves, stared for a moment. Her scarlet hair, cut in sharp angles, drew attention to full lips that opened with a hiss as I dropped my glamour. She lunged at me, fangs lengthening and eyes shifting to pure black.

I nipped to the other side of the tight space. "I wasn't asking."

“We don’t allow fae pieces of—”

“I would choose my next words carefully,” I warned her. Rage pounded in my chest, begging to be released. “I’m having a really bad week.” I flashed the inside of my coat, giving her a glimpse of one holster.

Would it be bad manners to shoot one of Durant’s people in his own place? Undoubtedly. But even with a death mark on my head, I knew no vampire would question fae royalty.

She paused, but a sneer curled her lip. “Is that supposed to scare me? Bullets don’t kill vampires.”

“But they do hurt, and we both know you’d rather I shot you than stake you.” One would kill her, and we both knew it. I dared her to test me. I’d been feeding my fury every day, unwilling to cave in to despair. But now that rage demanded action, preferably with a fair amount of blood.

She considered for a second before tilting her head toward an unmarked door behind the bar. “He’s in the back.”

“Thank you.” I tipped my head at her.

But she was already slinking toward the bar, where she reached for a bottle of something that looked like blood and poured herself a drink.

Squat armchairs upholstered in jewel-toned velvet were clustered around marble tables in dimly lit pockets that hid the faces of the creatures I passed. Most of the patrons in the speakeasy kept their heads down, either not eager to get involved or more interested in their absinthe and opium. Still, a few couldn’t resist the urge to stare. I was a novelty in a place like this. Fae tended to stick to their home courts, where their magic was at its strongest. Only the strongest of us could call upon ours, let alone nip, this far away from home.

But no one tried to stop me as I headed toward another door in the back. The word *office*, stamped in gold vinyl on its frosted window, was the only clue as to what waited behind it. The room inside was larger than the main floor of the speakeasy. A behemoth oak desk covered in stacks of paper and ledgers sat on one side with two empty leather club chairs before it. There was a bank of security monitors hanging on the wall, and in the center of the room, a motley group was packed around a small table, cigars and cards in hand.

Every creature froze at my entrance. Then, one by one, they threw their cards on the table. All but one.

I met Durant’s rapidly darkening eyes and nodded hello. He glanced at

his companions, sighing at the abandoned cards on the table before him, and waved a hand. "Leave us."

Curious eyes probed me as the creatures gathered their winnings and shuffled out of the back room, glancing back nervously at the money on the table. But I ignored them, unwilling to let my old friend out of my sight. Mostly because I wasn't sure that Durant still qualified as a friend, or whatever passed for friendship between our kinds. Vampires always had their own agendas—as did we—so even when we were on good terms, neither species trusted the other.

"I can't believe Veronica let you in here," he said when they were gone.

"I didn't give her a choice," I admitted.

Durant lounged back, and his open shirt collar revealed a coin pendant hanging from a cord. His hair, nearly as pale as his skin, was longer than I'd seen it in a century. He toyed with one of his leather gloves thoughtfully, and then, in a flash, a gun was pointed in my direction. "You are the last sorry piece of shit I expected to drag his ass in here tonight. I ought to kill you for what you did."

Not friends, then.

I didn't bother to draw my own weapon. Instead, I slid a smile onto my face. "Your sister is better off without me." I lifted my hands in obligatory surrender. "Besides that, I'm a changed man."

The skin on my wrist itched at the words, as if to remind me just how changed I was. The intersecting ribbons of gold—proof of my newest bargain and one that could never be broken—were hidden beneath their own glamour, but I never forgot they were there. The mark of our handfasting—a bond sealed by fate—burned and ached on my skin, and I doubted it would calm until Cate was safely by my side.

Durant stared over the barrel of his 9-millimeter, a slow grin breaking across his face. "My sister? I was talking about you cheating at cards the last time I visited New Orleans." Just as quickly as it appeared, the gun was re-holstered. He stood, buttoning his suit jacket, then crossed the room with a swift grace that belied his true nature. "I owe you one for my sister. She is better off without you. I might have had to kill you if you had stuck it out."

Without warning, he slung an arm around my shoulder and pulled me into a hug. My chest tightened with wary surprise, but I clapped a hand on his back. At least Durant was a lot more forgiving than his sister.

"Just stopping by for a visit?" He pointed to the pair of twin chairs

situated before the oak desk. I sank into the red leather seat, but Durant continued to a gold bar cart and poured two glasses of whiskey.

“I need information.” There was no point circling around that fact. Friendly charade aside, we both knew better than to trust each other. That was the trouble with arms dealers—and vampires. They were notoriously slippery.

He turned and passed a crystal glass to me. I took it but didn’t drink.

“Like the fact that you’re marked by the Wild Hunt?” he asked.

I lifted a brow. So he knew. That didn’t surprise me—it was why I’d come to him. He dealt in more than just weapons. “I see good news travels fast.”

“You pissed off a lot of people in your day. Your enemies are happy to drink to your imminent demise. That tattoo on your neck doesn’t help.”

I touched the raised tattoo on the back of my neck and frowned. The Hunt’s brand couldn’t be glamoured, and I kept forgetting it was there. The winged skull and crossbones held an ancient warning that every creature understood. *Memento mori*: remember that you will die.

But I wasn’t going to die today. Not before I found Cate.

Durant sank into the chair across the desk from me and took a slow sip of his whiskey, glancing at the untouched glass in my hand. “If I wanted you dead, I would have just shot you.”

But we both knew the drink was laced. Not with poison, but with something that leveled the playing field. Yarrow? Probably hedgethorne. Both herbs would limit my ability to call on my magic, ensuring I wouldn’t use it against Durant but also that I couldn’t escape. The drink was a test.

I lifted the glass with a grim smile and took a sip. The whiskey did a decent job hiding the herbs, save for a slight trace of bittersweetness.

I had either proved to Durant that he could relax—or that I was so desperate I was stupid. “You have contacts in London, don’t you?” I pressed on.

He inclined his head, eyes narrowing before he answered, “I do. Trouble with the Infernal Court?”

“I need to pay Bain a surprise visit. His club is open twenty-four hours. It would be useful to know when he visits.” Now *my* cards were on the table. Durant could just as easily decide to betray me as help me, especially since he knew about the death mark on my head. I couldn’t nip directly into another court without an invitation, but I *could* walk through the front

doors. I just needed to be prepared.

The vampire blew a slow stream of air out, blinking a few times as he processed this request. "London is tricky. I...shall we say...*don't get along* with the Rousseaux brother who oversees vampire-fae relationships there."

"You? But you're so charming." I took another drink, the whiskey blazing a trail of fire down my throat. It felt good after settling for Fiona's wine. But I could feel the grip on my magic both loosen and fumble, like fingers frozen from the cold. Still there but increasingly worthless. Soon I'd be cut off from it entirely.

"I can get information, but it will cost you," he warned me.

"I'm willing to pay." I reached slowly into my pocket. Durant tensed as I produced a slip of paper. I held it up like a white flag. "I also need some weapons."

He swiped it from me, letting out a low whistle as he skimmed the list. "What did Bain do to bring war to his doorstep?"

It wasn't like him to care about the particulars.

"You aren't growing a conscience, are you?" The less Durant knew, the better. He might choose to help me, but that didn't mean he wouldn't help the next person who came along asking for information, too.

He only snorted, grinning again. "There is no danger of that."

But I didn't meet his smile. "Bain knows what he did." Cate's face flashed through my mind, and I fought the painful but now familiar urge to nip directly to the gates of the Infernal Court and just start killing my way in. "Blood spilled is blood owed."

Durant chewed his lower lip for a moment before nodding. Vampires lived by a similar code. "That works both ways."

"I'm a dead man anyhow." This time, I smiled.

He studied the list more closely, shaking his head again. "It might take me a few days." He tapped the paper. "Grenades?"

"I don't have a few days," I growled, my control slipping its leash as my heart began to pound. I should have already gone after her. Gods knew what Bain had done in the last *few days*. "This is a matter of life and death."

"Isn't that always the case for you?"

Before I could answer, a red light flashed overhead, and I found myself twisting toward the door. Warning prickled the memento mori on my neck.

"It looks like we have company." Durant nodded to one of the security monitors above his desk. Six fae, looking like a crew of reject rock stars,

approached the bar. The one in the lead signaled Veronica, the vampire from earlier, shouting something. She leaped over the bar, catching a bullet squarely in the chest and crumpling into a heap on the floor. The screen blurred as creatures fled before giving way to static, the feed cutting off.

I swiveled toward Durant, reaching for my gun, suspicion flooding through my veins. After all these years, I should have known better than to trust him and been smarter than to take that drink. My fingers twitched, ready to nip away, but Durant slid open a drawer filled with guns and ammo.

“You should go if you can still nip. I’m guessing they’re here for you,” he said, threading a silencer onto the end of his pistol. “I can handle them.”

My thumb stroked the pad of my forefinger, already feeling my magic dim from the drugged whiskey. I had minutes before I lost access to it entirely—if I was lucky. If I nipped out, I might have seconds before they traced me to another location, and I couldn’t risk leading them back to Romy, my sister’s reluctantly helpful witch girlfriend. It was better to stay and fight it out. But *better* felt pretty fucking relative at the moment.

Only members of the Wild Hunt would have the balls to attack someone like Durant on his own turf, but he was outnumbered, and the Hunt wouldn’t take kindly to him helping me. They might spare the vampire or decide to make him an object lesson. And if they did, I would have to explain what happened to Durant’s sister. I reached for a second gun instead of taking his advice. “If you get killed, Baptiste will make my life hell. I’d stand a better chance with them.”

He laughed as something—or more likely, someone—slammed into the other side of the door.

“How much shit did you put in my drink?”

His eyes scanned the security monitor, his voice low and grim. “Enough to make this messy.”

Muffled footsteps sounded outside his office, followed by the echo of shattering glass a moment before the door burst open, breaching Durant’s inner sanctum. I moved instinctively, placing my back to his as the fae poured inside. Behind them, patrons scattered and fled into the night.

“Lachlan Gage, you are marked for death for the assassination of a penumbra,” the one in the lead announced, leveling his weapon directly at me.

I returned the favor. As I skimmed the group, my eyes paused on one of

the men in the back. His long black hair was pulled into a bun at the nape of his neck, a single braided plait framing his face. Goemon looked back without a hint of recognition. He had let me walk out of the bayou despite the memento mori branding me, but I knew better than to expect another mercy.

The leader's eyes flickered to my companion, growing wary as he realized what Durant was. A vampire changed the math. "We're only here to collect him. We don't want trouble."

"How unfortunate," Durant said with a battle-hardened resolve as he slid off the safety on his gun and aimed at the others. "You found it."

I stared back at the leader. "So we suggest you walk out of here while you still can."

"You can't run from the Hunt, Prince." He spat the word at me like venom.

"Who's running? I'm right here." Running only meant they would follow, which meant collateral damage. I needed to put them down.

He stepped away from the pack, nodding toward the ground. "Then let's do this the easy way. Get on your knees. We'll make it quick."

I cocked my head, fumbling for the threads of magic growing fainter by the second. My grip tightened, but my power slipped through my fingers. Soon I would be little better than a mortal, but the Hunt didn't know that. "I've never really liked the easy way."

I needed to make this count.

He lunged, and I snapped my fingers, reappearing behind him and taking a quick, clean shot. His body collapsed in a pool of blood, and I dove toward the desk as the others opened fire.

Durant dropped beside me as wood splintered, shards spraying the air as we pressed our backs to it.

"Neat trick. Want to see what I can do?" Durant called over the staccato pops.

"I'll cover you." I summoned my magic. Darkness choked the air, cutting off all light and sound. My eyes adjusted effortlessly, the shadows my natural habitat. Durant's own shifted to pitch black—a perfect predator. Nipping was a useful advantage, but they expected that. A vampire and a fae working together was harder to anticipate.

The huntsmen were not creatures of my court. Darkness did not run in their veins. Durant used the distraction to his advantage, vaulting over the

desk in a blur of fangs. I leaped up and began shooting as he ripped out one's throat and another's heart. He moved in the shadows with effortless grace, a creature of the night as deadly as the immortal soldiers. A bullet whistled past, grazing my neck. I sent another in the opposite direction, and a body hit the floor.

"On your left!" I shouted as a huntsman bolted toward Durant.

The vampire twisted, the movement as feline and lethal as a panther, and pounced, gutting the fae with brutal efficiency. But it cost him. The final hunter sent a bullet through his shoulder. Durant roared as his iron slug shattered bone, blood spraying in his face. I had the hunter by the neck before he got off another shot, my shadows surging from my body, coiling like serpents around him before plucking the gun from his fingers.

The move cost me what little magic I had left after Durant's drugged drink. My magic guttered and then sputtered out entirely. It would be a few hours before I could easily access it again.

I stared into Goemon's face. "Strange seeing you out of the bayou."

"Can't say I like it." The words were strained from my hand wrapped around his throat, but he didn't struggle. "Too many people. It made it harder to track you."

I'd resisted the urge to use magic since the night I arrived at Fiona's. Her warded apartment had kept them from finding me, but they'd arrived within minutes of me nipping past the vampire at the door. "You got here awfully fast."

"We were told you were in New York," he admitted. "We were beginning to think it was bad info, but then you nipped. You've been wise to use your magic sparingly."

Was he...helping me? Giving me information about how the Hunt worked? I'd sentenced plenty of people to their fate at the hands of his crew, but I knew little about how they operated or how their magic worked. I only knew that they were relentless.

I loosened my grip ever so slightly.

"But it's only a matter of time before we find you again." Not a threat. A warning.

"I'll try to keep a low profile."

"It won't matter, but you already know that," he said. "If you have unfinished business..."

My throat tightened, and I nodded once just to show him I understood.

Maybe he remembered Cate. Maybe he just didn't want to be the one to kill me. But eventually, he would have no choice but to carry out his mission.

"Make it quick," he gritted out.

"Thanks." I snapped his neck, letting his body fall to my feet. I didn't look down at him.

"I forgot how much your stupid bullets hurt." Durant cursed as he rose to his feet, slowed down by his mangled shoulder. He clamped a hand over the gushing wound, scowling as he looked around his office. "I'm going to get an earful about this mess when Veronica wakes up."

Blood was...everywhere.

"I'd stay and help, but somehow—"

"I would just wind up with a bigger mess." Durant kicked one of the bodies with the toe of his leather boot.

"They're not dead, and they're going to be pissed when they resurrect," I warned him. Even those with iron bullets riddling their bodies would eventually come back to life to fulfill their divine mission. Their perfect immortality was both their blessing and their curse. It also made them unstoppable.

"I'll dump them in the Hudson. That'll slow them down." He regarded me for a moment, his face unreadable. "At the risk of sounding sentimental, I think you'd better get out of New York before they wake up."

"Worried about me? That's so sweet." I passed him back his gun.

"Keep it." He walked toward a keypad on the wall. His fingers ghosted over it, and a crack appeared, sliding open to reveal a full weapons cache. "I think I'd better send some of this with you now."

"I owe you one."

"Consider this my official thanks for dumping my sister," he said as he piled weapons into two black duffel bags. "A friend of mine works security at Bain's club. I'll give him a call."

"Thank you," I said as he passed me the bags. I shrugged them over my shoulders, relaxing a little at the comforting weight, then gestured to his wound. "Is that going to be okay?"

Vampires healed quickly, but it was a bloody mess.

"I'll live, but you better get that checked out." He tipped his head, eyeing the gash on my neck. "If you want, I can dig up a Band-Aid."

I muttered something uncharitable, and he chuckled. Offering his hand, he clasped mine in a solid grip. "In all seriousness, Gage, it seems like you

have an enemy a lot closer than London.”

“Men like us always have enemies.”

“That’s why we have to remember who our friends are.” He clapped one hand on my shoulder, his eyes locking with mine. “Stay alive.”

We made our way into the main bar, where a few of the vampires were stirring back to life.

“They didn’t kill anyone.” Durant sounded surprised as he looked around.

The Hunt had inflicted plenty of damage, though. Liquor dripped from broken bottles onto the floor, tables and chairs were overturned, and bullet holes riddled each wall. “Maybe I should stick around.”

Behind the bar, Veronica started to push up, her scarlet hair now matted with blood.

“I think you better get out of here before she sees you,” Durant said as she moaned. “She’ll hand you your ass without your magic.”

I doubted that, but I gave him a grateful nod.

Night air stung the wound on my neck as I pushed out the door. No magic meant it would take its sweet time healing, and the iron in the slug wouldn’t help matters. But it had finally stopped raining, and the moon shone brightly in the cloudless sky. I melted into the night, tugging the collar of my coat higher to hide my pointed ears. Not that anyone would notice in the bedlam of New York. With the Hunt temporarily incapacitated, there was little danger in the city tonight.

The Hunt had overplayed its hand. If Durant followed through and dumped the ones who’d attacked us in the river, they might drown a couple of times before they made it to dry land. And I doubted more would show their faces now that they had pissed off one of the most powerful vampires in New York.

Between the blood I’d spilled and the task before me, I had to think before making my next move. But there was precious little time before I needed to act.

Durant was right—I had an enemy a lot closer than London. Maybe someone at his place had called the Wild Hunt, but doubt gnawed at me. First, the tainted clover. Then MacAlister had made it past my security at the Nether Court after his invitation had been rescinded and attacked Cate. Was there a snake in my own garden?

Raindrops hit my face, along with a dozen new questions, each more chilling than the last. It wasn’t over. The storm was just beginning.

Chapter Two

Cate

War.

The word hung in the air before its weight plunged to the pit of my stomach and began to churn. Bile rose in my throat, my mouth watered, and the staccato beat of my heart flew into a sprint.

Oberon wanted to start a war.

The prince of the Hallow Court, the oldest of the ruling families, the man who had hidden in a corner with me and made jokes at the Midnight Feast—was not my friend. His warm smiles had tricked me. Already dressed for the day in a tailored blue suit, he was still handsome, but now cruelty shadowed his eyes. The lines of his face seemed sharper, deepening despite the unnaturally sunny day surrounding us. A breeze whispered over me, seeping through my thin cotton nightgown. Its coolness crept through me and deepened until my fingers and toes went numb.

Next to me, Titania groaned. “You are so dramatic,” she said to her twin, her rich brown hair and amber eyes the feminine mirror of his own dark features. She grabbed a scone from the platter and began smothering it in clotted cream, somehow managing not to drop it down her silk blouse. “She’s been here for days. Can we finally kill her?”

Days? I’d been here for *days* while Lach was being hunted. The realization made a dull pain radiate through my chest even as my heart continued to race. No one knew where I was. No one was coming to save me. I barely suppressed a gasp as another pang followed like a silent warning that Titania meant business.

“At breakfast?” Oberon glanced at the linen tablecloth like he was imagining my blood splattered across it and frowned.

Say something. I fumbled for words, trying to think past the onslaught of realizations, thoughts, and fears now crowding into my brain like a panicked mob. My gaze darted past him to beautifully manicured gardens,

the hillside peppered with gold flowers beyond the grounds. There was an entire world out there—wild and unknown and potentially as deadly as my companions. But right now, it seemed eminently more survivable, whatever secrets it held. After everything—after Lach had sacrificed his own soul and had been marked by the Wild Hunt—I had to try. To run, to fight, to stay alive. I was going to save myself.

Not that I was going to make it past two centuries-old fae intent on killing me.

“Plotting to run?” Oberon asked. His dark eyes assessed me shrewdly as if he knew exactly what I was thinking.

Adrenaline shot through me, my hands gripping the arms of my chair, my body poised to spring and make a run for it. But a deep, hard-earned sense of self-preservation locked me in place and loosened my tongue. “I don’t even know where I am,” I said through gritted teeth, trying to keep the tremble out of my voice.

“Let me draw you a map,” he offered. He flicked a finger toward the hills. “Over there lies certain death.” His hand shifted to point over my shoulder. “If you go that way, I’m afraid not even a god will hear you scream.”

“And I’m safer here?” I looked between the two of them, wondering which one would do it—or if they were too important to get their own hands dirty.

“She raises a good point.” Titania dabbed the edges of her mouth with a napkin. Dropping it next to her plate, she reached under the table and produced a 9-millimeter, but she didn’t point it in my direction. Instead, she fiddled with it, ejecting and checking the magazine as if she wanted to make sure it was loaded before shoving it back in place with a harsh *click*.

My eyes tracked every movement, especially the last, when she flicked off the safety.

“How many times must I request that we don’t bring guns to the table?” Oberon shot her a pointed glance over his newspaper.

Titania set the gun down, angling it so the muzzle was aimed at me. “I thought you wanted to start a war.” She shrugged. “Lach is living on borrowed time; delivering his little toy back to his court with a bullet between her eyes will speed up that process.”

Yes, it definitely would.

Oberon thumbed through the paper idly before disappearing behind it.

“Lach believes Bain has her. It’s best to wait until after he attacks the Infernal Court,” he said absently like he was relaying the weather report. “The attack will draw him out of hiding and allow the Wild Hunt to take care of him. And I did promise she would be safe. There’s no need to kill her...”

Yet. My brain tacked on the unspoken end to his thought.

“You planned this. You framed Bain.” The accusation slipped out before I managed to clamp my mouth shut.

“I have my reasons,” he said, as if that explained everything.

I shook my head, trying to clear it. “Lach will figure it out. He’ll come after me.”

“Exactly!” Titania jabbed a finger toward me. “She’s a liability. If Lach finds out that we have her, he’ll come after us, and then how will you continue—”

“Lach won’t come after us when every sign points to the Infernal Court thanks to MacAlister’s mistake. That penumbra was an arrogant fool, but he did us a favor by dying. No loose ends. No one left alive knows we had anything to do with this, and if we’re lucky, the Nether Court will act rashly, attack Bain, and they’ll all kill one another.”

He continued, but I stopped hearing him as what he meant hit me. My brother, Channing, was the other loose end. Channing had made a deal to deliver me to Oberon. Had Oberon...?

Fear swelled in my throat until I couldn’t breathe. I had failed to protect my little brother, failed to keep him out of this mess, failed him. I blinked against the hot prickle of tears and reached for the water goblet in front of me, forcing down a sip to swallow my panic. I couldn’t let myself feel it. I couldn’t assume anything. Not now. Not while I was trapped here. Not while Oberon’s plan was still in motion. Lach was still alive. His family—*my friends*—were still alive. I had to survive, if only so I could warn them and stop them from starting a war among the fae courts. I couldn’t fail them as I’d failed Channing.

“And since you tied up that loose end, there’s no need to continue upholding your side of the bargain,” Titania pointed out, eyes narrowing on me. “You promised to save her from the Nether Court. You did that. Why keep her around?”

Oberon remained silent, as if considering her logic. Death was one of the few ways to break a bargain with the fae. I tried not to think about it. Even

if it was true, it wouldn't do me any good to know. But being here, it was easier to forgive Channing's recklessness. After all, Oberon had tricked me into thinking he was my friend, too. I'd foolishly believed once that the light courts might save me. That one of their dashing princes would rescue me from my deal with Lach. Now I knew better. I knew how the fae operated, so what was it that Oberon really wanted with me?

"She may prove useful," he said after a moment.

I sucked in a reedy breath, eyeing the gun still sitting by Titania's plate. Looking up, I caught her watching me. She smiled, and I quickly looked away.

"No, she won't." She rolled her eyes, tapping the white tablecloth. "Look, I can take her somewhere else if you're worried that I'll stain something."

He sighed. "If it's going to be like this every damn second, maybe you should just—"

"Wait!" I blurted out. I needed to prove useful sooner rather than later.

Titania was right about one thing: Oberon didn't need me alive to start his war, which meant staying that way was up to me. It was easy to put all the pieces together now. Bain's indignation at being accused of tainting the Nether Court's clover supply. The half riddles MacAlister had offered before his attack: a desire to leave the shadow court, to serve as another prince's penumbra. Oberon was the only prince without one. A role MacAlister thought he would be granted when he broke Lachlan Gage.

I had my doubts. With my adrenaline pumping, I hadn't been able to think that night, but now it was too clear. Things might not have gone precisely according to Oberon's plan, but he was still in control of this game. I needed to convince him to keep me alive before he made his next move.

"Did you have something to add?" Oberon pressed when I didn't continue.

"Who cares?" Titania said, not bothering to hide her disgust. "She would say anything to stay alive." It was clear what move she hoped he would make.

Suddenly, I was thankful for the shock that had held me in silence. I hadn't said anything that would betray the truth. Yet. I just had to play dumb, pretend to be the fragile doll they assumed I was. That wouldn't be hard. I just had to reinforce what Oberon already believed: that he was smarter than the rest of us.

The fae dealt in desire, and something told me that what Oberon wanted the most was his ego stroked. If he thought he'd not only bested his enemy, but that I was on his side and not Lach's, he might let his guard down. But the idea of betraying Lach, of doing that now, doing that while his last kiss still burned on my lips...

Anguish tightened my chest, the sorrow aching in my bones, but I shoved it down deep.

"Lach doesn't care about me." Each word tasted like a lie, bitter and impossible to swallow, but I forced them out. I couldn't let them use me against him.

Whatever they were expecting me to say, it wasn't that.

Oberon met his sister's dubious gaze before turning his attention fully on me. "He...doesn't?"

I snorted, which was easier to do on the verge of hyperventilating. Thank you, panic attack. "Lachlan Gage doesn't care about anyone. Surely, *you* know that."

A smile ghosted his lips. Of course Oberon believed that. Clearly, the Hallow Court prince shared that trait.

But Titania planted her palms on the table, shaking her head with barely restrained fury. "But you love him, don't you?"

"Love?" I channeled the pain of that thought, letting it contort my face into a grimace. "You think I loved him?"

She blinked, confusion flashing across her lovely face, and I seized my opportunity.

"I was *trapped*." I let some of the agony I felt slip through to sell the lie, and Oberon lowered his paper. Now that I had his attention, I plunged forward, giving in to my churning emotions more. "He *tricked* me. I was forced to live with him. Lach isn't the only one who can play games. I knew what he wanted from me. I didn't have a choice. I've been trying to escape him for weeks—trying to break my bargain."

Titania sneered, her amber eyes studying me like a bug under a microscope. "By any means necessary, it seems."

I hated her implication—not because of what it might say about me but because of what it insinuated about Lach—but I smiled back. "As far as I'm concerned, you did me a favor. You freed me from him."

Titania flinched, but Oberon pressed his lips into a bemused line. "I didn't break your bargain, Cate. You are still bound to him."

They might have known what happened with MacAlister, but they didn't know Lach had broken our bargain in those final moments before he sent me away—sent me toward this fate. My thumb brushed the band of my ring. Somehow it had all hinged on my mother's ring. I didn't understand it. But I would let them believe the bargain remained, if only to see whether it could help me.

"He can use the bargain to track her here. Which is why we need to kill her," Titania demanded. "Bargain ended. Problem solved."

My heart pounded in my chest as I realized my mistake. "You told me I was safe here." I knew that I wasn't, so very real fear bled into my words, cracking and breaking them. I grabbed the edge of the linen tablecloth and clutched it as I stared at Oberon, dredging up his own words to use against him—the most dangerous weapon against a sociopath was always their own ego. "You said you weren't a monster like Lach."

I hated myself for smearing Lach like this, but what choice did I have? If I died, any chance I had of escaping, of warning the other courts about Oberon's plans, died with me. I might have failed Channing, but I could still protect Ciara and Shaw and Roark. Maybe I could stop Lach from attacking Bain and delivering himself directly to the Wild Hunt. Still, I wanted to vomit all over their beautiful china, and my obvious distress only sold my lie.

"The Hallow Court is warded—spelled to prevent anyone from the outside getting in," Oberon said with a smug smile that made me want to smack him. "All courts are."

"But you came to the Nether Court. I don't understand." Playing dumb was working remarkably well. I just had to stomach the lie until he let his guard down. I didn't know what was worse: the terrible things spewing from my own lips or that Oberon believed them.

"We were invited for the betrothal." He looked like he might pat my head, and I braced myself to endure more of his condescension. "At least for the official celebrations, but that is why we stayed at the Avalon. We may enter New Orleans freely, but no one steps foot into a royal residence without an invitation. Lach cannot enter my home."

I nodded, letting my shoulders sag as if I was relieved. I wasn't. Despite everything, part of me hoped Lach would figure it out, nip right into this garden, and spirit me away. But I was on my own now. He had sent me away from New Orleans so that he could run from the Wild Hunt. He had

no idea that my brother had betrayed me. It was a small comfort to know that Ciara, Lach's sister—my newest yet closest friend—and all the others back in New Orleans would be safe if they stayed in their own court. Had Lach found time to tell them what had happened—to warn them?

"I wouldn't concern yourself. He has other things to worry about," Oberon continued when I remained silent. "He can't hide from the Wild Hunt long. He'll be dead soon."

"Yes, he will." A tremor cracked my voice, threatening to undermine my lies. I glanced around and frowned, hoping they didn't catch it. "I would say thank you, but since she wants to kill me..."

"Titania wants many things she can't have." He leveled cold eyes at her. "Isn't that right?"

Something unreadable flashed across her face. Her hand lashed out, seizing her gun, and I froze. But she tucked it away before rising from her seat. "Fine. Have it your way." She smirked. "I'm glad we would be so helpful in aiding your *escape*."

She didn't believe me. That didn't matter. For now.

Titania scowled at me, eyes as sharp as daggers, before she stomped toward the house, sunlight glinting off her dark hair. Ice filtered through my veins as she left. At least she let her disdain show. I knew where I stood with the Hallow Court princess. Her brother was another story. He was a spider spinning his webs to trap me.

"You must excuse my sister. She's been like this since the day we were born, or so I was told." Oberon pushed up from his seat and held out a hand. "Allow me to show you the grounds and prove that we aren't monsters."

Something only a monster would say. It took considerable effort to accept his outstretched hand. I forced a smile, my skin crawling where it met his. "I would like that."

Not exactly a lie. I needed to learn whether or not he was telling the truth about what lay beyond his estate. But I wasn't sure how long the adrenaline fueling my act would hold out.

Oberon led me into the gardens, toward the carefully trimmed hedgerows. Pink blossoms punctuated the bushes, straining toward the sun overhead and overshadowing the tiny white flowers growing in the shrubbery's shadows. The herbal scent of freshly cut grass mingled with the delicate, fleeting smells of primrose and oleander, the grounds looking as if it was early spring rather than October. But nothing in the Otherworld operated the

way my own world did. Here, beauty distracted and cajoled—just like the man at my side.

“I was rude earlier.”

“When you considered killing me?” I asked carefully.

“You were never in danger. It’s a good rule of thumb to not mistake Titania’s tantrums with my plans. Best to let her have her fits.” He laughed like it was a silly misunderstanding. “No, I assumed, like my sister, that you were in love with Lach. But you must know that it was about more than politics when I came for you,” he said as we wandered. Such a smooth liar. I’d expected that, just as I expected him to be arrogant enough to believe the lies I’d fed him about Lach.

“It was?” I kept my gaze pinned to the flowering bushes ahead, aware that he was watching me closely. I, however, was listening with equal calculation.

“I was genuinely concerned that you would be caught in the middle of all of this.”

It was really hard to summon the words I knew would stroke his ego while vividly picturing throttling him to death, but I persevered.

“Your war, you mean?” I brushed a finger over the velvet petals of a white rose and dangled an irresistible morsel for his ego. “I confess I don’t understand why the courts would go to war, but then I must also confess that I don’t care if they do. I’m only a prisoner to the fae.”

His eyes narrowed ever so slightly, his lips turning up, and I knew I had him. It was mildly insulting that Oberon believed I was so stupid I hadn’t figured out the truth, or that I was heartless enough to not care about the war he planned to start. Then again, he clearly didn’t have a heart of his own. Or someone to check his hubris.

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” He squeezed my hand, and I nearly gagged. “A man like Lach believes he can own others, tricking them like what happened to you. Lying to them about what he’s really after. Even now, you have no idea why he trapped you with that bargain.”

I stumbled a little, but Oberon caught me before my knees hit the grass. “Sorry. I should have put on shoes.”

“Soon,” Oberon promised, and my heart collapsed around the word.

I tamped down the curiosity he’d provoked—another web spun to ensnare me. Did he really know, or was I being tested? If I asked, Oberon would suspect I cared. “I’m just glad I’m free...or that I will be when he’s

dead.”

But there was someone I could ask about that wouldn’t raise suspicion—something I needed to know before I lost my mind with worry.

“You said that you made a bargain with my brother...”

I was going to kill Channing for being stupid enough to get involved with another fae after everything, but right now I just wanted to know that he was alive.

Oberon nodded. “I was concerned after he came to the Avalon looking for you.” My surprise must have shown, because he frowned. “I have a sister. I know what it’s like to worry.”

I really doubted that, but I gave him an encouraging smile. “Where is Channing? Is he here?”

“No. I’m afraid he fears us. I can’t blame him.” Such a fucking liar. “He stayed behind.”

Behind? I held my breath, praying he was telling the truth, even as I ignored the doubt creeping into my mind. “In New Orleans? Is that safe? If Lach—”

“Lach won’t step foot in fae territory now that he’s death-marked. But if you’re worried, I can have him brought—”

“No!” I blurted out, adding quickly, “Maybe when I’m less mad.”

If there was a chance that Channing was alive—that I’d misunderstood what Titania had said—I had to keep him as far away from this clusterfuck as possible.

Oberon paused to regard me. “You’re angry with him for protecting you?”

“I’m angry that men keep deciding what’s best for me.”

His mouth twitched, but he inclined his head. “Very well. Tell me about the night Lach killed MacAlister.”

“It all happened so quickly.” I drew a deep breath, weighing what to tell him to get more information without finding myself ensnared in his web. “I don’t understand half of it. I guess that’s why Channing didn’t tell me he was calling you.”

“Do you remember much?” he asked as we took a set of stone steps into a sunken, lower garden.

I shook my head. “MacAlister attacked me, and Lach killed him.”

“MacAlister attacked you?” He feigned surprise so well, I nearly believed him.

I shivered at the memory. “Lach told me he was marked by the Wicked Hunt—”

“*Wild Hunt*,” he corrected me.

I pressed my free hand to my forehead and managed a tiny giggle so he would buy my contrived mistake. “Yes, *whatever* that is. Lach warned me to get out of town. I didn’t know what to do, so I called Channing and told him everything.”

I planted my own lies carefully to see how he might nurture them, keeping my voice soft to hide the emotions threatening to give me away. People will always tell you more when they think you know less.

But I knew one thing he didn’t: I hadn’t told Channing shit. There hadn’t been time between meeting my brother and being betrayed.

“I do apologize for the unorthodox manner of your arrival. After Channing called, he told me what had happened with Lach and that the Hunt was on. That was how I knew you were in danger.” His face softened, the darkness in his eyes fading. Another carefully crafted mask of lies. It was little wonder that he’d fooled me when we’d first met, that he had fooled Channing into believing his intentions to protect me. “I was afraid for your safety.”

“Why would MacAlister try to hurt me?” I peered up at him. Was that MacAlister’s plan or his?

“Revenge, perhaps? He must have been upset over your part in ending Bain’s engagement to Ciara,” Oberon offered without missing a beat.

And the Academy Award for best smarmy, lying bastard goes to...

Oberon’s fingers tightened around my hand. I hated that I was still touching him. Could he feel my cold dread? Smell the sweat slicking my forehead? His giant ego must have prevented him from seeing the obvious. We were all our own worst enemies, a fact even fae princes weren’t immune to.

I was so preoccupied, he guided us through an arch and around several bushes before I realized we’d entered a hedge maze. Shaped yews stretched toward the sky, boxing us in and blocking any possibility of escape. My heart pounded harder with each step we took, with each turn and twist of the maze, every ounce of me wanting to pull free of his grasp and run back in the direction we’d come from. But that would give me away, and I didn’t know the way out.

Oberon fell silent, and in the warm sunlight I caught a glimmer of

moving letters creeping along his neck. They weren't inked in black like the tattoos that covered Lach's body. These were iridescent, shimmering like scars. More easily hidden but no less telling. I halted, gently tugging my hand away.

"You're thinking," I whispered.

He didn't respond for a long time. "You are quite convincing," he said with a cold smile. "I almost *want* to believe you."

Another trap—this one I'd walked into willingly, believing I was the predator, and now I was cornered. "I could say the same. Is that why you sent MacAlister after me?"

"I had my reasons." He gestured toward another bend in the maze. When I didn't budge, he sighed. "But I was telling the truth. I never planned to kill you. You're more useful to me if you're alive. If MacAlister wasn't dead, he would pay for his zealotry."

It might have been a relief to hear him admit it, but not while I was alone with him.

"Well, I feel safer now," I said dryly. I crossed my arms, wishing I was wearing more than the flimsy nightgown as a chill ran through me.

"If I wanted you dead, you would be dead. As I told you earlier, I know what Lach wanted from you. It's what I want, Cate. Let me show you." He tipped his head for us to continue before crooking his arm.

Death waited beyond the hedge. I couldn't trust him, but I would rather confront my fate head-on than wait for Oberon to stab me in the back. I brushed past him, ignoring his offered arm, and walked through the break in the yews. Oberon followed me...out of the maze and to the edge of the gardens.

The ground swelled a few short steps from me—the hills I'd glimpsed from the breakfast table. Did he expect me to run? Was this part of his manipulation, so he could claim he didn't kill me himself but let me die at the hands of whatever lay beyond those hills?

"This is the Otherworld," he said as he stepped beside me.

"No shit." I rolled my eyes. At least the false pleasantries and games were over.

"No, this is the *Otherworld*." He waved one hand, and the scene before us changed.

Darkness descended, the sun blotted from the sky in a near total eclipse that allowed only a slender ring of light to escape. The birdsong stopped,

replaced by an unnatural silence that settled like a weight on my shoulders. Black vines twisted like poisoned veins across the pastoral hills, a graveyard of withered flowers peeking out from under them. A sickly rot flooded my nostrils, and I covered my mouth and nose against the smell. Heavy gray clouds choked the blue sky, blocking the sun as lightning splintered through them.

Oberon gazed at the distant nightmare. “Our magic has been warped—*cursed*. Light and shadow converge. Chaos nears. We must stop it, especially now that the curse on Earth’s creatures has been lifted.”

“You’re afraid of a bunch of vampires? I’ve never even met one.”

“Vampires?” He laughed. “No. I have a way to keep them under control, but others are stirring. Old monsters and even older gods. Our magic must be balanced again. Light and shadow and the earth that binds them. The Otherworld must be united before it’s too late.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, unable to keep my voice from trembling. Oberon wasn’t telling me the truth. Not the whole truth, at least. He was dangling bits of it like bait, waiting for me to bite. “You want to go to *war*.”

“I want to be *king*. War is a necessary evil.”

He had the evil part right. “There is no king.”

“There will be.” His smile turned my blood to ice. “When the Terra Court rises again and magic is made whole. That’s what Lach was after, but he will not be king. He will not be the savior. Not anymore.”

“The Terra Court is gone. It’s ash.” I spit the words at him, even as dangerous thoughts began to swirl in my own brain. I refused to let them take root.

“Such a child.” He clucked his tongue. “Nothing is ever truly gone.”

“They all *died*.”

“Not *all* of them.”

Lach. Ciara. Fiona. Shaw. That bloodline ran through each of them, but Lach had renounced the throne.

“You know the royal bloodline lives,” he said, adding, “for *now*.”

“If you touch my family—” I snarled before I could stop myself.

His smile was as smooth as the polished marble of his estate and just as cold. “I knew you loved him—loved all of them. The family you never had. But how much?”

“What do you want?” I breathed.

Oberon swiveled to face me, his eyes dipping to the ring on my finger.

“We’ve been looking for that ring for a long time. It disappeared with the penumbra who wore it, long before the war. But the magic that links it to the Terra Court endures.”

“It’s just an emerald ring. Lach said it was worthless...” The words faded, the truth demanding to finally take hold.

The bargain.

Lach’s demand.

Swear that you will never take it off...

“Can’t you see, Cate?” Oberon pressed. “Lach was using you to get that ring. It’s not an emerald. It’s an *esmeraude*—one of our rarest gems.”

It wasn’t true. It was...impossible. This wasn’t a fae ring. Oberon was lying, but if he wasn’t... “Why? He is the true heir of the Terra Court. He doesn’t need the ring to claim it.”

“He chose the Nether Court so he could strengthen his empire and prepare to seize more power. That’s why he tried to ally with the Infernal Court. He needs the ring to reclaim his mother’s throne, and if he succeeds, the darkness you saw will spread. Not just through the Otherworld but to the earth itself. You’ve seen the monster that lives inside him.”

I tried to sort the truth from his lies, but it was impossible to know what to believe.

“Tell me how you got that ring.”

I didn’t answer him.

“Who gave it to you?” he needled.

Lie, a quiet voice whispered in my head. I wasn’t sure why, but I listened to it. “The woman who raised me after my parents died.”

“Interesting.” He studied me, and I wondered if he saw through my dishonesty. “It hardly matters. Give it to me.”

My blood roared in response, pounding as if trying to drown him out. I pressed a hand to my spinning head. Oberon wanted my ring just like Lach had. Why didn’t they just take it? I had offered it to Lach that first night, and he had refused. It didn’t make sense. My stomach clenched like an invisible fist had grabbed hold of my guts, and I gasped.

But Oberon continued without noticing. “Lach planned to retake the Otherworld. With that ring and Terran blood, he might have succeeded, might have become like an icon. But *I* won’t fail.”

Terran blood. He needed Terran blood. My friends...

“If I give it to you...” A sharp jolt of fear rocketed up my spine, but I

shook it off. “You won’t touch them?”

“Are you offering me a bargain?” he asked.

Don’t, the whisper warned, but this time I ignored it. If Lach was running from the Wild Hunt—running for his life—the Nether Court was without a leader. I couldn’t help them fight a war, but I could protect them. “If you meet my terms.”

Chapter Three

Cate

Despite my attempt to tiptoe, my footsteps echoed in the airy halls of the court. It felt silly to sneak around because I wasn't doing anything wrong. After a day of waiting for something to happen—half dreading and half eager—I'd grown restless. No one had stopped me from wandering through the halls. No one seemed to care what I was doing or where I went. I wasn't a prisoner, just as Oberon had claimed. But he'd also drugged me and brought me here against my will, so trust was going to be an issue, especially until the terms of our bargain were fulfilled.

He hadn't taken the ring.

I wasn't sure what he was waiting for.

Sunlight streamed through the tall windows, casting a pale glow over the silk-covered couches and expensive woven rugs, bouncing off the oil paintings that lined the walls. But the space remained cold, an eerie silence permeating each room I happened upon. The grandeur was a facade, as perfectly constructed as the paintings hanging in gilded frames, but underneath it was a void that I felt like a pit in my stomach.

I didn't belong to this court that was as lovely and deadly as the oleander that grew in its gardens. I'd already made my first mistake. Oberon had agreed to the terms of my bargain too quickly.

The ring was a small price to pay for the safety of my family and friends, but Lach's warning to never remove it rattled around in my brain, refusing to let me sleep. Now, each second I wore it, the ring felt heavier. The only piece of my mother that I had, and I had agreed to give it away.

All my life, I had wondered about my parents. The most I really knew were their names and the day they died. I had nothing from them, not even a death certificate. Nothing but this ring.

I paused by a window overlooking the gardens, but there was no sign of the hellscape Oberon had revealed to me yesterday.

I'd shown my ring to Lach the night we met. He had taken one look at its gold filigree and glassy green stone and declared it worthless. A lie. I didn't know how to feel about that. He hadn't had a chance to explain in those final, breathless moments as MacAlister lay dying and he took the final kill shot—marking himself for the Wild Hunt in my place. There hadn't been time for him to explain how he was breaking the bargain, and now, the memory gnawed at me. Had he ever wanted me at all? The thought had chased me out of my room, looking for answers to anything but that question.

Because he had taken that final shot for me. He cared as much as I did, so why hadn't he told me the truth? What terrible secret did this ring hold that two fae princes wanted it so badly?

The ring was the linchpin of my bargain with Lach, and now it was the linchpin of my bargain with Oberon—it had value. I just didn't understand why.

Tears clogged up my throat, but I swallowed them down, fleeing from my emotions as I continued into an adjoining hall.

I'd worn the ring compulsively since that day at Gran's when she had seen it and told me to never take it off. Even at work, where I'd been allowed one piece of jewelry, and I'd worn it while others had worn their wedding rings. But this...

It had never needed cleaning. It had never tarnished. It always fit. But the idea that I was walking around with a ring from some fallen fae court was ridiculous. My parents had died in a car accident—an end made all the more tragic by its mundanity. Maybe I would give Oberon the ring and he would find it was exactly what Lach had said that first night: worthless. But he would be bound by that bargain all the same.

Still...what if I was wrong?

I shoved the thought aside and entered a sitting room. How many did they need for the two of them? There were guards. I'd encountered a few in the various empty rooms, but they all stared straight ahead. It was more like encountering ghosts than people.

No one, save for Oberon and Titania, had uttered a word to me since my arrival, and those two hadn't exactly been chatty. I didn't trust a word that came out of Oberon's mouth, and Titania seemed to be avoiding my company. Fine by me.

I hadn't liked the princess when we met, and the fact that she was now

lobbying to kill me didn't help her case.

But that raised a new problem. I'd been so concerned with protecting the people I'd left behind, I hadn't considered my own situation. I'd struck a bargain using the only leverage I possessed without stipulating that they let me go. And if I had to live the rest of my mortal years in this mausoleum, I would lose my fucking mind.

I turned the corner, finding a spiral staircase. Torches blazed a path, their flames casting shadows across the steps. They curled like fingers, beckoning me to descend. And maybe I'd grown accustomed to the shadows of the Nether Court, but I started down them. It was a terrible idea, but lately I didn't have much else to work with, and I couldn't go back to that pristine white bedroom and just wait around for my fate.

I took the steps quickly, fingers sliding down the polished rail to keep me steady as I glanced over my shoulder, half expecting one of those silent guards to come after me.

The stairs emptied into a dimly lit corridor, a stark contrast to the stately open-air luxury of the main floor. The walls seemed to close in around me, the air thick and oppressive. Cold sweat beaded on my brow as I stared into the corridor that stretched before me, its end lost in shadows. In the absence of any windows, the only light came from the flickering torches. They illuminated the rough-hewn stone walls and the uneven floor beneath my feet. Deafening silence greeted me, broken only by my pounding heart and ragged breathing. *I shouldn't be here.*

The metal of my ring burned against my skin, and I clenched my fist, trying to ignore the sensation. It only grew stronger, though, a searing pain that shot up my arm and into my chest.

I should turn back and leave the secrets down here. The thought planted itself in my mind.

That would be the reasonable thing to do, but nothing about this situation fell under that heading. I forged forward, going slowly as my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting.

Each step ratcheted my pulse. One day I would listen to my survival instinct—or die ignoring it. It was difficult to guess which would come first. I was about to give up my search when I came across a door, slightly ajar, with a cramped room beyond. Shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, and a cluttered desk sat in the middle of the space. Books and journals were crammed onto every available surface, their leather covers cracked and

faded with age.

There was a reason these were down here, tucked away from prying eyes and curious guests. So I didn't try to stop myself from snooping.

I plucked one of the books from the shelf, my fingers trembling slightly as I opened it. The pages were yellow and brittle, the ink faded to a dull brown. I squinted in the poor lighting and realized they were written in Theban, the ancient fae tongue. The same language that made up the tattoos that covered Lach's body. If I ever got out of here, I was going to learn what the hell I was looking at.

Frustration welled up inside me as I flipped through the pages, desperately searching for something, anything that I could understand. I wished I had my phone with me so I could take a picture and try to translate it later. A futile plan. I doubted Google could help me with this.

But whatever had compelled me down those stairs still whispered in my mind. I didn't need proof that Oberon was up to no good—he'd proven that when he'd planted the seeds of discord between the shadow courts. Violence was inevitable, and he didn't have to get his own hands dirty.

My eyes darted around the room, searching for some clue, some hint of what Oberon was planning. Preferably something that was *not* written in a thousand-year-old magical language. I moved to the desk, which was covered in letters and leather-bound journals, and riffled through them. All written in Theban. Not even a freaking diagram.

It was a lost cause. I stacked them back into haphazard piles until it looked like the mess I'd found and not a ransacked room.

I made it two steps toward the hall when I spotted a small door peeking from behind a leather club chair. The door was half the size of a normal one. Probably nothing. Still, I shoved the chair out of the way, then dropped to my knees and tried its brass handle. Locked. Naturally. Secret doors usually were.

I'd seen Channing pick a lock. So, getting to my feet, I snatched the letter opener from the desk and carefully worked it into the keyhole, wiggling it back and forth until I felt something give. Adrenaline surged through my chest as I pushed harder. My grip slipped, and I caught the blade on instinct, gasping as it sliced open my hand. The letter opener clattered to the ground as blood welled in my palm. I closed my fingers against the smarting pain.

What did Oberon have behind a tiny, locked door?

I leaned forward, trying to peer through the keyhole, but I couldn't see a

thing. Frustrated, I pressed my ear to the door, holding my breath as I strained to listen for...something. I froze as I caught a muffled sound. Followed by a *growl*. A chill raced along my spine, raising the hairs on the back of my neck.

I tamped down my panic as I rose. Clenching my injured hand tightly, I scooted the chair back in place. Another growl, this one louder, sent me running into the hall.

I made it halfway down the corridor before I paused to catch my breath. Why was Oberon keeping an animal locked in the basement of the Hallow Court? What kind of a beast deserved that treatment? I closed my eyes, trying to steady my heart, but when I opened them, something was staring back.

It had no face. No body. But it moved with an undeniable presence, its luminous outline shifting as it came closer. My heart leaped into my throat, and it hesitated as if it sensed my unease.

A soft moan filled the air like a whispering wind. I knew that sound.

Wraith.

I had never seen one at the Nether Court. I'd only heard their sighing sounds and glimpsed hints of passing shadows.

The wraith hovered before me, and a tendril of light stretched toward me like a hand. I pressed against the wall, but it didn't touch me. Instead, the wisp curled, pointing itself in the direction of the stairs. I stared, breathing hard and fast.

"It's not safe here, is it?" I whispered.

I could have sworn it shook its nonexistent head.

I murmured my thanks and rushed back the way I'd come. My footsteps echoed off the stone walls as I climbed the spiral staircase, blood pounding in my ears.

I didn't look back to see if it had followed me.

I had more questions than answers now. They started in a loop as I hurried toward my room. I was a few steps from the door, consumed in thought, when someone stepped into my path. I stifled a gasp of surprise.

"Are you lost?" Titania wore her disdain like heavy perfume.

I hid my bloody hand behind my back as alarm coiled through me. How long had she been standing there? Had she been looking for me?

I straightened, squaring my shoulders. "Just exploring."

"How bold." Malice glinted in her eyes. "Can I give you some advice?"

“If I said no, would it stop you?” I asked flatly.

She ignored me. “There is no place more dangerous than the one beside the throne. Two princes want you there.”

I gritted my teeth, wondering if she was always this paranoid or if it was simply the byproduct of spending so much time listening to her brother plot against the world. “Oberon wants my ring. Not me.”

But I still had the ring. She was right; there was some reason I was still alive. He needed more from me than he was letting on.

“Do you think that bargaining with him will be that simple? That you can give him that ring and a smile and walk out of here?” she asked as if reading my mind. “If I were you, I would start making my peace with the gods.”

“Is that a threat?” I stared back at her.

She stilled, something unreadable flickering in her eyes. It was gone as swiftly as it had appeared. “It’s a warning.”

“I didn’t ask to come here,” I reminded her. “I was taken against my will. If you’re so concerned, help me escape.”

“No one escapes,” she said with a laugh that chilled my blood. “Not a single one of you. Oberon likes to collect things, and he has collected you.”

Fear bolted through me. “I’m not a toy.”

Her mouth pressed into a thin line. “And yet, he wants to play with you. But you know that. It’s why you agreed to his bargain.”

“I made that bargain to protect my friends. Something I’m sure you could never understand.”

She lowered her voice, moving closer. “And who will protect you, princess?” I flinched at the sound of Lach’s pet name on her lips, and her mouth carved into a sneer. “I learned a thing or two at school—like how to play these games of his. Trust me, you’ll never win against him.”

I couldn’t imagine what land-before-time education she’d had, but maybe toying with people like pawns was normal back then. “I’m not scared of your brother’s games.”

“You shouldn’t be. But you should be afraid of what happens when he’s done playing with you,” she murmured. She stepped to the side so I could pass. “Good luck.”

“Making friends?” Oberon interrupted, striding into view. I took a careful step toward my room. The more distance I had from both of them, the better.

“We’re just getting to know each other,” Titania said, softening her voice and lowering her eyes.

So. Full. Of. Shit. I had no idea what Shaw had seen in her. But I stayed silent, remembering what she had said. Titania was a snake, but she was right about Oberon. My only chance lay in convincing him to let down his guard.

“Good. I want Cate to feel welcome here.” Each word was delivered like a threat.

Titania tilted her head in acknowledgment. Oberon followed me into my room and held out his hand. “I’m ready for the ring.”

My hand clenched instinctively, and I winced.

“What is it?” He grabbed my hand, prying open my fingers. He frowned at the sticky blood before raising my palm to his lips.

I watched in silent horror as he licked the blood from the wound. The wet heat of his tongue sent bile shooting into my throat, and I barely kept myself from vomiting.

“That’s better,” he said.

I stared as the wound closed, skin knitting together into a pinkish line.

What fresh hell was this?

Oberon lowered my hand but didn’t release it. Instead, his fingers moved to my ring.

No.

Lach had told me to keep it on, but I didn’t have a choice. The bargain had been struck, and if I went back on it now...

Oberon clasped it and frowned.

“It’s a little tight,” I muttered, drawing my hand away. I tried to twist it from my finger, and a pulse of electricity shot up my arm. “Ow!”

“The ring,” Oberon pressed.

I sucked in a deep breath and tried again. Another shock sent my stomach clenching, and I doubled over. “I c-c-can’t.”

Titania swept toward me. “Let me try.”

I held out my shaking arm, bracing myself as she tried to slip the ring off, but the second she touched it, she screamed and jerked away. Turning wide eyes to her brother, she shook her head. “She’s not lying.”

He glowered at us and reached for it himself. I whimpered before he made contact, but he barely touched it before he pulled back. “What have you done?”

“It’s just a ring. It belonged to my mother.” My arms wrapped around my trembling body. It was the truth, but I couldn’t deny what I’d felt in my bones. It hadn’t simply been a shock. My whole body had cried out to protect the ring at any cost. I didn’t know what that meant. I wasn’t sure that I wanted to.

He brushed a finger over the gold filigree. Slivers of electricity sent my fingers seizing into a fist.

“This isn’t fae magic.” He studied me, inclining his face until it was a fraction of an inch from mine. “If you know what it is, you should tell me. Or perhaps I can ask your brother, Channing, about this ring.”

“No,” I whimpered. “He doesn’t know anything about this. *Please.*”

“You could cut it off,” Titania suggested from across the corridor. “Finger and all.”

I was going to pass out.

Oberon considered for a moment. “That might backfire. I have a better idea.” He strode toward the door and beckoned for his sister to follow him. “Tomorrow, we send for a witch.”

Chapter Four

Lach

Sweet laughter echoed in the darkness. I turned toward the familiar sound, neurons firing into action. “Cate?”

A flicker of movement caught my eye, and I whipped around as a figure fled down the corridor, out of sight.

“Cate!” I called her name, my voice clawing and frantic, sprinting after her. My body slowed when I glimpsed her. I fought against the invisible force.

Just a little too far ahead.

She turned, arms reaching for me, a silent plea etched in the space between us. Desperation surged through my veins, propelling me forward. The ground turned to mud, swallowing one foot. The other. With each step, I sank farther into the muck as if it was dragging me toward hell.

I fought harder, need pounding in my chest as mud consumed me to the waist, then the chest. My arms strained toward her, tearing at the mire.

Cate’s eyes locked with mine, a storm of emotions swirling within them. “Why did you let me go?”

Her words cut sharper than any blade, slicing through the dream, and I woke, gasping. Shafts of buttery light fell across the guest room bed, and I forced myself up. I was still panting as I stumbled, bleary-eyed, into the living room.

Fiona, my perpetually disapproving sister, flew out of the kitchen. “Where the hell were you last night?” Her eyes zeroed in on my neck. “And why are you bleeding?”

“I *was* bleeding,” I corrected her, scrubbing at the caked-on blood. “I went to get information. Has anyone called?”

I’d wandered through the city until dawn, needing time to think before I found myself stuck in a cramped apartment with my sister, her increasingly hostile witch girlfriend, and too many cats. I didn’t remember passing out. I

checked my watch. Durant should have heard something by now.

Fiona didn't answer me. "Was that before or after you tried to get yourself killed?"

I made my way to the kitchen, where I'd plugged in my new phone. Romy, my sister's better half, didn't look up from the stack of grimoires in front of her as I passed. But she scratched absent-mindedly at the dark baby hairs that peeked from her silk head wrap—a sure sign that she was pretending not to eavesdrop.

"Where were you?" Fiona repeated as I grabbed my phone.

There were no missed calls. I resisted the urge to throw it against the wall.

"Lachlan."

She wasn't going to let it go, and this apartment wasn't big enough to contain the fight brewing between us. "I ran into a little trouble at Durant's."

"You went to see the arms dealer?" Her tone sharpened.

Romy finally turned at this revelation, studying the wound on my neck. "Is he the one who shot you?"

"Probably," Fiona snapped, crossing her arms. "Every time my brother leaves New Orleans, he gets shot."

Which was why I rarely did. But I shook my head. "I cut myself shaving."

"I know a grazing wound when I see one, Lachlan."

Historically, it was a bad sign when my sister used my formal name.

"I thought maybe you'd forgotten since you became a pacifist."

This earned a rare snort from Romy, who usually barely deigned to acknowledge my existence, let alone find me amusing. It was a miracle that she was helping me at all. Although I suspected that the aid was only to get me out of her apartment sooner rather than later—preferably without destroying the building in a fight with my sister.

"I just got rid of my guns. Not stocking an arsenal doesn't make me a pacifist." She had the decency to look offended at the idea. Fiona may have never liked the violence surrounding the courts, but she was no innocent. No matter how she acted now.

"No, it makes you a sitting duck."

"I don't want your life." The quiet words were laced with venom. She had too much of our mother in her. Not a pacifist, exactly, but something far

more dangerous. Underneath her tough exterior, somewhere very, very, very deep down, she was an idealist. She had never forgiven me for relinquishing our family's claim on the Terra Court throne. She thought I'd given up on it.

"I supported you leaving New Orleans so you could figure shit out," I reminded her. "But part of the deal was that you would be prepared if the day ever came when one of us showed up on your doorstep."

"*You* know why I left New Orleans." She glanced to where her girlfriend was still far too absorbed in her grimoire. Judging by the set of Romy's shoulders, she was bracing for impact. Bringing up the reason they'd left the city usually made my sister detonate. The prejudice they faced as a mixed-species couple hadn't stopped them from falling in love, but it had kept them from their true home.

Romy seemed resigned to her fate. Her coven, like most, had forbidden marriages between witches and fae. She had chosen Fiona over them—and my sister couldn't forgive herself for it.

I didn't particularly care that Romy was a witch. Our mutual dislike stemmed from conflicting personalities. Romy had practiced earth magic for most of her life. She made potions, consulted grimoires, and relied on the Belle Mère—the mother goddess—to provide, even as her people's magic dwindled under the curse that had only recently lifted. Fae had never lost access to their magic, even if it had changed and warped, broken in its own way. But despite being able to call on magic, I often found a bullet was a more expedient solution to a problem. That seemed to trigger her. Fiona might not be a pacifist, but she was living like one to please her girlfriend.

"I ran into the Wild Hunt." There was no point keeping it from them.

Fiona stilled. "The Hunt is in New York?"

"They were." I shot my sister a pointed look.

"Did they leave?" Romy asked, closing the massive grimoire in front of her.

I bit my lip, giving my sister another look. "They won't be an issue. Not for a while."

Romy's brow furrowed, and then her eyes widened as she caught my meaning. "Oh." She swallowed this bit of information. "I guess my cloaking spell wasn't strong enough."

"You think?"

"Watch it," Fiona snarled under her breath.

I tamped down my annoyance and forced myself to bow my head in her

girlfriend's direction. She had tried to veil me, using an old spell in her family's grimoire that acted like a personal ward meant to hide me at all times. "I'm sorry. I didn't..." I wasn't sure what I meant anymore, so I let the apology trail away. "It seems it wasn't."

She loosed a groan of frustration as she reopened a different grimoire in her pile. "I'm not sure I'm strong enough to cast spells on two targets at once, even with the Belle Mère's blessing." Her eyes moved to the necklace lying next to the books on the table, and my chest tightened. "If I only had one..."

"Cate," I said quietly. "Focus on Cate."

Romy's eyes were softer than usual as she met my gaze and nodded once. Without the added magical protection, I knew what I had to do. I continued to the guest room and dropped my phone on the bed, grabbing the duffel bags off the floor. Fiona followed me.

"We don't even know if Cate is alive," she said quietly.

"She's alive." I would know if she wasn't. It was the only comfort I'd had in this shit week. Cut off from my court, my family, and her—the fact had kept me sane.

"You don't—"

"I know," I interrupted her. Just like I knew my own heart was still beating. The second hers stopped, I would feel it. But I didn't have time to explain. Something told me that Fiona wouldn't understand anyway.

She didn't press me on the issue, just like she hadn't asked me about the new tattoo on my wrist—the one I now kept glamoured at all times. I'd been more than happy to avoid the topic as well.

I unzipped one of the bags and began pulling out its contents. Fiona hovered as I took stock of the weapons, laying each out on the bed, one at a time.

"What is your plan?" she asked as I began stacking boxes of ammunition next to the guns.

"I'm not waiting around anymore." I could barely breathe. My skin tightened with each passing second that Cate was with Bain, and I was damn close to peeling it off. "I'm going after her."

She took a step between me and the doorway. Fiona wasn't above using force to stop me, even if she'd given up her guns. "That is a monumentally bad idea."

"I didn't ask for your opinion."

“Opinion?” Fiona swiped a box of bullets. “That is a fact. What are you going to do, nip to London and just start shooting?”

“I don’t have time to argue with you. Every second I waste in New York leaves Cate at the mercy of that monster.” Had he figured out what happened to his penumbra yet? Was he taking revenge on her for it? The knowledge that she was alive was little comfort when I considered what she might be enduring. “I need more weapons.”

“You’ll get your girlfriend killed, too,” she said quietly.

“Girlfriend?” I repeated. My sister had seen the truth. Why was she pretending otherwise? “She is my...”

“Yes?” Fiona demanded when I trailed away. “What is she, Lach?”

I clamped my mouth shut. The first time I said those words wouldn’t be to anyone but Cate.

“You can’t even say it,” she accused.

“Fi,” Romy called as she appeared from the other room, light shimmering around her like an aura, as if her magic was preparing to intervene. “Let him go.”

She whirled on her. “It’s a suicide mission.”

“Staying in New York won’t be any safer. Not anymore.” Romy turned a calculating stare on me. “It sounds like he made quite a scene.”

“*They* made quite a scene,” I corrected her. The Wild Hunt had picked the fight; whether or not I’d been asking for it was a different story.

Romy ignored me. “People will have seen him. There are plenty of witches who would rat you out to the Hunt in this city. You should leave.”

“Will you?” I asked her.

“Enough,” Fiona interrupted us. “No, she will not.” She glared at Romy to solidify that it was not up for negotiation. There might be bad blood between us, but we still shared it. My sister and I had never had an easy relationship. We’d both gotten the lion’s share of our mother’s temper. But family was family. “She’s not wrong, though. Magic is awake here. The witches are no longer confined to old spells and parlor tricks. They have their power back, and they aren’t afraid to use it, especially if they think you’re a threat.”

This was no surprise. There’d been very little love between other creatures and our kind before the curse that had stifled their magic. When fae had retained their own magic, it had shifted the power dynamic in our favor. Now?

"I've never done anything to them," I said coolly.

"You've never done anything for us, either." Romy crossed her arms and glared. "Fae treat other creatures like second-class citizens in their cities."

"I don't have time for this." I started to turn away from them. She could prosecute this agenda on her time. I had plenty of my own things to worry about.

"Wait," Fiona called. "I can't let you do this." Something flickered beneath her resolve. The flush of anger drained, leaving her skin even paler than usual, and Romy moved beside her, placing a hand on her shoulder to steady her.

"We shouldn't fight," Romy murmured.

But Fiona's eyes stayed on me. It was only the second time I remembered my sister ever looking so worried. I hoped this time didn't end like the first. "Wait until we hear from home. Ciara is working on something."

"There was an uncharted eclipse in the city, according to my sister." Romy nodded to confirm the theory. "That means powerful magic is being cast."

"Just give it a few more days," Fiona pleaded. "Give them time to find a solution."

But even the thought of waiting deepened the gnawing uneasiness in my gut. We didn't have time to wait. "I don't expect you to understand."

"Try explaining," she sniped back.

"I should never have dragged you into this," I muttered.

My phone vibrated on the bed.

"Don't you dare answer that," Fiona warned. "Why is it even on?"

"A necessary evil," I said, ignoring her. The Wild Hunt had already traced me to New York. I answered it with a clipped, "Yes."

"According to my pal Gideon, Bain is at the club right now," Durant drawled on the other end of the line.

"Now?" I checked my watch. It was a little early to be starting the evening. The club would be less busy at this hour—less potential for innocent people getting caught in the crossfire.

And likely a trap.

Durant continued. "He went up to the VIP floor with a brunette. In the back, up the staircase. He's got a crew of vampires on."

A brunette. Definitely a trap. Bain was dangling Cate like bait. Adrenaline coursed through me, gathering into a tight knot in my chest. "I

owe you.”

“I’ll remember that.” Durant sounded pleased.

I hung up on his ominous promise and turned back to the bed.

“You can’t go after him alone.”

Of course Fiona had heard every word. She studied the cache before us and then plucked a semiautomatic from the pile. Turning it over in her hands, she sighed. “We should wait for Roark.”

“We?” Maybe she wasn’t a pacifist after all. Romy caught my gaze over her shoulder. She and I might not see eye to eye, but we could agree on this. “You aren’t getting mixed up in this.”

“I’m already mixed up in this.”

I shook my head, tucking a Beretta into my waistband before reaching for my regular double holster. “I’m going after an heir in his own court.”

“No.” She took a step forward like she might physically stop me. “Bain won’t invite you to the Infernal Court.”

But that wasn’t my plan. “I don’t need an invitation to enter London.”

“The second you step one foot into that city, you’re a dead man.”

“And I’m taking Bain down with me. If he goes, anyone who comes with me will find themselves marked for the Hunt, too. I can’t let that happen.”

“Why do you need all these weapons?” she demanded.

The weapons weren’t for me. At least not all of them. I shoved a grenade into my pocket along with a few more loaded magazines. “Fallout.”

Her eyebrows jumped. “Lach—”

“Keep them. Just in case.”

“You can’t honestly think that you’re going to survive,” she murmured.

I forced a smirk that felt as empty as the hole in my chest. “Bad pennies always turn up.”

“I can’t let you go alone.”

My gaze flicked to Romy, and she nodded ever so slightly as she began to whisper under her breath. I checked the clips on my 9-millimeters before sliding them into my holster. “I appreciate the sentiment, but this is my mess to clean up.”

“You think you can stop me?”

“No,” I admitted, stepping forward and kissing her forehead. “But she can.”

Romy’s chant grew louder, and Fiona tried to lunge but found herself frozen in place.

“At least wait for Roark,” she screamed at me between curses.
But I was already gone.

Stepping foot in London—into fae territory—was like triggering the countdown on a bomb. Even without nipping directly inside, the moment I appeared outside the nightclub poised over the entrance of the Infernal Court, the clock began.

It didn’t look like much from the street. A brick warehouse repurposed into a nightclub. It had been a factory the last time I’d bothered to visit Bain on his turf. A velvet rope stretched the length of the sidewalk, and a handful of overeager humans waited to get inside. I studied the building a moment longer, my eyes flickering to the sign over the double doors.

Brimstone.

Time to walk into hell.

The bouncer looked me up and down as I approached, bypassing the line. His eyes darkened, narrowing on my human glamour, before going jet-black. Without Romy’s additional magic cloaking me, it would be easy for another fae to see past it. But he wasn’t fae. He was a vampire.

Gideon.

“I didn’t think you would be stupid enough to show your face here.” His hand hesitated on the clip holding the velvet rope. Behind me, a few people in the line grumbled.

“My ignorance knows no bounds,” I promised him.

He scowled, glancing toward the crowd. “There are humans in there. If I let you inside, it’s my ass on the line.”

I glanced at the people waiting to get in and sighed. Time to kill two birds with one stone. Clear the queue and do Gideon a favor. It was going to be messy, and I didn’t really have time to waste. “We can’t have that. How about an alibi?” I pulled out a gun and shot him. He’d recover. Eventually. “Sorry.”

The street went silent for a split second before someone screamed. Panic erupted around me, some people dropping to the ground, others running. Everyone eager to get as far away as they could. The cops would take their time when the reports started coming in, not wanting to interfere in Bain’s business.

I stepped over the vampire’s body and proceeded into the club. At the early hour, it was still half empty, but the low, pulsing music had smothered the gunfire. No one looked up as I made my way across the dance floor

toward a hallway lined with gold torchères lit to look like the flames of the underworld.

But while the humans hadn't heard the gunshot, security had.

Two more vampires appeared, temporarily dazed as I dropped my human glamour. They hesitated when they saw I was fae, and I gave each an apologetic smile before I took them out with quick, clean shots. The room seemed to freeze, only the pulsating beat of the music continuing, before the partiers scattered like startled birds, rushing toward exits or taking cover behind tables and pillars. The tang of fear rose above the smells of sweat and liquor as I strode toward the back of the house and the stairs that led to the VIP floor.

A guard, this one fae, stepped into my path, and I leveled the 9-millimeter at him. He hesitated—unlike the vamps, he wouldn't recover from a direct hit with an iron slug. So I made the choice easy for him as I took a step closer. “Your prince will want the pleasure of killing me himself.”

Then I dropped my gun.

He grabbed me by the elbow. I didn't fight it. He'd kept Cate alive, which meant he didn't want to kill her. The whole point was to get inside and make Bain an offer he couldn't refuse: the chance to put a bullet between the eyes of the man responsible for killing his penumbra.

It's what I would do for Roark.

All he had to do was let her go. Nip her back to New Orleans, back to Ciara and the others. One last bargain to save her life.

The guard hustled me inside the room, patting me down until he'd relieved me of my weapons, including the grenade in my pocket. He shoved me to the ground before a red leather couch and deposited the grenade on the table next to his boss.

“You brought a fucking grenade?” Frost coated Bain's voice.

I pushed to my feet, dusting off my slacks, and turned to face the prince of the Infernal Court and the terrified woman perched on his lap.

A woman who was not Cate.

She blinked in surprise as Bain deposited her onto her feet. “Go get a bottle of champagne.”

Her eyes lingered on the grenade before she scurried off. I stared after her.

Not Cate.

A few more guards stepped closer, but Bain held up a hand to stop them.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Where’s Cate?” I snarled as my rapidly fraying control snapped.

“How should I know?” He shifted, crossing his legs, and reached for a rocks glass on the table beside him. “Where’s my penumbra’s body?”

“In the bayou.” I glanced around the room, numbly noting the half dozen guards surrounding me.

A muscle twitched in his jaw, his blue eyes chips of ice. “Is that what this is about? Her?”

“MacAlister tried to kill her, and when he failed, you took her,” I accused. He had to have her. His penumbra had tried to kill her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Gage.” He drained his glass before depositing it on the table. He stood, peeling off his jacket, and began rolling up his sleeves. “But I can’t let you walk out of this room. Blood spilled and all.” I glanced at the guards surrounding us, but Bain shook his head and wagged a finger at me. “This is between the two of us...for now.”

He didn’t have Cate. There was no bargain to be made. I wouldn’t walk away from this club alive.

There was only one thing to do. I slipped out of my own jacket and smiled grimly at him. “I’ve always wanted to kick your ass.”

Chapter Five

Cate

My guest privileges had been revoked.

I woke up to find I couldn't leave my room. Every time I tried, it was like I hit an invisible brick wall. No one bothered to check on me. I was beginning to hope these witches would hurry the hell up when a diminutive redhead wheeled a cart laden with breakfast—piles of cheeses and meats, pastries wafting their buttery scents, glossy velvet-dusted berries, and, most importantly, coffee—into my room.

"I guess they want me to stay here?" I asked her, already knowing the answer.

She laid china and silverware on the table by the window, working with a quiet precision and determined to avoid talking to the prisoner.

Because that's definitely what I was this morning.

When everything was in place, she turned and nodded for me to take a seat.

"I'm surprised Oberon is feeding me," I admitted as she began piling food onto my plate. "What's your name?"

She shook her head and offered an apologetic smile, dipping her head in a half curtsy before darting out of the room like a frightened mouse. So much for finding an ally. Not that it would help. If I couldn't give Oberon the ring, I had nothing to bargain with, and a housemaid wasn't going to be able to help.

I turned my attention to the food, stomach already growling despite the gloomy thoughts. I'd been awake for hours, and thanks to the fact that fae food never made you full, I was starving.

"She can't speak to you," a lofty voice informed me from the doorway.

I whipped toward it, half a croissant shoved in my mouth, to find Titania sneering at me. I swallowed hard. "Are you ever worried that your face is going to get stuck like that?"

Her eyes narrowed.

“Not going to give us a smile, then?” I plucked a bit from the remaining half of the croissant, its delicate layers shattering and dusting the carpet with crumbs.

She grimaced at the mess but stepped inside. “The help isn’t allowed to speak.”

“Maybe they just don’t want to talk to you.” I knew that I didn’t.

“Gods, you’re dense. Lach really loves you? He must be getting desperate.” She waved a hand, and the crumbs on the floor vanished. It pretty much proved that karma didn’t exist that such horrible people had access to such incredible magic. I’d be so much nicer if I never had to vacuum. “The staff cannot speak. They are spelled to remain silent.”

“Spelled?” My appetite vanished. “What kind of monster—”

Before I could finish the sentence, the monster himself strode through the door.

“Mind your manners,” Oberon ordered me. Across the room, Titania snorted. She knew how to play his game, all right, and it involved kissing her brother’s ass at all times.

I bit my tongue so hard that I half expected to swallow it. This was a means to an end. I couldn’t risk what would happen if Oberon attacked the Nether Court. If the court was in danger, Lach would return and quickly find himself at the mercy of the Wild Hunt.

I was protecting him, too.

My stomach pitched, spiraling into a pit, as two Hallow Court guards entered the room.

Neither of them said a word—their brutish physiques and the bulges of holsters under their suit jackets spoke for them. They stepped to the side to allow two women to pass. The younger of the two bowed her head slightly to Oberon, but her silver-haired companion showed no hint of deference. Despite the churning waves of anxiety rolling through me, I nearly smiled to see him frown at the slight.

The younger adjusted the embroidered gloves she wore. A curious choice. Otherwise, she looked remarkably normal in her jeans and sweater. Her hair was pulled into a tight blond knot on the top of her head. “It’s an honor, Your—”

“You summoned us?” The elder cut her off, annoyance on her deeply lined face. She wore no gloves, and her modest dress was cut in an old-

fashioned style.

Oberon's nostrils flared as he regarded the old witch. "And you took your time, Ilsa." He nodded once at the other witch. "Marin."

"I'm not the one who needs help." Ilsa straightened under his glare, tilting her chin up.

"You have access to my court by my grace," he reminded her. "I suppose you think you are above serving the court now that the source of your magic has been returned."

"No," the younger one, Marin, jumped in, throwing a pleading look at her companion. "We were in the city preparing for the blood moon. We came as soon as we received word you needed us."

She nudged Ilsa in the rib cage. Sighing, the other witch nodded, but she didn't say anything. Oberon, however, looked mollified.

Such a delicate ego for a man who considered himself deadly.

He gestured to me. "She has something I desire—a ring."

"Have you tried asking her for it?" Ilsa asked dryly.

I barely swallowed a laugh, even as Titania stiffened.

Oberon's eyes flashed like the lightning of a vengeful god. "Cate and I have a bargain," he said through gritted teeth, "but it seems she can't fulfill her end of it. I'm afraid she's the one who needs your help before I lose patience."

Icy dread doused any lingering amusement.

I twisted the ring around my finger, but it didn't budge. Ilsa's eyes tracked the movement, but she remained silent.

"I believe there is a spell binding it to her," Oberon continued. "It's not fae magic. I want to know what it is and why it's been placed."

Marin started toward me, and I resisted the urge to run. Barely. Warning tingled across my skin, my entire body going taut, as though this woman was a predator.

Swear that you will never take it off... Fucking swear it.

I shut out Lach's voice even as guilt flooded through me, hot and sticky and unwelcome. This was the right thing to do—no matter what I had promised him. He couldn't have known it would come to this.

But the sharp edge of guilt morphed into something oily. I was thinking like a fae—warping the situation to suit me.

Marin's eyes held mine, a silent demand for compliance as she reached for me. I hesitated, and she impatiently yanked my hand up for inspection.

The pleasantries were reserved for Oberon, it seemed. Her leather-clad finger grazed the esmeraude, and a sharp twang of pain shot across my fingers and through my arm. I wrenched my hand away.

“What the hell?” I stroked the lingering throb. “That hurt!”

“You were right to call us,” Marin said, reaching toward me again.

But before she could touch me, the older witch took a step closer, as swift as a striking serpent. Her gaze flickered around us, pausing to assess Oberon with a calculating gleam. The room seemed to hold its breath; even the fae prince shifted on his feet and looked to where his guards stood silently by. “Marin forgets herself,” Ilsa said slowly. “Before we assist you, I want assurances as to that other matter.”

His eyes rolled, and I felt the increasingly familiar urge to slap him. “I will see to it,” he said blandly.

“You will release our friend,” Ilsa stipulated, “and *then* we will deliver the ring.”

Something clenched in my stomach, but I didn’t dare ask who Oberon had captured, didn’t dare think of the growls I’d heard during my explorations, didn’t dare wonder who else he had locked away in this beautiful prison—or what he was doing to them.

Tension crackled in the room like that spark of foreign magic that lingered on my skin. It wouldn’t take much for it to ignite. I’d seen what a fae prince could do, and I had no doubt that as powerful as these witches might be, they couldn’t stand against him in the Otherworld, where his magic was at its strongest.

Annoyance rolled off him, but he waved a hand. “It’s a bargain.” He turned to the guard closest to him. “Go see that our witch guest finds her way back to her world, and remind her to stay there this time.”

My heart jumped into my throat. Another “guest.” Words were a game to him, twisting them to suit his narrative and his desires. He had played me when we first met. That hadn’t changed, but what other games was he playing now? A chill trickled down my spine.

“Happy?” he asked Ilsa before pointing at me. “Now do your part.”

Marin moved toward me again, but Ilsa stepped between us. “Allow me.” The younger witch frowned but fell back. Ilsa stretched out her palm but made no move to grab me as her companion had. “When you are ready.”

Oberon muttered under his breath, but she ignored him. I swallowed, yet the lump in my throat didn’t budge. Bracing myself for the shock, I closed

my eyes and placed my hand in hers.

Her touch was featherlight, skin cool and soft on mine. No pain came. I pried open an eye to find Ilsa studying the ring, but she didn't touch it. Instead, she began a low chant in a strange language. Hairs pricked on the back of my neck as the energy in the room shifted, her voice weaving through it until delicate threads of light appeared all around us. They shimmered, winking in and out of sight. I opened my eyes entirely, unable to resist their hypnotic pull.

Oberon drummed his fingers on his arms behind her, sighing heavily. Marin's eyes widened, and she cleared her throat ever so slightly. How could they be so blasé in the presence of magic?

Ilsa's eyes lifted to mine, and she gave a slight, nearly imperceptible shake of her head. My mouth opened, questions poised to jump out at her, but she dropped my hand before I could say a word.

"It's an old binding spell," she announced, turning away from me.

"Unbind it," Oberon snapped.

She answered with a serpentine smile. "It's not that simple. The ring is bound to her. Only she can remove it."

"But I can't," I blurted out, cheeks growing hot. "I tried."

The last thing I needed was for Oberon to think I was trying to screw him. I tugged on the ring, yanking with all my strength until I found myself gasping from the pain.

"Either she is a very good actress, or you're wrong," Oberon said.

But Ilsa shrugged. "I'm not wrong, and she is not acting. Only she can remove it, but only when its conditions have been met."

"What the hell does that mean?" I glared at her. It wasn't enough that I needed to get this stupid ring off, that doing so would break my promise to Lach, that giving it away would mean surrendering the only tangible link to my parents. Now I had to pass a test, too?

"Something is holding you back from removing it," Ilsa continued. "You do not wish to remove it, so you cannot."

"Oh, I wish to remove it." And then I was going to jam it down someone's throat.

"She looks positively violent." Oberon's laugh grated on my fraying nerves. "I think I believe her."

"There may be another way. If you are interested?" Marin directed the question at Oberon.

He nodded. "That would be useful."

Ilsa tensed but didn't interrupt as Marin went on. "It's old magic, which means it will play by old magic's rules. In the past, magic often attached to specific people."

Oberon beckoned her to continue more quickly. "Just tell me what needs to be done. I don't need a history lesson."

"There is another old binding spell that might trick this one. A handfasting might convince the ring that you are her."

My stomach flipped, words failing me. She didn't mean...

"Explain." Oberon didn't look nearly as disturbed as he should.

"When a witch's handfasting is blessed by the goddess, the couple ceases to be two individuals in the eyes of magic."

"And the two shall become one," he murmured. His lip curled, and my stomach sank further. "So, I marry her, and the ring thinks I'm her?"

I couldn't just sit here and act like I was okay with this. "Absolutely fucking not. That is not part of the bargain."

They ignored me, Marin nodding. But Ilsa shook her head. "She would have to prepare like a witch. It won't work if she doesn't perform the sacred rituals to the goddess. The union must be blessed."

"And how long will these rituals take?"

Marin seemed undeterred by her companion's objection. "Three nights of rituals. The third must be performed at midnight under the moon."

Laughter bubbled inside me, a hysterical edge taking hold. "You can't actually be serious." I glared at Oberon. "I'm not marrying you."

But he continued to ignore me. "Make the arrangements."

Ilsa cast one final glance at me, sadness in her eyes. Maybe she felt bad for selling someone out to save her friend, but it wasn't going to stop her from doing it. Hate welled inside me, even as I could admit I didn't blame her. "We will return tonight to perform the first ritual."

I wanted to save my friends, but marrying Oberon? My chest tightened, my skin itching and burning like my soul was trying to escape this fate. There had to be another way. It wasn't like Oberon wanted to marry me. He was clearly already in love with himself.

I remained silent as he guided the witches out of the room. Titania lingered behind while he dismissed them.

I was still weighing exactly how to tell Oberon to go fuck himself over this marriage idea when Titania spoke. "What's the news out of London?"

she asked him. “I can’t believe you made me sit through all of that. You could have just told us.”

London. The rage simmering inside me cooled into fear. Bain was in London.

“I thought it best to wait.” His eyes were trained on me. “I wanted to be sure Cate remained cooperative.”

“Stop teasing.” Titania pouted. “You can torture her, but I’m your sister.”

“I have no plans to torture Cate, so long as she fulfills her end of our arrangement.”

“About that.” I took a deep, if shaky, breath. “Marrying you wasn’t part of the terms. Find another way. I’m spoken for.”

His answering smile hollowed something in my chest. “I think you’ll find you aren’t. Not anymore. Lach made a move on the Infernal Court.”

I couldn’t breathe.

“Reports are limited, but it’s what I expected,” he continued.

Blood roared in my ears. *No. No. No.*

Someone squealed with delight in the distance. Titania?

It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered.

“I’m afraid there is no one left to protect your friends in New Orleans, if you will not.”

I crumpled to the floor before he finished speaking. Lach had done exactly what Oberon expected—what *I* would expect him to do. He had sought vengeance, and now...

“Because Lachlan Gage is dead.”

Chapter Six

Cate

Day passed into night. The sun rose and set again. I didn't care. The witches came, chanting their blessings, smudging oils across my lips and forehead. I didn't care. The world kept spinning.

I didn't care.

Cedar from the previous night's ritual lingered in the air like a punishment, mocking me with its cruelty. Lach's scent. I couldn't escape it or the memories it dredged up: his obnoxious smirk and those swirling, telling tattoos; the raw vulnerability I'd glimpsed under the moonlight the night I knew I'd never break the bargain; the utter calm on his face the moment before he took MacAlister's life and spared mine. Gone.

He was gone. Dead.

I tested the words as I waited for the final ritual, staring out the window to where blue sky met endless sea. I didn't notice when night cloaked both in darkness. I waited for it to swallow me, too. But it stretched before me like my future—a never-ending night as grim as a glimpse of the Otherworld beyond the court.

I pressed my cheek to the glass to cool my feverish skin, steadying myself with my palm when I thought I might collapse. Ribbons of moonlight fell across my skin...and twisted—like the tattoos that had wound themselves over Lach's body. I stared, my heart leaping slightly, until they vanished.

"Pathetic." Hallucinating was a new blow. Likely brought on by low blood sugar and lower expectations. The perfect combination for a bride on her wedding night.

Because that's what this was: the last night of the ritual. Oberon would probably have a priest waiting to jump in as soon as Ilsa spoke the final incantation or waved her magic wand or whatever she did.

Knowing I would be married by morning cut through my numbness like a

knife. Panic clawed at me as though, despite everything, my shredded soul was still desperate to escape. But it was the only way to shield Lach's family and Channing—my friends and the closest thing to a family I'd ever known. His family was all that was left of him now, and I would not leave Channing unprotected, no matter how he had betrayed me.

I could give *them* the future that was stolen from *us*.

It was a justification, a futile attempt to find some scrap of purpose in all this pain. Becoming Oberon's bride, giving him the ring, would keep him from going after the Nether Court.

I could do this one thing to keep them safe, even though it meant breaking my promise to Lach.

I just needed a sign. Minutes and hours passed—maybe even eternity itself—as I waited for another glimpse of gold. Even if it was only a hallucination, the possibility was a small comfort.

A soft knock at the door jolted me from my vigil.

"Come in." The words were rough in my dry mouth. I forced myself to swallow, straightening as the door opened. The mute maid shuffled inside, a delicate white gown draped over her arms. She laid it across the bed, its fabric flowing like spilled milk, and turned to me. Our eyes met, and hers were filled with a sadness that mirrored my own.

I forced my feet to move, each step a cruel reminder of what waited for me as I followed her into the bathroom. She turned on the shower, laying out a towel by the sink, and nodded before disappearing into the bedroom. A polite reminder that I hadn't bathed for days.

Shedding the dress I'd worn since my arrival, I stepped under the water. The heat loosened the tension knotting my shoulders after sleepless nights spent huddled by the window as my last moments of freedom slipped by. I reached for the soap, lathering it until its lavender overwhelmed the cedar oil that had haunted me all day. Every motion was automatic, performed out of habit. Just like the rest of my life would be.

I wrapped myself in the soft towel and returned to the bedroom, ready to get this over with. Lingerie had been laid out. My stomach dipped at the sight of the lacy undergarments and what they implied. That had not been part of the discussion. Oberon could have his ring, but he would never have his bride.

The maid studied me, an understanding in her eyes that broke my heart. Some words didn't need to be spoken. Some scars were shared. I swallowed

as I picked up the skimpy bra, nausea twisting my guts. She moved to the vanity, pretending to busy herself as I put on the underwear. After I hooked the bra, she returned to help me with the dress.

It wasn't an actual wedding gown, not by modern standards, with its flowing layers of gossamer long enough to pool into a small train. Tiny, hand-stitched flowers and vines were embroidered on the gauzy fabric that rose into a high neckline before tapering into a pair of fluttery sleeves that draped off my shoulders like butterfly wings. There was no denying its virginal pretensions. It would be laughable if I was capable of laughing.

She slipped it over my head, layering me in an innocence long stolen. The dress clung to my curves, a second skin I neither recognized nor wanted. Her fingers moved nimbly up the buttons. When she was finished, she started toward the full-length mirror, but I moved to the vanity. I didn't need to check my appearance. Today was a performance. Nothing more.

I sat on the stool, staring into the mirror without really seeing anything. She worked with a quiet precision, weaving my hair into an intricate updo, but each gentle touch felt like an apology—as if she wished she could protect me.

"I don't need to be saved," I whispered to her. "I'm the savior."

Her gaze held a flicker of something more, a desperate communication barred by the cruel spell that stole her voice.

"Can you write?" Opening the drawer to search for a pen and paper—for a lifeline to express the words trapped inside her—I found only cosmetics. No glammers, then. I couldn't be certain that she was human, but I suspected if she wasn't, she wasn't allowed to do magic. I uncapped an eyeliner pencil and held it out to her. But she shook her head, the glimmer of commiseration flickering out, leaving me with the heavy certainty that she deserved to be rescued, too.

She placed a cautious hand on my shoulder and squeezed before returning to her duty. When she finished, she gestured to the mirror as if seeking my approval. Since she wasn't the one blackmailing me into marriage, I complied. A stranger looked back. She had my eyes, my mouth, my nose, but I wasn't inside.

As I stared at my reflection, a golden filament flickered over my skin. I grabbed my wrist like I could catch it, but it vanished in a blink. The illusion shattered, and I turned away from the glass.

No more escape. No more denial.

Today, I would marry Oberon and seal my fate—and the future of those I loved. It wasn't such a bad trade-off.

I barely had time to catch my breath before the bedroom door opened. I turned to see Oberon and the witches entering my room, their presence filling the space with an unsettling energy. They wore matching robes of emerald green embroidered with silver thread. Ilsa raised an eyebrow at my appearance but didn't say anything. Her gaze flickered to the maid and lingered intently until the poor thing scuttled out of the room.

Oberon, however, was dressed for the modern world. He looked every bit the regal king he craved to become in his expensive tailored suit, the black fabric accentuating his dark hair. The choice was a stark reminder that the clock was ticking.

Titania trailed behind them. Her vibrant red dress, cut scandalously low, was a jarring contrast to my own. The tight-fitting fabric clung to her curves, and I couldn't help but feel that her choice of attire was a wedding wish especially for me. The message? *Fuck you.*

At least she and I saw eye to eye. We'd be best friends in no time.

"Ready to get this over with, Cate?" Oberon's voice pulled me back to the present.

Relief shot through me, short-lived but welcome. Maybe I'd misread the lingerie.

"You look..." He paused, raking his gaze down my body in a way that made my skin crawl. "Exquisite."

Or maybe not.

"Before we begin the ritual, there is one more thing you must do to show the goddess the sincerity of your intentions," Marin said, withdrawing a knife from a sheath under her cloak.

I swallowed hard as its blade glinted in the light, my heart pounding in my chest. "What is that?"

Oberon dutifully held out his left hand. He didn't flinch as Marin pierced his index finger. Blood welled on its tip, and she smeared the blade through it before she turned to reach for my hand. I started back a step, repulsed, and she scowled, grabbing my arm.

"Blood helps seal powerful magic." She pricked my skin. My blood seeped across Oberon's blood, staining the blade as she murmured, "*Mother goddess, sacred and true, let blood unite this spell anew. Beneath the surface where secrets lie, threads of fate may crimson tie.*"

Worst wedding ever.

Marin nodded to Oberon. "The handfasting."

Alarm bleated inside me, but I found myself transfixed, unable to move, as Oberon produced a length of silk rope. I didn't have to ask what it was for. Only days ago, I'd stood in another room—in another life—as Ciara was handfasted to Bain. Unfortunately, I doubted mine would end as fortuitously as hers. But I didn't protest as Oberon laced it around my wrist. My hand trembled in his as he wrapped the silk around his, binding us together in a symbolic gesture that felt all too real. A knot formed at the base of my throat, the finality of the act striking me with a cold dread.

I waited for the tattoo to appear—proof of our marriage bond.

But it never came.

Oberon's eyes narrowed. His hand clenched around mine, nails digging into my flesh.

"Where is it?" he growled, scanning my arm for the missing mark.

"You must be patient," Ilsa advised, the authority in her voice daring him to challenge her. "This is a witch wedding, not a fae one. The mark shall appear once the goddess blesses the union tonight." She pointed out the window to where a sliver of crescent moon inched ever closer to its zenith. "It is nearly midnight. We must begin."

He dragged me toward the door, the rope still wrapped around my wrist, but Ilsa held up a hand.

"The rituals of the Belle Mère are for women alone," she said firmly. He opened his mouth to argue, but she cut him off. "If we do not begin soon, we will have to start over from the beginning."

I wasn't sure what was worse: the reality that I'd be married to Oberon according to fae and witch customs tonight, or the thought of being anointed and chanted over for one more minute.

Reluctantly, he released me. The silk rope slipped to the floor, but the sense of confinement lingered. He turned to Titania. "Watch her."

Not a request. A command.

Titania nodded, though her lips curled in a mischievous smile that matched her rebellious dress. Oberon didn't follow as they ushered me out of the room and through the halls, past guards, their eyes following us in silent curiosity.

Night embraced us as we stepped outside, the cool air soothing as my heart began to race.

Moonlight spilled over the flower beds and mixed with the flickering candles lining our path, casting elongated shadows that danced with the wind. The hedge maze loomed before us, its paths twisting and turning. The powdery softness of night-blooming flowers choked the air, my already shallow breaths catching on the knot forming in my throat.

I skimmed the dark silhouettes of the estate's boundary, remembering the desolate wasteland Oberon had shown me. This was my last chance to make a run for it, to escape into the night. But what then? The stark reality of the world beyond—cloaked in an eternal darkness that promised no refuge—dashed the fleeting temptation. There was nowhere to run. I had no way to return to my world. I was trapped in Oberon's web, and soon he would devour me.

"We must begin." Ilsa's voice cut through my racing thoughts, firm but not unkind. She placed a guiding hand on my shoulder, a spark of magic tingling across my skin as she directed me into a circle of salt—a solitary island under the vast expanse of the night sky. Candles glowed on the makeshift altar before me, their flames flickering in the breeze without extinguishing. Ilsa crossed to it and lifted a book from the cradle at its center. Marin and Titania took their places in their own circles, their faces illuminated by candlelight. The younger witch wore a fixed expression of reverie. Titania, however, looked torn between curiosity and boredom, like a cat considering a bit of string.

"Belle Mère, goddess of many faces, accept this offering of three," Ilsa cried out. "Bless our cause."

If there was a cause, it was a lost one. I doubted a goddess was listening, and if she was, I really doubted she cared about what I wanted. But I found my eyes turning up, like a child searching for a star to wish upon.

I didn't want to marry Oberon.

I didn't want to give him the ring.

I couldn't trust anything he said, especially about the safety of my family and friends. Only a bargain could hold him to his word.

That's why I was here, standing in a salt circle under the moonlight in a not-quite-wedding dress.

Because I was desperate.

I'd been here before. Lesson *not* learned.

Ilsa began to chant, her ancient words vibrating in the air. My skin prickled as energy hummed, building and expanding as she called forth

magic. She picked up a silver goblet from the altar and dipped the knife, coated in our blood, into the cup, and plumes of smoke rose from it and vanished into the night. Ilsa passed the cup from Marin to Titania. They both drank without comment, their eyes glazing slightly, and a sense of inevitability settled like lead in my chest.

But when it was my turn, I hesitated, my hand trembling as she held it out to me.

“You must drink,” Ilsa hissed. “Trust the goddess.”

If she only knew trust was *not* one of my life skills.

Not that I had a lot of options. I stared into the chalice, a little concerned that it was still smoking. Hardly any remained. I downed the contents, gagging as a bitter earthiness coated my tongue. That’s when Titania hit the ground.

Was that supposed to happen?

Marin let out a triumphant cheer, whirling toward me with wild eyes.

Shit. I hurled the cup toward the altar, but it was too late. I swayed, my knees buckling. The world spun around me, darkness beckoning me to finally sleep. Ilsa’s voice echoed distantly. “Sleep now, child. The goddess will guide your path.”

My vision blurred as my knees hit the dirt with a teeth-rattling crack, and I sent up a prayer of my own.

Belle Mère, if you’re listening: help.

Chapter Seven

Cate

The world tilted on its axis as I blinked to find my cheek smashed against damp, hard earth. It felt like I'd put my brain in a blender. Could this ritual bullshit get any worse? Groaning, I pushed onto my elbows and looked across the garden to find...*myself*.

I scrambled back, fingers tearing at the cold grass, suddenly very fucking awake.

A shadow fell over me as Marin approached and knelt before me. She held out a hand to steady me, but I didn't reach for it.

"Easy, Cate," she said softly. "The effects of the spell are quite strong. Give yourself a minute."

A minute? I was going to need a goddamn year.

I clutched my chest and froze when I found my boobs two sizes smaller. I looked down to find Titania's hand, wearing *my* ring, planted over *my* rampaging heart. "What the hell is going on?" I reached up to touch my face. Not my nose. Not my mouth. Not *me*. "What have you done to me?"

"Shhh!" Ilsa shushed me. "People will hear you."

"She's panicking. It's to be expected," Marin called to her.

Panicking? I was having some type of psychotic break. I poked at my cheek, pinched my arm. I felt everything, but this wasn't my body. Somehow, I was *Titania*.

Marin grabbed my hand as I was about to slap myself. "It's a simple transference spell. Only temporary. I need you to listen." Urgency laced her words. "We lied to Oberon." She gestured to my sleeping body. "I've placed a spell on both of you, making you appear like each other, but we have to get you out of here before it wears off."

"Are you serious?" Something thundered in my chest. My heart. Or Titania's heart. It was all a bit difficult to wrap my head around. "Why?"

"No one will stop Titania from leaving the court." She rose, grabbing my

hand and hauling me to my feet. “She will remain asleep until the spell wears off. We should all have enough time to get the hell out of here before Oberon realizes what we’ve done.”

A glimmer of hope ignited in my chest, but it was instantly smothered by a fresh pang of fear. “If he catches us—”

“We’re aware of what happens,” Ilsa cut me off. “She needs to change.”

Looking down, I realized I was still wearing the white gown the maid had dressed me in earlier. I started to tear it off, but Marin stopped me. “We need to put her in that. Be careful.”

I nodded and began to undress as she moved to help Ilsa with Titania’s clothing. Years of working as a nurse and changing in hospital locker rooms had cured me of any modesty. I focused on that to distract myself from the fact that I was wearing someone else’s skin. I stripped everything off, trembling as I stood naked in the night’s cool breeze. Marin passed me the red dress and shoes Titania had worn to the ritual, and I slipped into them as they dressed her in my white gown.

It would almost be worth sticking around to see her wake up wearing it.

“Call the guards to help us,” Ilsa ordered Marin. She dashed off, and the old witch turned on me. “Play the part. They must believe you are Titania. Can you do that?”

“Act like a raging bitch?” I asked, shivering again. Her dress was useless in this weather. “I think I can handle that.”

She looked unconvinced as Marin returned, two guards running behind her.

They shared a look as they took in the unconscious woman surrounded by the salt circle. One pivoted to stare at me. His eyes swept over me from head to toe.

My pulse sped up. Did he know? Then I realized they were waiting for me to give the order. “What are you doing?” I marched toward them and pointed at...me. I was so going to need therapy after this. “Oberon’s *fragile* human bride fainted. Get her inside before he finds out you left her on the ground this long.”

Genuine fear widened their eyes, and they quickly lifted her. A rush of sympathy hit me as they carried her toward my fate, but I quickly turned up my nose. Sympathy, kindness, a shred of decency—showing signs of any of those things would be a dead giveaway that I wasn’t Titania.

Marin and Ilsa followed a few steps behind me as we made our way

toward the bedroom. Each step inside the Hallow Court sent my adrenaline surging until I was in full-blown survival mode. I gave in to the familiar. Reacting and responding—this was what I was good at after endless nights working as a nurse. There wasn't time to consider all the terrible ways this terrible plan might end.

Ilsa moved beside me, lowering her voice to a whisper. "Oberon expects the ritual to take longer, but we must hurry."

I refused to let myself consider what he would do to the three of us if we didn't make it out of here. I refused to think of the locked room one floor down, refused to consider the servants cursed to move in silence through the estate's beautiful horror.

Well, I tried to refuse.

"Send for Cate's maid to watch over her while we're gone," I barked to the guards, snapping my fingers and feeling a foreign spark of magic that startled me. They nodded, too nervous to notice, and rushed off to fetch the mute woman.

"What are you doing?" Marin grabbed my arm. "We need to go."

"I won't leave her here." She had shown me kindness, and my gut told me that woman was as much a prisoner as I was.

"There's no time," Marin hissed.

"Then leave." I would find my own way out. Somehow.

"She's right." Ilsa reached for her companion's hand and gripped it. "Gods know what he's done to the creature."

Creature? I didn't have time to ask what the woman was before she appeared in the room. The guards paused outside the door. No doubt wanting to avoid my wrath.

The maid's eyes followed me warily, seeing only the Hallow Court princess who'd probably made her life hell. But when they landed on the bed, she rushed toward the unconscious figure she mistook for me. I blocked her. I didn't want her to actually stay here; I needed a reason to order her out of the room with me. "Where is my brother?" I demanded. "Didn't you tell him his bride is waiting?"

She blinked, confusion clouding her eyes, but I grabbed her wrist and pulled her from the room. I paused near the door and looked at the witches. "You two better come along and explain what went wrong yourself. I am not taking the fall for your mistake."

They glanced at each other, Ilsa looking mildly impressed by my

performance.

“Wait here and don’t let anyone in that room,” I ordered the guards, throwing them one final, dangerous glare before I dragged the maid down the hall.

She struggled a little against my hold.

“Stop,” I hissed. “Just trust me.”

Her gaze darted to the witches, who nodded.

“This way.” Ilsa pointed to the end of the corridor, but when we reached it, we found an empty room.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Now you nip us out of here,” Marin said, reaching for my shoulder.

“That’s the plan?” I stared at them. All of this trouble, and that was their big plan? “I can’t nip. I’m not a fae.”

Another pointed look between the witches.

“It doesn’t matter. Titania is,” Ilsa explained. “Your entire beings were transferred into each other, including her magic. We’ve been working on this for days, preparing your body every night, Cate.” She grabbed my other arm. The maid, to her credit, didn’t try to run despite the absolutely ludicrous conversation happening in front of her. Instead, she looked almost relieved.

“I don’t know how.” I had never expected to die in such a weird, confusing way, but I had a feeling if I tried to magically transport us anywhere, bad shit was going down.

“Just snap your fingers and imagine you’re on Earth,” Ilsa said.

I stared at her. “Those are your instructions?”

“This might help. Imagine you’re going here.” Marin held up her phone, and I glimpsed a photo of a cobbled street lined with a row of quaint shops and restaurants.

“Where is that?” I asked.

“All that matters is that it’s close,” she said hurriedly. “From what we know about fae magic, nipping requires strong magic. We can’t risk going too far, since...”

I had no clue what I was doing. Was this a rescue or a joke? I grabbed the phone, committing the image to memory. If this was the only chance we had, I needed to try, even if it sounded far-fetched.

“Ready?” Ilsa pressed.

Not even a little.

There were plans, and then there were suicide missions. This felt more like the latter.

“We’re running out of time.” Marin grabbed one of my arms, nodding for them to do the same.

I clamped my mouth into a grim line, but the maid gave me an encouraging nod and squeezed my hand, leaving the other free. It was a testament to how fucked up the Hallow Court must be if she was going along with this.

I closed my eyes, all three clinging to me, and pictured the lively street in the photo.

And then I snapped my fingers.

Chapter Eight

Lach

Consciousness proved I wasn't dead, but it made me wish I was.

My muscles protested as I sat up and tried to open my eyes, which seemed to be glued shut. I winced as I wiped crusted blood from my lashes. That explained the soreness. My shirt was torn down the middle to reveal singed skin and seeping wounds. Bain had fought dirty, summoning a binding spell that allowed him to use his fire magic against me. The rest was a bit hazy, like how I'd wound up in a fairly comfortable bed and not a shallow grave.

That was the danger of confronting an enemy in another court. They had the home field advantage, and clearly, Bain had been prepared for my arrival. Whatever curse he'd used against me must have lingered in my blood, because my head was fuzzy and I wasn't healing. More reasons to hate him.

I'd failed my first attempt to swing my legs over the side of the bed when the door creaked open and answered one of my questions.

"You look like shit," Roark announced a bit too cheerfully.

I flipped him off—or tried to. My finger was broken, and I was seeing double. A smile tugged at my lips, but I winced. Even that hurt. "How?"

"Your sister called me. Did you think she was going to let you go after Bain alone?"

His words dashed any relief I'd felt at seeing him. I should have known my penumbra would intervene when he found out I'd headed to London. "So, your phone does work."

He ignored the accusation.

"Eat this." Something hard and cold smacked against my chest. I fumbled, barely catching the blood apple. "You are going to need your strength."

The ominous bent of his words jogged something loose in my brain. I

took a bite, forcing myself to swallow. An instant warmth spread through me, easing, if not erasing, some of my pain and clearing my head enough for me to make out my surroundings.

The Avalon. Roark had brought me to the Avalon.

I shot to my feet, my left ankle barking in protest. Also broken. I stumbled a step. “Have you lost your mind? The Hunt—”

“Aren’t going to be a problem.” Roark caught me by the arm and nudged me toward a chair. My penumbra—my shadow—had been my friend and advisor since birth. Even if I had left the throne in the hands of my sister, our bond remained.

“If they show up here, all of you could get caught in the crossfire.”

“Except we’re not idiots, unlike some people who go after their enemies without backup,” he said with a pointed look. “Ciara’s been spoon-feeding you yarrow to keep your magic hidden. We didn’t want the Hunt to be able to trace you here. Not before we were ready for them.”

That’s why I hadn’t healed. Not due to Bain, but my own family drugging me.

“And we’re ready now?”

“More or less.” He shrugged like we weren’t discussing my imminent death at the hands of an execution squad. “I convinced her to stop dosing you so we could catch you up.”

“Thanks,” I said, not quite sure that I meant it.

“I’m glad to see you. Your family, however, wants to kill you.” He clapped a hand on my shoulder, and I winced at the smarting pain. He shoved me down with a smile and looked pointedly at the apple. “I would take whatever help I can get.”

I groaned, collapsing into the seat and dutifully taking another bite. “What the hell happened?”

“You really don’t remember?” He leaned against the wall, crossing his tattooed forearms, and glared across the room at me. “You walked into the Infernal Court and picked a fight with Bain.”

Oh yeah. *That*.

“Without anyone to back you up,” he added.

“You mentioned that.”

“Because you’re a moron.”

“Sounds like me,” I said flatly.

“Bain beat the shit out of you. You’ve been out for days.”

“Days?” I repeated. I’d lost *days*.

“Ciara said to let you heal on your own.”

“Why would she say that?”

“Because we have enough to deal with. We didn’t need to worry about you, too.” Roark chewed on his lip ring—a sure sign that he was frustrated enough to agree with her.

“Why am I alive?” That’s what didn’t make sense. Bain was within his rights to kill me or turn me over to the Wild Hunt. I’d picked the fight. I had breached his court. I had killed his penumbra.

I shouldn’t be breathing.

“Good question.” He tilted his head, waiting for me to supply a reason. But I only shrugged. “I showed up, and he told me to get you out of his sight. I practically had to scrape you off the floor.”

“Hopefully you got all the important bits.” I deposited the core next to a full bowl of apples before taking another.

Roark waved his hand, and the core disappeared. “You mean hopefully I got all the brain cells. You can’t stand to lose any more.”

He had good reason to be pissed at me, and since I couldn’t do shit until the blood apple sped up my natural healing abilities, I took it.

But when I failed to challenge him, Roark’s voice softened with disappointment. “You attacked another court. What were you thinking?”

That’s the problem: I wasn’t thinking. I *couldn’t* think. Even now, I was biding time until I was healed enough to continue my search for Cate. My eyes lifted to his. I wasn’t used to sharing my thoughts out loud with him, but he seemed to understand the implied question.

“Bain doesn’t have Cate,” he said softly.

I tensed hearing her name, a new pain flooding through me. “So he claims.”

“Do you believe him?” Roark asked.

He wasn’t angry that I’d attacked another court. He was pissed that I’d left him out of it. If I said no, if I asked him to go back to London, he would. It was a small comfort that after everything, the bond between us was still unbreakable.

But that didn’t change facts. “Things are a bit fuzzy,” I admitted, “but he seemed genuinely surprised when I showed up. I don’t think he has her.”

“So, who does?” Roark asked.

That was the question. I stared past him like I might find the answers if I

only looked harder.

“We’ll find her.”

I tried to nod.

“What—”

The door to my room swung open, cutting him off. Ciara stormed inside, pointing a shaky finger at me. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Apparently, that was the question of the hour.

“He wasn’t,” Fiona answered for me, appearing at our sister’s side.

I held up my hands in surrender, relieved that my fingers were already fully healed thanks to the apple. But Ciara continued her rampage. “I have spent the last few days trying to convince every creature in New Orleans to help you, overtaking the city’s magic on a spell we aren’t sure will even hold, and then you go and pull something like this!”

Fiona crossed her arms over her chest, lifting a brow.

“Go ahead,” I grumbled.

But she glared at me. “Saying *I told you so* gets us nowhere. Now, if you could learn from one of your mistakes, that would be helpful.”

“Let’s not get ambitious,” Roark said, a half smile playing on his lips as he watched them attack.

I gripped the chair and hauled myself to my feet.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Ciara demanded.

“Back to the Infernal Court. I’d rather deal with Bain.”

Ciara drew a sharp breath, her face mottling red with rage. “If you so much as—”

“Whoa.” Roark grabbed her by the shoulders. “He’s not going anywhere.”

He sent a sharp look in my direction. Roark would stop me. He was probably the only one who could.

“I’m not going through all the trouble of putting a *bona fides* ward on this city for you to get yourself killed,” she snapped.

Nope. Roark was clearly right that she planned to do that herself.

“A ward?” I asked. Someone had to steer this conversation in a different direction. “What good will that do?”

Despite her fury, a smug smile lit up her face. “A *bona fides* ward,” she repeated, “and for starters, it will keep the Wild Hunt out of New Orleans.”

“Really? You came up with that?” I looked at Roark for confirmation.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Ciara said in a wounded voice.

I quickly shook my head before she exploded again. "I'm not. I had no idea that was possible."

Her smile faltered. "A familiar gave me the idea. I've been meeting with the covens for days, trying to convince them to help us. The spell draws off magic from all three parishes and projects out like a shield to the city limits. At least it's supposed to. We're still getting it stabilized."

"What kind of magic does it use?" I asked. It was a good idea, but relying on the covens for help was delicate business, and judging by Ciara's deepening frown, it wasn't going smoothly.

"Several to make it hard to unravel," Roark told me. "It's tied to the location as well as a loyalty oath, blood, and some other stuff."

"And they're actually cooperating?" I was impressed. Ciara might not believe she could handle taking my place, but clearly, she could.

She grimaced. "They're already complaining that it's draining the city's magic, and we've only shielded to this side of the river. Every creature in New Orleans that isn't of our bloodline has until midnight to take the oath. After that, it should stay up."

"And if they don't take the oath?" I asked. As a rule, we kept track of every creature that entered the city, but some occasionally slipped past us.

"They'll find themselves very uncomfortable," Ciara said, scrunching her nose. "The magic will mark them as dissidents physically. They'll want to leave town."

"Or they'll come crawling to us," Roark added with a smug grin.

"Let's hope so." Ciara's sigh carried a weight I understood. No wonder she was in such a bad mood. Doing business with the city's covens was difficult on a good day and rarely required the three groups to work together. "I'm supposed to meet with the covens in a few hours to hunt down anyone who's holding out on us."

Probably a fair few.

"And before that, we need to have a family meeting of our own," Fiona suggested. "Someone should call Shaw at the hospital."

"Hospital?"

"He's with Channing," Ciara explained. "I figured Cate would kill us if anything happened to her brother, so I made him keep watch. That way, when she gets back..."

A knot tightened in my throat. I managed a nod of thanks but couldn't bring myself to speak.

“Bain doesn’t have her,” Roark told them in a low voice.

Ciara stared at him for a minute before her eyes flashed to me. “That doesn’t make sense. Where is she?”

“Maybe she just left town,” Fiona said.

Anger gripped me, but it was Ciara who snapped, “You don’t know her.”

“And Channing called me,” I reminded them. “He said someone took her.”

“He didn’t say who it was?”

I swallowed. “I assumed.” I should have nipped to her brother the moment he called, should have forced the information out of him before this could happen. “Has he told us anything?”

Ciara glanced at Roark.

“What?” I asked.

She took a deep breath. “He’s in a coma. There was a lot of internal damage. Garcia isn’t sure he’ll walk again.”

Only half of what she said filtered through. “You’re telling me that no one has talked to Channing?”

“Try to keep up. He’s in a coma,” Fiona said.

“Did you even try to wake him?”

Ciara glared at me. “We’ve had our hands full. Do you know how hard it is to track down every creature in this city?”

“And we thought Bain had her,” Fiona reminded me.

“So now we know that he doesn’t.” I got up, testing my ankle for a second before I strode to my closet for clothes. One fucking blood apple, and I was healed. They could have given it to me days ago if they were going to stifle my magic’s natural ability to heal. I slipped out of the torn shirt, pausing to scrub away the clotted remnants of the fight, before I reached for another. “Channing knows who has her. We need him awake.”

Roark picked up another blood apple from the bowl, reading my mind.

“That’s not going to be enough,” Ciara told him. “He’s paralyzed. He needs something stronger than that.”

Finally, we agreed on something. It was likely to be the last thing we agreed on, though. “You’re right.” I turned to Roark, the shadow magic of my city ebbing toward me. “Call Baptiste.”

Chapter Nine

Cate

It was a rough landing.

My stomach continued its descent as the four of us crashed into a pile, landing on hard stone. I couldn't bring myself to open my eyes, convinced I'd find myself sprawled on the marble floor of the Hallow Court. But the scent of fresh rain hit my nostrils, followed by car horns and engines and tires swishing on wet streets.

It couldn't be...

I dared a peek at the ground beneath us. Wet cobblestone greeted me. Lifting my eyes, I discovered that we had landed behind a dumpster, the reeking stench of beer and old fish wafting from its open lid. A sob of relief slipped from my mouth as I drank in what lay just beyond it: a narrow avenue filled with warmly lit pubs and restaurants. Laughter drifted toward us as doors opened and patrons spilled into the night.

Earth.

We were somewhere on *Earth*. I could have kissed the stone beneath me. People walked past on their way to normal lives, completely oblivious. Which was probably a blessing. I couldn't imagine what we must look like.

"I cannot believe that worked." Marin let out a whoop.

An arm wiggled beneath my back. I had one of them pinned. Rolling to the side, I untangled myself from the others, sitting up to find myself looking at Ilsa. Her wrinkles had faded into fine lines, her silver hair now a buttery blond. I blinked a few times, and she smiled.

"We borrowed faces, too." Marin's words were a painful reminder that I still looked like Titania.

"Courtesy of the Belle Mère," Ilsa said, lifting a youthful hand to show me a small tattoo on her wrist: a circle flanked on either side by crescent moons. "That part wasn't a lie."

"You're not..." I stumbled, searching for what to say.

“Old?” she offered.

“Don’t let her fool you,” Marin interjected. Words failed me entirely as she shucked off the cloak to reveal a T-shirt and jeans, her long pale hair now short and spiky. Now, I felt even more overdressed. “She’s older than she looks.”

Magic. Ilsa nodded as if she’d heard my thoughts. “We can explain more later. The magic disguising you will fade at midnight. We should go. Our coven is waiting for us in Kildare. They’ll help you.”

But would they? Helping me escape might have been another trick. “Why should I trust you?”

“Do you have a choice?”

That was a good point. But I held my ground. “I have questions.”

“They can wait,” Marin said firmly. “We’ll answer your questions once you’re safe.”

“I can’t waste time here. I need to get back to New Orleans.” Before Oberon discovered I was missing and went after them.

Marin touched her own tattoo. “This links us and our cause—to those of us who follow the old book’s ways. Those who bear it will help you.”

Before I could ask more, a melodic voice interjected, “I think you will find help wherever you look.”

I whipped around to the maid, brows raising in question at hearing her finally speak.

“Kelly...and thank you.” She hugged me tightly, tears brimming in her eyes. “I never thought I’d escape that place.”

“Neither did I.” Rough emotion cracked my own voice.

“Oberon is a bigger monster than you can imagine. You’ve saved me from more than just a life of servitude.”

Dread traced an icy finger down my spine. The witches of New Orleans might be able to help me, but there were other questions only Kelly might answer. “Do you know anything about what happens below ground in the Hallow Court?”

She bit her lip, shaking her head. “I don’t remember much... It’s all a blur. But he took my blood, and then he took my voice.”

My heart sank, the dread pooling in my stomach like molten lead. I had escaped Oberon. How long would it be until he came after the people I loved?

“When did he take you captive?” Ilsa asked her in a shrewd voice.

"I don't know," she admitted. "It felt like an eternity. Where are we? I need to reach my daughter. She'll be looking for me."

"Dublin," Marin told her, "the seat of the Hallow Court."

"I need to get to her. She was in Venice before..."

Kelly's life had been stolen.

"We'll help you," Marin promised. "Now we should probably get off the street. People will think we're drunk."

But Ilsa grinned as she brushed debris off my shoulder. "Trinity College is only a few blocks away. We'll blend right in. Plenty of people are out drinking at this hour."

"Do you have someone you want to call?" Ilsa asked Kelly.

The question hit me squarely in the gut, grief tempering my joy as I realized the person I wanted to call would never answer.

"My daughter," Kelly said.

"When we reach Kildare," Marin said. "We can't waste time here. Let's go."

But I shook my head. "I need to get home. Now."

Marin's silvery eyes filled with sympathy.

"You can still nip," Ilsa told me.

It had been a miracle that we'd made it here. "To New Orleans?"

"If you go quickly," Ilsa nodded. "It will be simpler, since it's home. Just picture where you want to be. Our sisters there can answer your questions."

That was easy. I'd picture black-paneled walls and windows that overlooked the bustling heart of New Orleans, a fire warming a marble hearth, shelves crammed with books on either side. But that room would be empty. My heart ached at the promise of returning home to a city without Lach. I bottled up the feeling before the rawness in my throat turned to tears. I was still in an enemy's city. I couldn't fall apart even as anguish pulled at the seams of my grief.

"It's too dangerous," Marin said before I could make the leap. "She can't make it that far."

"She's channeling Titania's magic as well as her appear—"

"Exactly." Marin cut her off, shaking her head. "What will happen if she shows up looking like Titania? Plus, we have no idea if Titania could nip that far."

"Titania is hundreds of years old, royalty, and she teaches at the academy," Ilsa said dryly. "I'm sure she's powerful enough."

“It’s too much to ask of *her*.” Marin nodded in my direction. “We can’t risk it.”

“It’s no safer for her to stay here in *his* city,” Ilsa said.

“Which is why we need to get her off the streets before her appearance changes.” Marin started to jostle me toward a back alley.

But we only made it a few steps before a deep voice called out, “Is everything okay, Titania?”

I spun around to find two men in black suits approaching us. They glanced at my companions as if assessing a threat. The closest one’s gaze narrowed on Kelly and the uniform she still wore.

I stepped between them before they could ask more questions. “Do I look like I’m okay?” I planted a hand on my hip. “I just spent the evening having my ass chewed out by my brother because these three can’t do their jobs.”

Confusion creased their foreheads, and I saw a flicker of tattoos slip past their human glammers. I needed to get these women out of here now.

Turning back to the others, I mouthed, *I’ll be okay. Go*. I rubbed my fingers together with a conspiratorial wink, then raised my voice. “Get out of my sight and tell the coven to send someone competent next time!”

Marin hesitated, uncertainty clouding her eyes.

I summoned the frostiest tone I could manage. “I’m done with you. Leave.”

For a moment, Marin didn’t move. Finally, she shrugged. “We did what we could. Good luck.”

Whatever doubt she was wrestling with, she’d come to the same conclusion I had. They had gotten me out of the Hallow Court, but now we were running out of time before their spell wore off. We stood a better chance if we split up.

“If you need our help again, you know where to find us,” Ilsa said, flashing her tattoo as she took a step away.

“I doubt that I will.” I shooed them off, hoping they would get the message. The sooner they got out of here, the sooner I’d know just how well Titania’s magic worked—or if I could even wield it twice.

The witches seemed to understand, but Kelly held back, staring at the guards like she was waiting to be recognized and dragged back to the Hallow Court. But they didn’t appear to know who she was. Ilsa tugged at her sleeve. “Come on.”

I smiled at her, barely nodding my head. *Just go*.

Kelly opened her mouth, but Marin cut her off with a sharp look. She shot me one small nod of gratitude before the witches led her into the night, each of them glancing over their shoulder at me as they went.

“Do you want us to escort you back to court?” one of the guards asked when I finally faced them.

“Home?” My voice pitched, but I tossed my hair like I’d seen Titania do a dozen times and pointed to the pub on the corner. “I need a drink.”

They shared an uneasy look. I’d made another mistake.

“Why don’t you go to the family’s place? You know Oberon doesn’t like it when you stray too far from home.” He crooked his arm.

Of course they had a place somewhere in the city, just like the Avalon. The chances of my escape narrowed with each passing second, but something told me I would be completely out of luck if I let them take me anywhere.

Time to try a different tactic. I traced a finger down his tie, fluttering my lashes. “What my brother doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” I gave him a little pout. “Just one drink. I need a break from him.”

It was an educated guess that everyone who knew Oberon, his twin sister included, felt this way. I’d caught her rolling her eyes behind his back, heard the snarky comments murmured under her breath. I just hoped I wasn’t wrong.

He heaved a sigh, looking me up and down. “Do you need some money?”

It wasn’t hard to tell this dress didn’t have pockets, and I wasn’t carrying a purse. What would someone like Titania do in a situation like this? I grinned at him. “I’m wearing the dress so I don’t have to buy my own drinks.”

His companion chuckled. I wrinkled my nose, giving them a little wave as I sauntered toward the pub’s door, hoping I didn’t break my ankle. High heels and cobblestones were a dangerous combination. But wearing Titania’s skin seemed to imbue me with a grace I didn’t naturally possess.

Still, I sagged with relief when I made it through the door. The hum of conversation and clinking glasses instantly grounded me. There was safety in numbers. For now.

I’d kept a photo of Dublin on the fridge in my apartment for years—one of the many places I had never been but longed to go. Part of me wanted to linger in the cozy bar. The part of me that still clung to my old life and its relative normalcy. But there was no time for that.

Now that I was out of the guards' sights, I could make good on the plan I'd conveyed to the others. I moved into an empty corner of the pub and closed my eyes, my heart pounding as I pictured Lach's quarters. The rug we'd made love on. The windows overlooking the streets of New Orleans. *Him*. A tear spilled down my cheek as I snapped my fingers.

Nothing happened.

I tried again, but there was no spark of magic. Maybe I'd used up whatever had transferred to me during the escape. I was still trying when a kid ambled up to me, a goofy grin pinned on his freckle-smattered face. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Judging by the slight slur of the question, he'd already had a few. He couldn't be much older than Channing.

Before I could let him down and return to my futile nipping attempts, he stumbled back a step. "Whoa. Did your hair just change?"

My hand flew up to touch it, finding the coarse, wavy hair I'd had my whole life instead of Titania's glossy tresses. I covered my frown. "I think you've had enough to drink. Where are your friends?"

He turned to point them out, and I slipped into the crowd. I was out of time. There would be no tricking the guards if they came back inside now. Pushing my way to the bar, I prayed for a miracle.

"Can I get you something?" The bartender pressed her palms to the counter, blinking a little as she took in my now slightly too tight dress. Yes, my body was definitely back—which meant Titania had just woken up in the Hallow Court.

"My date turned out to be a creep, and I lost my phone," I told her. The shiver I dredged up was courtesy of Oberon. "Can I borrow yours?"

She nodded sympathetically, pulling it from her pocket. "It's about to die, but you can probably make a quick call."

I only had a few numbers memorized, and I dialed the one person I knew would answer a phone call from a random international number without batting her eyelashes. She was also my best bet at getting out of here quickly.

"Where are we?" I asked as it rang.

"O'Malley's," the bartender said before turning to take an order.

The phone continued to ring, its tone foreign, then sent me to voicemail.

"It's me. I'm in Dublin, at a place called O'Malley's, but—"

The phone beeped and cut off right as Oberon's guards walked through

the door.

Chapter Ten

Lach

The stench of antiseptic and anxiety hung inside Gage Memorial. Now I knew why I'd never bothered to step foot inside the hospital that bore my family's name.

Despite my desire to go alone, I was outvoted, because apparently under Ciara's rule, we were now a fucking democracy. That's why she was here: to be the reasonable one. I suspected that Roark had come to be the muscle if she needed to keep me in check. Even with both of them chaperoning, we'd wasted twenty minutes bickering over whether or not it was safe to venture into this part of town while Ciara's phone rang incessantly. It seemed every creature in New Orleans needed a piece of her.

Roark eyed me as Ciara strode up to the desk to speak with the nurse on duty.

"Are you doing all right?" he asked when I remained silent.

"Fine," I grunted. The yarrow had officially worn off, and along with the torturous prickle of magic healing me, I was increasingly aware of a different pain.

I felt like I'd been ripped in half, like I was bleeding out, like I was going to die. I had no idea where Cate was, but she was in danger. I felt it like the mark on my own neck. I was running out of time to find her.

Roark studied me for a moment. He knew me too well to buy it. Even without the signet ring connecting our thoughts, he knew what I was thinking. Sympathy softened his eyes, but before he could speak, Ciara waved to us.

"Let's go," she called.

Roark followed dutifully, and I fell into step beside him, but as soon as we were through the double doors, a nurse stepped into our path and held up a hand to block us.

"Can I help you?" She eyed us over her reading glasses like she could see

past the glamour Ciara had placed on me before we left. Using my magic was still too dangerous. But the nurse only frowned. “Visitors aren’t allowed back here.”

“Lachlan!” Garcia rushed toward us, fumbling with his stethoscope as he tugged his lab coat on. He paused to give the nurse a sharp look. “Haley, they’re with me.”

But she didn’t budge. “Lachlan? Lachlan Gage?”

Was she a nurse or security? I nodded, starting to move past her. Garcia fell into step beside us.

Haley followed, eyeing me critically. “Where is Cate? She hasn’t visited her brother once, and who is that guy hanging around? Is Channing in trouble again?”

Ciara stepped in before I could answer. “Cate has been sick,” she lied smoothly, though I could see the strain in her eyes. “She can’t risk exposing Channing or anyone else here.”

“That’s what you keep telling me.”

So they knew each other.

“It’s the truth.” Ciara held her gaze.

Haley pursed her lips, clearly not buying the story. “Cate never called in sick once the entire time we worked together. If you think that I—”

“Nevertheless,” Garcia interjected, “Cate isn’t here right now. I’m sure she will come when she can. I believe there’s a patient waiting in room two.” He gestured toward the other side of the emergency room.

Haley’s jaw worked like she was biting back a retort, but she marched off.

“Cate is missed,” Garcia said apologetically.

His words hit me in the one spot the blood apple’s magic couldn’t heal. I nodded numbly as we continued into the private section of the emergency room that was reserved for members of my crew. Nearly a dozen doctors and nurses were clustered around a station, and I turned to Garcia in surprise. “How many of our people are back here?”

We kept the hospital supplied with the latest technology and hired the best fae and human doctors in exchange for a certain level of discretion. For some reason, it looked like every member of that carefully selected staff was present.

“It’s unusual to have a human here,” Garcia explained, “and quite a few of them heard that a vampire...”

“Get rid of them,” I said through gritted teeth.

“They’re simply interested in the healing—”

“Now,” I added.

He tilted his head. “Of course.”

That was the chief of medicine’s real job: to obey me. He started toward them, already barking his own orders, and the staff scattered.

“He’s in that one.” Ciara pointed to a room across the hall.

Monitors beeped rhythmically as we entered, tracking every aspect of Channing’s fragile condition. But it was all just background noise compared to the crushing weight of worry that sat heavily on my chest.

“Lach,” Shaw greeted me, but he wasn’t alone. His companion was the opposite of my red-haired brother in every way, from his dark-brown skin and cropped hair to the nearly black eyes. But his gloves gave him away as a vampire.

“Where’s Baptiste?” I asked, eyes narrowing on him.

“She sent me.” A smooth smile slid onto his face as he extended a hand.

“Dante. I know your brother from school. We—”

“Do you know why you’re here?” I cut him off.

He glanced at Shaw. My brother lifted his eyebrows as if to say, *I told you so*.

“Baptiste told me to do whatever you asked.” He nodded. “And she told me to tell you that you’re going to owe her.”

“You’ll definitely pay for this favor later,” Roark muttered, casting a sidelong glance in my direction. Until recently, he’d shared a psychic link with me courtesy of our matching signet rings. But I’d entrusted my ring to Ciara in my absence, which meant Roark had to share his frequent warnings with everyone in the room.

“Whatever it takes.”

He nodded subtly—a silent promise that we’d do everything in our power to make that happen.

“We need him awake,” I ordered Dante, my voice tense.

Surprise registered on his face. The fae had access to vampire healing magic; our blood apples grown from their blood and venom sped our healing when consumed, as did ambrosia, the wine we made from the fruit. But strictly speaking, I was out of line asking a vampire to heal a *human*. It wasn’t against any laws, exactly, but the Vampire Council frowned on it. Baptiste would make certain they didn’t find out...for a price. One that

would be determined at a later date.

“We can extract my venom,” he offered. “It will be more sanitary, but we’ll need—”

“We don’t have time. Do what you have to do.”

Dante didn’t ask more questions, drawing a small knife from his pocket and making a shallow cut on his wrist. Blood welled up, pooling around the incision before he pressed it to Channing’s lips. But that was only half the process. Dante reared back, eyes going pitch-black before he sank his fangs into Channing’s neck to deposit his venom. One quick bite and he stood back up, patting the corners of his mouth with a tissue.

“It shouldn’t take too long.” He moved toward the door, Shaw following close behind him.

I managed a terse nod. “Thank you.”

“I’ll walk you out.” Shaw ushered the vampire toward the door, looking grateful for a chance to escape.

Ciara shifted on her feet, arms wrapping around her waist as we waited for the effects to take hold. “He’s going to have a scar.”

“He’ll thank me when he walks again,” I muttered.

“Okay, but you’re explaining this to Cate.”

Gladly.

I closed my eyes, imagining how she would scream at me, and smiled.

Roark nudged me, and I opened my eyes as Channing’s fluttered, the monitors attached to his body going haywire. Roark reached over and ripped the cords from the wall to shut them off. The machines were no longer necessary.

Channing spluttered, his body spasming as it knit itself back together. But he didn’t wake up.

“Should we get him something for the pain?” Roark asked.

But Ciara shook her head. “The venom will take care of that.”

My penumbra and I shared a look over her head, but neither of us asked how she knew that particular fact.

Channing gasped, body arching as his eyes flew open. Ciara grabbed my arm, but I wrenched free, lunging for him.

“Where is she?” I demanded, panic rising in my chest. “Who has Cate?”

“Whoa, Lach, give him a minute,” Shaw called, ducking back into the room.

Roark moved behind me, grasping my shoulders, but I shook free of him.

“Tell me! She’s gone because of you. Your sister is in danger, and so help me gods, if anything happens to her, I will end you.” I leaned closer to Cate’s brother, letting the truth of my threat show. “Who shot you?”

Channing swallowed hard, his tongue gliding over dry lips. His confused eyes darted around the room like he was searching for someone.

“Channing, please,” I said in a harsh whisper. “She isn’t safe. I need to find her.”

His gaze settled on me, his mouth moving.

“He needs water,” Ciara suggested, heading toward the door.

But Channing’s hand shot toward my wrist. “Ob...” He worked his mouth, trying to get the word out. “Ob...er...”

“Oberon,” I finished for him. My knees gave out as realization hit me. Bain had been more than an easy scapegoat. But he had only been a distraction, a sleight of hand to keep me from seeing my true enemy.

I’d fallen for the trick and made a terrible mistake.

Roark seized me around the waist. Not to keep me from crumbling—to keep me from making another one.

“Let me go,” I growled, struggling against him. The pain I’d felt before drove itself deeper until my blood burned with the need to go after her. Oberon would pay for what he had done. Then his sister would pay. And if anything had happened to Cate, there would be nothing left of the Hallow Court when I was finished.

But Roark tightened his grip. “That is what Oberon wants. Think about it.” When I continued to thrash, he added, “If he wanted her dead, he would have killed her instead of attacking Channing. She’s alive. *For now*. But if you go after her without a plan, he *will* kill you and she will be in real danger.”

Each word doused the anger blazing inside me until finally the flames of my rage dwindled into smoldering resolve. Roark was right. Oberon had started this game, expecting me to act without thinking.

I stopped fighting Roark and held up my hands. “I surrender.”

But he didn’t release me. Fair enough.

Ciara moved into my line of sight. “Let’s get one thing straight. If he lets you go and you nip to the Hallow Court, we are all coming with you.”

I sucked at the air, still fighting the urge to defy them. My heart pounded against my rib cage so hard that I half expected it to tear free to seek her.

And that would drag the Nether Court into war. I’d given up my throne

and my signet to my sister before my attack on Bain. That placed his license for retribution into a gray area. But if we all wound up in Oberon's court, it would be akin to declaring war.

I suspected that was his intention.

You didn't steal a fellow heir's lover if you wanted things to stay peaceful.

"We can reach out," Ciara suggested.

"Reach out? This isn't the UN. We're not going to engage in negotiations," I snarled.

"We don't know why Oberon took her—"

But it was Roark who cut her off. "Yes, we do," he said quietly. "He shot Channing. His intentions are clear. If he's the one who sent MacAlister after Cate, it was a play to start a turf war with Lach." He turned to me. "And that means you cannot take his bait."

I knew he was right. Roark usually was, whether I liked it or not. "She's not bait."

"I know that." He gripped my shoulders. "And the last thing she would want is to see the entirety of our court and her home destroyed. We have to think about this. There's no other option."

"There's one." It involved removing Oberon from this plane of existence. Dead equals problem solved.

Even without the signet ring allowing him inside my thoughts, Roark shook his head. "That's not a solution."

"I'm already marked." What was a little more blood on my hands if I lived long enough to see Cate safe?

"Send me after him," Channing volunteered. The color was returning to his cheeks. With the vampire blood in his system, he was probably already able to walk, but Shaw clamped a hand on his shoulder to quiet him.

"We need a plan," Ciara said firmly, ignoring Cate's brother. "Preferably one that doesn't involve a body count."

I shook my head. There was no way this ended without bloodshed.

"He'll have her in the Otherworld." Roark cast a grim look in my direction. "You can't enter his court without an invitation, and even if you could..."

The Wild Hunt would follow me to Dublin. If Oberon and his men didn't kill me on sight, they would.

"I could go."

I whipped toward Shaw, unable to hide my surprise at his offer. “You?” I laughed, the sound hollow to my own ears. “Oberon would destroy you.”

“But Titania wouldn’t,” he said tightly. “Let me try.”

“Absolutely fucking not.” I couldn’t allow my family to be dragged into this any more than they already were. Whatever Oberon was plotting would end with my death. I could live with that. “You’ll get yourself killed. If anyone is going after her, it should be me.”

“You have no idea what you’re up against.” His voice pitched higher as he took a dangerous step in my direction. “Just let—”

“Shut up!” Ciara yelled, and we both froze. “I need to hear this,” she hissed, pressing her phone to her ear.

Shaw grumbled something under his breath as he slumped against the wall. His frustrated look matched Channing’s. How had I been stuck dealing with two irresponsible kid brothers?

“Well?” I prompted Ciara. A moment later, an expression of shock slackened her face, but she quickly looked something up on the screen. Roark took a step closer, his own eyes going wide as he picked up on her thoughts.

“What is it?” I demanded, panic unraveling my already fraying nerves.

“It was a message from Cate,” she said slowly.

The world stopped spinning.

“She’s in Dublin.”

I couldn’t breathe.

“At a place called O’Malley’s near Trinity College,” she finished with a stunned blink, holding up her phone to show me a picture of an Irish pub.

It took every ounce of self-control I possessed to stay rooted to that spot.

“Go get her,” Channing called weakly.

My fingers fumbled as I barely stopped myself from snapping them.

“What if this is part of Oberon’s plan? It could be a trap,” Roark warned me.

It probably was, but I met his eyes. His nostrils flared slightly as he took another step toward Ciara. I nodded once, understanding passing between us.

“What else did she say?” I forced the question out, my entire being aching to rush to her.

“That’s all.” Ciara swallowed, glancing toward Roark. “What if this is our only chance? I should go.”

Roark's eyes flashed, a rumble tearing from his chest in a single word: "No."

"Why not?" She planted a hand on her hip as they stared each other down.

"Because none of you can risk getting dragged into this," I said, stepping in before they both imploded. Even if she was in Dublin, it was still Hallow Court territory. "Oberon will have told his men to look out for you. If any of you is caught entering his city, you'll be punished."

Or worse.

"We can't just sit here and do nothing," Shaw said, straightening up and moving toward us. "It's Cate."

For once, I agreed with my brother.

Ciara rubbed the bridge of her nose. "We need more information so we can know if it's safe to go after her."

"That will take too long." Each second we did nothing, Cate was in danger. "We know where she is now." And each minute that we wasted, we risked losing track of her.

"You just said that none of us could risk it," Ciara reminded me.

"None of *you* can," I murmured, and Roark took a concerned step closer. I waved him off. "I'm not going to do anything stupid."

"If Oberon doesn't find you, the Hunt will." Ciara shook her head. "Maybe we can send—"

"No one is going after her but me," I said softly. My family was the only thing stopping me from nipping now. I couldn't risk them following me. "It's the only thing that makes sense."

"Your magic is being tracked," she reminded me.

I looked between my sister and my best friend. "You need to stay here and get the bona fides spell stabilized. You're the only one who can, and until you do, New Orleans is under threat from both Oberon and the Hunt." I turned to Roark. "And I need you with her."

He inclined his head, understanding what I wasn't saying. Ciara had things under control for now, but there were plenty of creatures in the city who might see an untested princess as an opportunity.

"We can't pretend that I'm not a dead man," I continued, ignoring how the words made her lower lip tremble. "If it's a trap, they'll only have me. I've got nothing to lose."

And everything to gain.

“And when you nip, you’ll have seconds before the Hunt finds you,” Shaw said.

More like minutes, if New York had taught me anything. But thanks to my family, I already knew a way around that. “Only if I use my magic.”

For a second, she just stared at me, her jaw slightly unhinged. “You can’t be serious.”

“If one of you nips me there, they won’t be able to trace me. Even Oberon won’t know I’m there,” I said as Ciara began to pace the room. “The Hunt will never expect me to go to Dublin, to enter another court. We’ll be on our way back before they can track me.”

“You won’t be able to use your magic while you’re there,” Roark said quietly.

The thought had occurred to me. “I know.”

Ciara paused to stare at me. “And meanwhile, you’ll be in a foreign court without access to your magic, without a glamour. You’ll be a sitting duck.”

“I won’t be going alone.” I patted the holster I wore under my jacket.

“Oberon will love that,” Ciara muttered.

Roark finally offered his opinion. “This is reckless.”

It was. I couldn’t deny that.

“But it might work,” he added.

Ciara huffed at his betrayal before she threw her hands in the air and resumed her pacing. “So you want us to nip you to Dublin and *hope* you both make it out alive?”

“No, I want you to get that spell fully operational.” I grabbed her shoulders and turned her to face me. If this was a trap, Oberon would use it as an excuse to attack the Nether Court—and New Orleans. “I want you to protect our family and our court. Can you do that?”

She held my gaze for a beat before nodding.

“Bring her back,” Channing called to me.

I turned to face him. “I’d start working on my apology if I were you.”

The recently returned color drained from his face, but he managed to bob his head. “Just get her home.”

But I gripped Roark’s shoulder and dragged him to the corner. “If we don’t come back,” I said in a low voice, “keep Ciara safe. Whatever Oberon’s up to, he’ll target her if she’s standing between him and what he wants.”

“You’re coming back.” His tone brooked no argument.

But even if he didn't want to, he needed to hear this. "No matter what happens, get the bona fides up. This isn't just about the Hunt. We don't know what Oberon is planning. Keeping control of the city is priority number one."

"I understand." He pinned me with a stare. "Don't pick a fight. You can't win. If it's a trap, come back. We'll find another way to reach Cate."

It was his duty to say it. I understood, but we both knew there were only two ways I was returning to New Orleans: with Cate by my side or in a body bag.

"Let's do this," I said, shifting to nod my farewell. Shaw offered a quick bob of the head as he moved to stand by the hospital bed, where Channing looked like he might spring up and try to follow me. I couldn't blame him for wanting to go after his sister. At least Shaw could keep him from doing anything stupid.

"Wait!" Ciara leaped in front of me. Her nose wrinkled in concentration, and I felt the faint tingle of magic as a glamour settled over my features. "You can't go in there with your ears out. The magic will only last a few minutes at that distance, though," she warned me.

A few minutes was all I had, but with any luck—something that was admittedly in short supply—it was all that I would need.

"Don't get killed," Ciara blurted out as Roark lifted his hand.

"I'll do my best." I flashed her a smile as my penumbra snapped his fingers.

The world slipped out from under me in a riot of light and colors, weaving and winding until my feet found purchase on a cobblestone street—right in the middle of a group of tipsy university students. They scattered like birds, shouting in disbelief to one another, but I ignored them. They were too drunk to be believed, and the clock was ticking. I needed to find Cate before my time ran out and unwanted attention proved deadly.

"Where did you come from, mate?" one of them yelled.

I strode past him, moving as quickly as I could without drawing attention to myself. They shouted after me, earning the attention of more people on the street. A few glanced in my direction as I scanned the block, but they quickly lost interest. There was nothing to see. For now.

My chest tightened when I spotted a swinging sign emblazoned with the name O'Malley's a few doors down. I turned the collar of my jacket against Dublin's cold, blocking the mark of the Hunt that not even Ciara's glamour

could hide. Each step seemed to take an eternity, and I half wondered if it was another dream, if the cobblestones would turn to quicksand before I reached the pub.

It had to be nearing final call at O'Malley's as I stepped inside, even if the pub was still crowded. I scanned the room, feeling for that persistent tug that had wormed inside me since I was separated from Cate. I didn't see her, but I felt her. She was nearby, within reach. I just had to find her. Her presence beckoned me, its grip on my heart unshakable. She burned in my blood, sharpening each of my senses as I cut my way through the crowd with a certainty that left no room for doubt.

Cate was a survivor, which meant she would be smart enough to hide. Because of the mark, she wouldn't expect me to be the one to come for her. That's why she had called Ciara. But as I wove my way through the boisterous patrons, my excitement turned to agitation, then fear, when I spotted two muscular men in well-tailored suits entering through the front door. They marched up to the bartender, leaning to ask her questions. Oberon's men carried themselves like mine did—all business. The woman behind the bar crossed her arms, regarding them for a moment before she shook her head. Something told me that I owed her one.

One of the guards turned in my direction, and I ducked behind an ancient wooden post, out of sight. Warning prickled up my spine. It wasn't a good sign that they were here. Maybe Roark was right. Maybe Oberon had laid a trap for me.

But she was here, and even if Oberon had planted her as bait, I couldn't just walk away.

Closing my eyes, I placed a hand over my chest, over the other permanent mark burned into my skin. The one that no longer moved like the others, because it had found where it belonged and where it would stay until my dying breath. Her name had written itself on my soul. I reached for that connection now, called out to the bond that linked us with the last of my waning magic. The connection stretched taut, and when I opened my eyes, the crowd shifted as a group called out farewells and headed for the door—and tucked into the corner behind them was...her.

She was more beautiful than I remembered, even though her face was seared into my mind like the bond inked on my flesh.

Cate stood, her eyes darting through the room and widening as they caught sight of the guards I'd already seen. She crouched slightly, sliding

against the wall and disappearing into a tight corridor marked with a toilet sign. Alone. She was hiding. Not bait at all.

And she was in danger. I couldn't risk nipping us out—not with Oberon's guards close enough to sense my magic. It was a long shot that they would try to follow, but it wasn't a gamble I was willing to take.

I slithered through the crowd, working my way swiftly but carefully so as not to draw the guards' attention. The place was closing up. If I could reach her, we could slip out with the crowd. I kept my head down as I brushed past a couple arguing in the corridor, my heart hammering so loudly they could probably hear it over their disagreement. And past them...

I had never moved so quickly in my life.

Cate twisted the knob to the restroom, shaking it when it didn't open. Her fist flew toward it, and adrenaline jolted through me. If she caught the attention of the guards... I shot forward and seized her hand in midair, catching her off guard. She staggered only a step and then lunged. Her other palm collided with my chest, shoving me against the wall as she tried to flee.

But she froze, her eyes widening. I grabbed her other hand. Relief washed through my skin at her touch. But she only stared, nearly toppling over. My arm hooked her waist and dragged her to me.

"Come here often?" My lips brushed the shell of her ear, and she jolted out of her daze as the guards appeared at the mouth of the hallway.

"What are—"

I smashed my lips to hers, spinning her to press her back to the wall. The kiss was desperate and stupid, and we were probably about to get killed, but it was the only way I wanted to die: with her taste on my lips.

Chapter Eleven

Cate

The kiss ended too soon. I clutched Lach like he was an anchor. Solid. Steady. *Real*.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from him.

Here.

Alive.

And even though I could feel him—touch him—I found myself memorizing every feature like this might be a cruel joke and he would be ripped away from me again. The thick fringe of lashes over his eyes. How those eyes crinkled when he smiled. The joyous hooked curve of that grin.

Oh god, the joy.

A warm buoyancy lifted me onto tiptoes and closer to him, but he turned away, looking down the hallway.

"They didn't see us."

I blinked, my brain scrambling to catch up. "Who?"

"Oberon's guys."

Fear gripped me at those two words, extinguishing the illusion of safety I felt in his presence. If Oberon didn't find us, the Hunt would. Dublin was a fae court. We might have stood a chance somewhere else.

"I didn't want them to see us leave," he continued like we weren't in mortal peril. "I'd rather Oberon didn't find out I was in his city. They'll sense us nipping. We need to get away from them."

But for the first time in days, it wasn't Oberon I was worried about.

"We can't be here." I gripped his forearms, prepared to haul him out of fae territory by force. "If the Hunt catches you—"

"They won't." He cupped the sides of my face, his thumbs stroking lines over my skin.

I relaxed a little, but my hold on him didn't loosen. "But we're trapped."

"But we're *together*."

Together.

There was enough magic in that single word that I forgot about the strange city outside, forgot about Oberon's men and the Wild Hunt, forgot about being trapped.

Lach drew a ragged breath, his chest heaving slightly as his gaze searched mine. I'd imagined this moment a thousand times since I woke up in the Hallow Court, but I'd forgotten how green his eyes were—the color as rare and precious as emeralds. He was really here, standing before me.

"You're alive," I whispered.

He stole a quick kiss. "Let's keep it that way." He swept a quick glance over me and frowned. "You're going to freeze out there."

I stared as he shucked his jacket off and wrapped it around my shoulders, its warmth shaking me out of my stupor as I stared at the holster under his arm. He rolled his eyes and slipped it off, tucked a semiautomatic behind his back, then dropped the holster on the ground.

The pub was already half empty, only a few stragglers remaining. Lach didn't let me go as we slipped closer to the largest group, who were making their way to the door. I pulled his coat tighter and searched the cramped space for signs of Oberon's men. There were two near the bar, arguing with the woman who had lent me her phone.

"She looks pissed," I muttered, turning my eyes back to Lach. And froze. "Your *glamour*."

It was gone.

"Time to go," he said grimly. He nudged me into the thick of the group. I cringed, waiting for someone to notice us, but no one seemed to, even after Lach slung an arm around one of the guys' shoulders and strolled casually out the door.

I followed his lead, pretending to laugh with the strangers as we made our way down the block. My heart raced faster with each stolen step. The farther we got from the pub, the more frantic I felt. Lach was walking down the street with his ears out, Oberon knew by now that I had escaped, and we were in an enemy court *without* magic.

And I'd thought waking up in Titania's body was stressful.

Lach untangled himself from his new friend as we rounded the street corner. Waving a quick goodbye, he took my hand and pulled me toward the other side of the street. We darted down a back alley. Tendrils of dense fog curled off the damp street and vanished like smoke, old brick walls

pressing in on either side. It was too dark to see where it led, but Lach started down it.

“This screams looking for trouble,” I muttered, gripping his hand more tightly.

His feet splashed in a puddle. “Or running from it.” He drew me closer, wrapping a reassuring arm around my waist, and gazed down at me. “Ready to go home?”

“I’ll go anywhere with you,” I murmured, meaning it.

Lach inclined his head, his lips brushing over mine as he snapped his fingers. Our mouths met as the world fell away beneath my feet, my stomach plunging with it. But this time it didn’t feel like falling—it felt like flying.

My hands clutched his shirt, clinging to him like he might slip through my fingers. Light crackled around us, and I braced, wishing the journey had taken longer. I wasn’t quite ready to return to the real world.

And then something seized the back of my neck and yanked me from him.

My eyes flew open and found his wide with panic as something tore me away. We both lunged forward, even as the phantom force hauled me farther back. Lach mouthed something, the words lost in the void between worlds, as our fingers brushed.

He was slipping away.

We’d found each other, only to be torn apart again.

But he wasn’t dead. He was in reach, and I was not letting him go without a fucking fight.

Determination settled like cold steel inside me, and I threw myself forward with every ounce of strength I had. Golden strands snapped, cleaving the air like cracking whips as my body sliced forward, arm outstretched. The tips of my fingers brushed his shirt as I tumbled forward into the space between worlds, and then his hand closed over mine. We plummeted, hurtling into chaos and nothing, my fingers slipping from his grasp.

And I did the only thing I could think to do.

I snapped my fingers, only one image breaking through the buzzing terror in my brain.

Safety.

We crashed into a bookshelf, sending it, its contents, and us toppling to

the floor. I shot to my knees, relief nearly choking me when Lach sat up, blinking in bewilderment at the ruined library surrounding us.

“Where are we?” But as soon as the words were out of his mouth, he was on his feet, wary energy radiating from him in waves. “Don’t move.”

I did as he asked. He turned in a swift circle, assessing the change in circumstances, his body still defensive as if waiting for another attack. I held my breath while the seconds ticked by, my heart hammering, until he finally stopped and looked over at me. “Where are we?” he repeated.

“A reading room at”—I forced myself to swallow—“the library on St. Charles.”

It was deserted at this hour. The lights turned off, the tables empty. A cart of books waited to be shelved nearby. This was the place my brain had automatically associated with safety. In a childhood of bouncing between foster homes, the library was the closest place I’d had to a home most of the time, and often I’d pretend that’s what it was, that I lived in the old mansion. I’d practically grown up in these stacks, in the former estate’s reading rooms, beside the unused fireplace while studying for my nursing degree.

Lach stared at me, and then he threw back his head and laughed.

“I’m glad you find this so funny.” I did not. I rubbed my chest, a lump forming in my throat. Part of me still felt that invisible hand ripping me from his arms. The rest of me was only just processing everything that had happened. It was all too much.

His laughter faded, shadows gathering in his eyes. He dropped to one knee and then the other, until we were face-to-face. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t understand how we wound up here.” I was having a hard time comprehending pretty much everything. “Why would we go where I was thinking?”

“I’m not sure.” But his head angled away. “My magic must have redirected us when you grabbed me.”

“Just as long as you can’t read my thoughts.” That would be too much, but the look on his face suggested he wished that he could. I cared less about the how, though. “What was that when we nipped? It felt like something was trying to grab us.”

He drew a deep breath, any amusement long forgotten. “It had to be the Hunt. They’re getting faster.”

“Faster?” I asked with a squeak. If they were getting faster, that meant...

“They caught up with me in New York,” he admitted, frowning as he reached behind his back. “The bastards got my gun.”

He sounded more annoyed than anything.

My mouth fell open, but only one word came out. “What?”

“They can track my magic when I nip or use a glamour. Or basically do anything. They must have figured out how to grab me mid-nip, which makes sense.” He took my hand like I might float away. It felt like I would. “You move between worlds when you nip. They were waiting for me—I should have seen it coming. I guess I’ll be driving from now on.”

None of it made sense, especially how calm he was, given that he’d barely escaped his would-be executioners, who were probably on their way to us again. I jumped up—or tried to. Lach held me fast.

I tugged against his hold, something primal taking control of me. “We need to go before they—”

“They can’t reach us here. This part of the city is warded.”

“Please start saying something that makes sense.” My head was swimming now.

“The Hunt can’t enter New Orleans, thanks to a spell Ciara cooked up. The point is that we’re safe, even if we have a long walk home from here.” He shot me a crooked smile that sent warmth pooling in my core. “Or I can call for a ride.”

Something told me he didn’t want to do that any more than I wanted him to make that call. Not when my body seemed to be waking up to the fact that he was here and alive, real and touchable and mine.

“I can’t believe you found me.” A part of me hadn’t dared to utter the words—the part that remained convinced that one wrong move would break the spell.

Slashes of moonlight streamed through the wooden blinds and illuminated the sharp lines of his face. He cupped my face gently, the pads of his thumbs stroking across my cheeks.

“I meant it when I said I would never let you go.” A rough tremor laced his voice, and the sound of it hit me squarely in the gut.

A sob racked through me, my knees suddenly going weak, and I swayed, about to crumble. But his hands remained fixed on my face, those unblinking eyes never leaving mine as though he refused to let me out of his sight. He didn’t move closer. He didn’t draw me against his body. Instead, he waited. Lach stayed rigid, the taut energy radiating from him

somehow as soothing as the fingers caressing my cheeks. My own need became unbearable as he waited for *my* signal. It was totally and completely unnecessary.

And I loved him a little more for it.

“Kiss me,” I whispered.

He groaned with relief, his eyes shuttering as he brought his mouth to mine. My palms braced his hard chest, fingers sinking to grab fistfuls of his shirt so that he couldn’t vanish. The kiss was soft and searching, despite the urgent ache that spread through me at every point of contact. I needed to feel more of him—needed to erase the memories of our separation—and I pressed into his arms. Lach’s hand moved away from my face, one tangling in my hair as the other cradled my neck with heartbreaking gentleness. He deepened the kiss until the world faded away once more. I forgot the pain behind us and the danger before us. There was only him and the promise his lips made against my own.

When he finally pulled away, I was breathless. He rested his forehead against mine, the weight of unspoken words hanging in the air between us.

I broke first. “I thought I lost you. He said you *died*.”

“I will always find my way back to you. Not even death will stop me,” he promised, brushing fingers softly along the nape of my neck. He paused. “Did he hurt you?”

A careful question.

I shook my head, sighing when his eyes narrowed. I didn’t want caution and concern. Not when we’d been through hell and back and my body ached for proof that I was alive—proof only his touch could give me. I wanted to feel him moving inside me until I believed it wasn’t a dream. I needed hands and teeth and skin and *him*.

“He didn’t,” I said, shifting close enough that Lach’s cedar-and-spice scent filled my nostrils and sent a pang spiraling through me. It was more than need that I was feeling. I almost didn’t understand it. “Well, I guess there might be some emotional scars from telling me the man I love was dead.”

The words left my mouth before I could haul them back. It wasn’t that I regretted saying it. I just hadn’t really thought about it. And now it was out there, and I couldn’t take it back, and if he didn’t...

My gaze dipped to my feet, but Lach reached for my chin and lifted my face to his. His smile spread, the shadows fading from his eyes. “Love?”

“Don’t let it go to your head. Your ego can’t—”

He didn’t wait for permission this time. His lips captured mine, and there was nothing fragile about this kiss. It was as much a claiming as it was a declaration. He wrapped an arm around my waist, drawing me impossibly close as his tongue traced the seam of my lips. They parted in welcome, and I moaned at his taste, at the overpowering flood of emotions that poured through me.

He drew back, keeping a firm hold on me. “I’m in love with you.”

He loved me. I’d known it, but hearing him say it... Something was cracking open and spilling out, and I knew I would never be the same.

It was the first time a man had ever said those words to me. He was the only man I ever wanted to say them. Now and for the rest of my life. I stared up at him, thoughts muddled in the depth of my feelings. Tears slipped down my cheeks, and I blinked in surprise.

“Cate?” He brushed one away, his brows knitting together in concern.

I hooked an arm around his neck, dragging him back to me. “I need you inside me. *Now.*”

“So demanding, princess. Are you sure you don’t want to head back to the Avalon?”

It was at least an hour’s walk from here. Calling for a ride would get us there faster—but then his family would know we had returned, and I needed him to myself. I dropped his jacket on the ground. “*Now.*”

“As you wish.” His mouth twitched as he cradled me in his arms and gently laid me on his coat. Straightening, he knelt beside me and brushed his thumb over his lower lip as he assessed the prize before him. “This is some dress. Exactly how did you escape from Oberon?”

I cringed, peeking at the red silk I’d stolen off Titania’s back. “Long story.” I crooked my index finger. “Tell you later.”

He chuckled, and I went molten. I squeezed my thighs together as the heat settled into a demanding throb. Lach gripped my ankle and lifted it to his mouth. Pressing a kiss to it, he tugged off my high heel and tossed it over his shoulder with a smirk before moving to the next one. He paused and fingered the hem of my stolen gown. “I dreamed about you.”

My mouth went dry, but I lifted a brow. “Oh?”

Leaning over me, he plucked the dress’s straps off my shoulders before his fingers continued to the plunging neckline. “I nearly lost my mind when I woke up.” He traced the curve of my breast. “I felt like I was dying

without you.”

He found the side zipper and tugged it slowly down. My breasts spilled out, and I bowed off the floor, nipples peaking in the cool air. Lach seized his chance and peeled off the dress. A growl rumbled in his chest when he had me completely bare.

“You said it was a long story,” he muttered through gritted teeth. “Did he...?”

The unfinished question promised violence.

“He didn’t touch me,” I whispered. “No one touched me.”

But something tortured lingered in his gaze as it skimmed over my flesh, the intensity pinning me in place. His teeth sank into his lower lip, and I found myself squirming.

“Please.”

He grinned, the light in that smile chasing away those shadows. “Somebody finally found her manners.”

“Never mind.” I glared at him, my annoyance faltering as he swiftly unfastened his buttons. Glimpsing the smooth, muscled chest beneath, I whimpered. “Forget please. Get your damn clothes off.”

But Lach didn’t laugh. He snarled—and pounced. I arched to meet him, my hands sliding to slip his shirt off. His scent bloomed in my nostrils, and my chest tightened.

The rest of his clothes followed with equal urgency. Strong arms bracketed my body, and I clutched his shoulders, nails digging into his skin as our mouths crushed together. I needed him, needed his skin on every square inch of my own, needed there to be no separation between us. There would be time to linger later.

I bucked closer, rewarded with a brush of his cock. Shifting, I rolled my hips, trying to urge him inside. Lach broke the kiss, drawing back just far enough to meet my eyes as he reached between us and guided his tip to my entrance. My breath hitched as he pushed in a fraction. He paused until I gasped, nodding for him to continue. He slid in, inch by inch, giving me time to adjust as he stretched and then filled me entirely. His piercing gaze held mine, boring through me as if claiming not only my body but my soul.

Darkness curled around him, unfurling like smoke as his magic spread from his body and coasted over me. I craned myself toward it until the shadows brushed my skin, blazing paths of fire where they touched.

“Holy...” My eyes rolled back as his magic ignited every nerve ending

into an inferno.

Lach reached over and gripped my chin. “Look at me, princess.” The words strained out of him, and I wondered what he was holding back. “I need to see you.”

I couldn’t refuse, even as the wisps swept long, sensuous strokes up my arms and over my collarbone before continuing to my breasts. His magic circled my nipples, drawing them into tight buds before playfully tweaking them. A sob of pleasure choked out of me as the shadows inflicted their sensual torture, continuing until my body sang with need and my entire being centered on where we were joined.

Lach pulled out a few inches until I protested with a slight squeak of disapproval. A smile ghosted his lips, and he slammed deep before retreating again. In and out, the punishing rhythm taking me closer and closer to the edge. The shadows moved with each thrust, their touch shifting from gentle to demanding. He held nothing back, his entire body claiming me. His magic licked at my body, demanding my submission, and I gave in to its pull.

“Lach!” I cried out his name, and he answered by slamming into me harder and faster. The room spun, and I clung to him. He was both the tempest and my shelter in the storm. The world splintered, emotions tearing through me as I went over the edge, Lach following with a strangled shout. He spilled inside me, his mouth finding mine as the world reknit, weaving bits of his soul into mine.

Collapsing, Lach reached over and tucked me against his chest. I counted his breaths as it rose and fell, treasuring the beats of his heart. We laid there, limbs still tangled, stealing small touches until his breath grew even and his eyes closed.

I pushed onto my elbow and stared at him. “You do have sexy magic.”

“Are you lodging a complaint? Because if you don’t want me to—”

“No!” I cut him off. “Trust me, I’m a fan. But you acted like I was imagining things.” How many times had I been convinced he was using his magic to stoke desire in me, and he had acted like—

“You were.” His mouth pressed into a bemused line. He still hadn’t opened his eyes. “I never used it on you before.”

“Liar.” But I swallowed.

He chuckled, stroking a hand down the length of my spine. “That just now? That was only a taste. A sneak preview of the things I could do...” He

paused, peeking at me with heavy eyelids. “Before...I didn’t want to scare you.”

I swallowed, discovering a lump in my throat. I couldn’t pinpoint what had changed between us. Maybe it was saying I love you. But it felt deeper than that, and something told me that sharing that magic meant more than he was letting on. I cleared my throat. “How does one perfect their sexy magic, exactly?”

“Perfect? Are you calling me an expert?”

“I wouldn’t dare risk inflating your ego any further by saying something like that,” I retorted dryly. “I asked out of scientific curiosity.”

But his grin widened. “So, do you want to hear about all the women I’ve used sexy magic on? For your research? Maybe you should take notes. I bet there’s a pen and paper around here somewhere.”

A soft snarl slipped from me, and I sat up, startled. Lach laughed, hooking an arm around me and dragging me back into his arms. He kissed the top of my head. “I’ve never used my sexy magic with anyone,” he murmured. I blinked in surprise but remained silent. “I don’t summon my shadows often.”

“Why?”

“Because usually there’s a cost—not just to me but to my court,” he said in a soft voice. I held my breath, afraid I wouldn’t hear him. “It’s hard to explain. My magic—our magic—isn’t what it was.”

Just like the magic at the Hallow Court.

“Am I worth paying the price?” It was an honest question. I’d seen what happened to magic that had been broken.

“Always, and it’s different with you...now...” He fumbled the words like he didn’t know how to explain it.

The whole matter promised a heavy conversation, one I wasn’t sure I was ready to have. Not yet. Facing the truth was inevitable, but I wanted to steal a few more minutes. I let my eyes drift along his muscled torso, watching all but one of his tattoos shift and swirl as they trailed downward—as if he was thinking *exactly* what I was.

“Where are those headed?” My finger traced the one that remained on his chest.

Lach hooked an arm around me and dragged me under him.

“Why don’t we find out?” The promise dripping in his voice made my thighs clench.

He started a slow descent, dropping kisses down my neck and over my collarbone. I arched to meet his tongue as it circled my nipple. But as my hand wrapped around the back of his neck, it brushed a raised scar. I pushed up, earning a grunt of annoyance from him, as I inspected the mark there.

“Is that...” I trailed away, already knowing what the winged skull meant. It wasn’t like his other tattoos, smooth and changing. Its ink was burned like a brand into his flesh—a permanent symbol of the crime he’d committed when he saved my life.

“Like it?” he asked, shifting to his knees and taking me in his arms. “It’s one of my top three.”

“I’m not sure I want to know what the other two are,” I whispered. Seeing the mark that labeled him a dead man brought reality rushing back like a hangover. Despite my desire to ignore it, I knew we couldn’t, not when we’d only narrowly avoided the Wild Hunt. I needed answers. A lot of them. And there were things I needed to tell him, starting with what had happened at the Hallow Court.

“We should talk about the Wild Hunt...and Oberon.” My stomach lurched as I said his name.

“Mood officially killed,” Lach grumbled, but he didn’t let me go. “It can wait.”

As if he didn’t want to hear what had happened any more than I wanted to revisit it. Especially when I considered how Lach would react to what the prince of the Hallow Court had done. The witches may have saved me, but they hadn’t stopped him from magically binding me.

Maybe there was no witch wedding. The goddess definitely hadn’t blessed shit. But Oberon had used fae magic before the ritual when he handfasted me, just like Bain and Ciara had done. I lifted my hand, inspecting it for signs of the mark. I had no doubt I had cause to break the handfasting. What I didn’t know was exactly how to officially do it, and when Lach found out...

Plus then there was the matter of my ring. I still didn’t want to believe Oberon’s claims. But Lach had begged me not to take it off, which meant he knew *something* about it. But what? How was I going to wait to ask about that?

“You’re thinking,” he accused.

I watched as several of his tattoos appeared, scrawling themselves down his neck and over his shoulder. “So are you.” I sucked in a deep breath and

released it slowly. “I’ll start. Confession or question?”

“Confession?” he repeated with immediate concern. “I think we should start there.”

“Are you sure?” I asked weakly.

“I am now.” He untangled his limbs from mine and sat up.

He loved me, and even though I was new to this, something told me that wouldn’t change—even after he learned the truth. I closed my eyes and blurted it out before I lost my nerve. “Oberon handfasted me.”

I waited for the explosion—bracing for him to nip to the Hallow Court and add another death mark for the Wild Hunt to collect.

“No, he didn’t.”

Maybe it was the utter calm in his voice or perhaps it was my surprise, but I found myself scrambling to sit up, too. I tucked my legs under me and stared at him. “He did. We’re handfasted or married or whatever. That’s all, though. He never laid a finger on me,” I added quickly when Lach’s face darkened. I didn’t want to consider what might have happened if the witches hadn’t secretly conspired against him—if the wedding had been real. “Obviously, it means nothing to me.”

But he shook his head. “You aren’t married. You can’t be.”

So, he was in denial, which might be a good thing. At least it would delay the inevitable violence. “Look, it happened. He handfasted me and said we were married. I was there and—”

“You *can’t* be married to him.” He cut me off but stopped short, his forehead creasing. Every tattoo on his body, save for the four symbols inked over his heart, fled and swirled.

Suspicion seeped through me. “What do you mean by that?”

He considered for a moment. “I need you to hear me out before you freak.”

“Freak?” My voice pitched on the word. “What’s going on, Gage?”

He winced slightly at the use of his surname. “You can’t be married to him, because...”

I waited for him to finish that sentence, my heart straining against the cage of my ribs.

Because he didn’t want me to be? Because it meant even more trouble? Because I belonged to him?

“Finish that thought,” I said through gritted teeth.

He closed his eyes briefly, and when he opened them, a new tattoo

appeared, snaking in ribbons around his left hand and wrist. I'd never seen it before. "You can't be married to him because you're already married to me."

I rocketed to my feet so quickly that I nearly tripped over the books still lying on the ground. I fought to stay upright as I processed what he was saying. "We are not married!"

"Shortest honeymoon ever," he muttered.

Understatement of the year.

Chapter Twelve

Lach

I had outlived nearly every soul marked by the Wild Hunt. I was still breathing despite walking into the territory of two other courts without an invitation. But whatever fortune had kept me alive this long wanted no part of Cate's anger.

"Let's talk." I pointed to a nearby chair, offering her my most tempting smile. "Sit."

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm not a dog."

At least things still felt familiar between us.

Cate squatted to grab her dress, nearly tripping as she slipped it on. And now she was putting clothes on—the *last* thing I wanted after being torn apart for nearly a week. She continued to pace the room as she zipped it. I knew better than to stop her. Her spirit was what I loved most about her. It also made her slightly terrifying, and right now, she looked very...spirited.

She paused next to the window and began examining her wrist. Finally, she threw her hands up. "I don't have one. Is this a...joke?"

She stumbled over the final word like she'd planned to say something else, and I flinched. Maybe it was the bond between us—the bond she was now questioning—but I knew what she'd intended to say.

Was it a trick? Was I toying with her?

I waited for the anger to come, for the red-hot fury that always blazed when someone questioned my integrity. But this wasn't *someone*. It was Cate, and if anyone had the right to question me about anything—from the weather to my intentions—it was my mate. Instead, a heaviness crushed my chest, like the weight of every problem I'd been ignoring had been suddenly deposited on my shoulders.

"Take off your ring," I said in a quiet voice.

She needed to know the truth. Not that the truth was going to win me any favors, especially when she realized everything I had kept from her. But if

she was going to be pissed at me, she might as well get it all out in one go. Having the fight was the first step in making my mistakes up to her. Potentially, jewelry and flowers would have to get involved, too.

She blinked a few times before shaking her head like she was experiencing a glitch. “I c-c-can’t.”

“Can’t?” I frowned, pushing to my feet and moving toward her.

Red stained her cheeks as I approached, her teeth sinking into her lower lip as her gaze swept down my body. The attention provoked my own blood to rush to the spot. Not my intention but impossible to prevent. She turned her focus out the window, her blush deepening. “Will you put something on? I can’t think.”

I cursed under my breath as I swiped my boxers off the floor. That was the other reason for holding off on this serious conversation: no one believed in mates anymore. Probably because nobody knew a mated pair. But they’d existed once, gifting the fae lexicon with phrases such as “fuck like mates” and “breed like mates.” Slang that still existed today. Although humans had changed “mates” to “bunnies,” which raised some serious concerns, if you asked me. But the birds and bees were roughly the same. Newly mated pairs wanted to fuck. A lot. It was an impulse that was hard to control. Even now, some primitive part of me bellowed to throw her over my shoulder and deliver orgasms until she forgot her own name. I’d hoped to get some of it out of my system before it was time for this conversation.

That might have been a mistake. Just another one to add to my incredibly long list of things to atone for. I needed to start writing shit down.

“Are you trying to think of an excuse?” she asked.

Looking up, I realized she was staring at my moving tattoos. I could usually keep them in check, but with Cate around, they were the bane of my existence. She could always tell when I was thinking. “No.” I shook my head. “Just deciding where to start.”

Probably not with the fact that we were mates. That might be too big of a shock. It was better to work our way there slowly—one of the reasons that I’d latched on to *married* when she brought up Oberon handfasting her. Incidentally, another good reason to kill him. Slowly. But *married* seemed less intimidating news than *mated*.

I might have been wrong about that, too. But now that I had her back, I would do anything to keep her.

She crossed her arms over her chest, raising her chin as she prepared to

give an order, but her lower lip quivered. “Tell me about the ring.” Her interest surprised me, until she added, “You used it to break the bargain.”

“Yes.” So she remembered that, despite the bloody chaos of MacAlister’s final moments. I took another concerned step toward her. “What do you mean that you can’t take it off? Did you try?”

I’d told her not to—warned her. Of course, she’d done the exact opposite. I loved her tenacity, but it was going to kill me.

“No way,” she said firmly, drawing a deep breath. “You’re answering the questions, and I have *a lot* of them.” As her eyes skimmed my bare chest, the redness on her cheeks blossomed again and she looked away. “I think something is wrong with me.”

It was going to be a long night.

“Maybe we should head toward the Avalon before we get caught trespassing.” She gestured toward the exit sign glowing over the nearest door. “Or at least get outside where I can’t...”

“Jump my bones?” I finished.

“Believe it or not, I have some self-control.” The way her throat bobbed suggested otherwise.

“Not,” I said with a sigh. Keeping the truth from her was getting us nowhere. I took a deep breath. “You don’t have any self-control because of the mating bond.”

Her eyes widened, and she took a shaky step backward, bumping into the wall. She braced herself against it as she continued to stare at me. Her heart rate sped up through the bond we shared. “Mating?” she said in a strangled voice. “You said we were married.”

“It’s kinda the same thing.” It was not remotely the same thing. I felt Cate in every atom of my being. She was as fundamental a part of me as the blood in my veins, my bones, my flesh. Every moment I wasn’t touching her was agony. Her taste lingered in my mouth. I craved her in a way that was so primal, I couldn’t remember a time I didn’t feel this way. She was my beginning and my end and every breath in between.

As though she could sense the lie, she pointed a finger at me. “Get dressed. We need to *really* talk.”

She grabbed my coat off the floor and marched out of the reading room. I threw the rest of my clothes on and followed, not bothering with buttons.

Cate was waiting on the large front porch, her attention focused on the lawn. It was warm for late October, even in New Orleans, but she clutched

the jacket closed. She didn't bother to look at me as I stepped out of the library.

Fog shrouded the avenue as we started on what was bound to be a very long walk home; even the moon seemed to flee behind the protection of a bank of clouds. The street was quiet, guarded by ancient oaks whose branches draped over the pavement in a protective canopy. Not a single light shone from the old, weathered mansions that lined the block as though every soul in New Orleans wanted to stay out of this conversation. But the air was heavy, damp with the smell of earth and autumnal decay as we made our way between patches of light cast by the iron streetlamps.

Cate paused at a broken bit of pavement and slipped off her impractical shoes. "Start. Explaining. Now."

I decided it was best to begin with the basics and then prime her for the bombshell. "To the fae, handfasting shows intention to be married. It allows the couple a year and a day to decide if they're right for each other."

"I was at Ciara's handfasting," she reminded me. "So, this thing between us can be broken?"

The words were a knife to my heart. She had a right to ask questions, to be upset, to reject the bond if she so chose. But fuck...I'd rather take a bullet than consider that possibility. "Not broken, but you can reject it."

"What do you mean that it can't be broken?" She shook her head. "What happened to the trial marriage? How did this even happen?" Questions flooded from her, her voice pitching higher with each one.

"Do you remember the night we finally went to bed together?" Why the fuck did I feel embarrassed asking that? I pushed past it when she nodded and forced myself to continue. "And I tied you up?"

Time to rip off the bandage.

Her mouth fell open. "That? It wasn't a handfasting."

"I guess it was." I lifted my hand to show her the mark of the mating bond again. "And the magic took."

"It was just sex," she blurted out.

I winced, each word stabbing me through the heart.

"And yet..." She might even be pleased that it was knocking me down a few pegs—if she could see past whatever homicidal fantasies she was currently entertaining. This whole situation was a lesson in humility. I deserved this. A punishment for how I'd lied and tricked her when we first met.

She remained silent for a full minute—the longest one of my life. “Did you do it on purpose?”

My pace faltered as I bit back a response I knew I would regret. Mating had been the furthest thing from my mind that night, even though I’d already fallen in love with her. The universe didn’t deliver gifts like mates to men like me.

“If you did, you can tell me,” she added. “I just want to know.”

The quiet in her voice affected me more than if she’d screamed it. Part of me wished that she would. Apparently, there was something worse than having my integrity questioned. It was knowing I’d disappointed her.

“I didn’t.” A breeze tossed my hair, the wind carrying us toward an uncertain future. “I don’t have any proof. All I have is my word.”

Her gaze fixed on me, something unreadable moving behind her eyes. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

She took another deep breath. “I believe you.”

“You do?” It spilled out of me. To my relief, she laughed. Not a true laugh. Tension laced this one, but it was a start.

“I was there.” She smiled as if recalling the memory. “We weren’t thinking clearly.”

My eyebrows shot up. “I guess not.”

“I mean, we were just...going at it.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Is it a bad sign that we’re better at fighting than talking?”

“We’ll get better at talking.” I took a step toward her, battling my instinct to reach out and take her into my arms, even as I eyed a sturdy-looking oak tree. There was no one around, and already my need for her was rising again.

“Because we’re stuck together?” The question snuffed my forming plans to make love to her there.

“You aren’t stuck with me.” Something twisted in my guts, like the words poised on my tongue were actual poison. “Just because magic sealed the bond doesn’t take away your choice in the matter. If you don’t wish to be mates, I’ll respect that.”

And then I would walk straight out of New Orleans so Goemon could put a bullet in my brain.

“Can I...think about it?” She chewed on her lower lip.

Was that a test or an opportunity? Probably best to view it as the latter.

Because I couldn't give up. Not on her. Not on us. I would never force her to accept the bond, but death would be a mercy if she did. The idea of walking around for the rest of my life with half of my soul...

"Take all the time you need." She deserved that much, even if it nearly killed me to consider the possibility that she might reject me.

But her face was distant as she wandered under the glow of a streetlamp. We walked without speaking for another block before she broke the silence. "Now, tell me about my ring. Why did it break our bargain? I offered it to you the night I came to you about Channing. Why didn't you just take it then?"

Had I thought getting all the bad news out of the way at once was a good idea?

I understood why she needed to know, but there was so much I was still trying to sort out.

We walked beside each other but separate, our footsteps echoing in the night. "It's not the ring, exactly." I hesitated. There was a reason I'd never told her the truth. Before MacAlister's attack, I'd expected the right time to come along one day. He had forced my hand, and after I killed him, when I needed to break that bargain and sever the connection between us, I hadn't paused to decide how to deliver the news. I'd had more important things to worry about. "First of all, the ring has to be given of your own free will. No one can take it."

She twisted it around her finger, processing this information, but didn't remove it. Finally, she nodded. "Oberon said the ring belongs to the Terra Court—to your mother's court."

Dread sluiced through me. I never should have arranged the marriage between Ciara and Bain. It was a mistake to invite the other courts into mine.

"Oberon recognized the ring?" The question sounded strangled even to my own ears.

She nodded. "I think that's why he sent MacAlister after me. He called witches in to break the spell, but they helped me escape instead."

Pieces began to fall into place. I'd risked her life by keeping it from her—another mistake I wouldn't make again. That was if she was still talking to me at the end of this. All my poor choices were piling up. "Tell me what you know."

I listened silently as Cate filled me in on everything that had happened at

the Hallow Court: Oberon's claims about the Otherworld, him taking responsibility for sending MacAlister, his plans to start a war.

"And I tried to look around the estate," she continued. "He has a spell on everyone who works there so they can't talk or communicate. And I found a room hidden in the basement. I heard sounds from inside it." She shivered, her arms wrapping around her middle. "But it was locked, so I couldn't get in to find out what he's doing in there."

That was a small miracle. If Oberon guessed what she was... But he couldn't have. He had to think it was only the ring. If he had known the truth, he would never have let her go. He would have locked her away behind that door and done gods knew what to her.

I stared at the sidewalk, my head too heavy to face the path before us. More questions. More problems. More burdens to bear.

"It doesn't make sense." She shook her head. "Why would my mother have something from the Terra Court? And why can't I take it off?"

"I'm not sure about that," I admitted, frowning. "I can't believe you were going to give it to him after what I told you." If she had taken that ring off, Oberon would have figured it out.

It was all my fault. I had made that bargain, taking her away from her safe hiding place and thrusting her into my world.

But Cate didn't shrink from me. "You didn't tell me shit, Gage. And I would have given it to him to protect the Nether Court, to protect my friends and family."

And I loved her for it, even though it would have put her in danger. More danger than she could have possibly known. Part of me wished that she had left New Orleans the night of MacAlister's attack, that she had disappeared and I had never gone after her. Because there was no way to protect her from the truth or the burden it carried—a burden I'd carried alone since the day of my parents' deaths.

I had to tell her now, and once she knew all of it—once she knew what I'd kept from her—I would let her decide if she wanted to walk away from the Otherworld, from the truth, from *me*.

I wouldn't blame her if she did.

"The Terra Court wasn't like the courts today," I began as we started across a wide boulevard. "It coexisted with humans."

"Coexisted? The humans knew?" she asked. "A few of them or all of them?"

“Most of them. It was in the center of the city. There was a special spell on it. Humans who left the city forgot it existed. Those who stayed worked with the fae. They were friends. They even married. It was the Axis Mundi—the central point that tied our worlds together. When it was lost, magic changed. It grew unstable. Every day, it becomes more unpredictable...”

“The darkness shadowing Oberon’s court,” she murmured, stopping in the middle of the street. “If it’s that important, why didn’t you reclaim it?”

I braced myself to deliver another bombshell. Blowback was inevitable. “Because I’m not the heir to the Terra Court.”

Chapter Thirteen

Cate

“I don’t understand.” Where was the punch line? What did any of this have to do with me?

Something niggled in the back of my brain, but I refused to let it squirm its way into my thoughts. This was just more fae fuckery. Another trick like the bargain or the handfasting. I turned in the opposite direction, preparing to storm into the city’s familiar arms, but something held me. I wanted to trust Lach—*needed* to trust him. I couldn’t love him without it.

“Tell me everything.” I watched Lach as we walked, the night fading away around us.

“When I was a kid, my mother’s penumbra was always around. We called her Aunt Stacia.” A boyish grin lit up his face at the memory, giving me a glimpse of who he’d been long before he’d risen to his own throne. My heart clenched at the vulnerability in that single smile. “We couldn’t say her full name.”

“What was it?” I asked softly.

“Anastacia.” The smile faded as his eyes grew distant, lost to some other place and time. “And then, one day, she disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

He nodded, eyes meeting mine for only a moment. “My parents wouldn’t talk about it. Whenever I asked about her—whenever any of us asked—my mother would start to cry, so we...stopped asking.”

Children always learned about heartbreak in the margins. I’d seen it a thousand times at the hospital. The child tucked in the corner while parents whispered or wailed, too lost in their own problems to notice. Experiencing loss without the benefit of understanding and growing older in the process, thinking we didn’t understand. Or maybe they thought it made us wiser.

Maybe it just made us into the broken adults we all became.

“That must have been hard.”

He took a deep breath. "It was like having my family ripped apart," he admitted. "In a lot of ways, Stacia was my mother, too. You would have thought they were sisters. They completed each other." He laughed, scratching the back of his neck. "Whenever Roark and I were fighting, my father would say, 'Be like your mother and Stacia. A penumbra is a gift.'"

"What about your father's penumbra? You mentioned they dismissed both their penumbras." It was the reason he thought his parents might have been mates. I looked at his hand, realizing for the first time that his own signet was gone.

"I never met him. He was gone before I was born. I guess that's why my father was always riding me about Roark, about how not everyone was so lucky about the companions chosen for them.

"My mother understood, though. She knew what it was like to be linked to someone your whole life, how they could be your best friend *and* your worst enemy. She had a lot more patience when the two of us acted out. She would tell stories about the trouble she and Stacia got into when they were kids, how Stacia always covered for her. The stories stopped when Stacia left."

That was how memories worked. In the beginning, when they were too painful to bear, it was easier to ignore them, and then gradually, they slipped away and became the past we didn't share. I understood why she couldn't bear it. Some memories were too painful to relive.

"But why do you think this is your mother's ring?" I asked, fiddling with its band.

"I remember it, and there's obviously magic in it," he said quietly.

The witches had told me as much. The fact that I couldn't take it off confirmed it. That was reason enough to be suspicious, but it didn't mean the ring was hers. I needed more proof than the memory of a child, especially since Lach hadn't been a child for quite some time.

"Even after Stacia was gone, my mother wore that ring every day of her life. I have no doubt she was wearing it on the day she died."

"And you never found it?" It was a careful question. I knew the basics of how his parents had died—killed fighting in a war to protect the court they had abandoned—but he hadn't told me much about what happened after.

"No trace of the court remains. I went once, when I was feeling particularly self-destructive, but I couldn't find a single scrap of it left. It was like it never existed, like the earth just swallowed it whole."

My stomach dropped, beginning to churn. I clutched my middle, trying to ward away the queasy sensation.

“Maybe someone else found her ring,” I said quietly. “And somehow, my parents got it. Bought it in a shop or something.” I was grasping at straws. I knew next to nothing about my parents. They were just names on my birth certificate. There was no family to take me in, no possessions left behind.

“I suppose it could have found its way from Warsaw.” He tilted his head and studied me for a moment. “Or maybe it’s Stacia’s ring. They’re identical. That’s why the magic works. The stones are cut from the same jewel, fashioned and forged to be perfectly matched.”

My throat constricted.

“The first news I had of Stacia came after the Terra Court fell,” he continued. “I returned home to an empty throne and a letter my father had left me.”

Part of me longed to close the distance between us, to hold his hand, but I continued forward, not wanting to interrupt.

“In the letter, he confessed a secret they had kept from all of us, one they had hidden since the day they married. My father took the throne during a turbulent period in our history,” Lach said. “Every throne but that of the Hallow Court had passed to a new heir in the last decade. When the Nether Court passed to him, he was young and unmarried and wanted to establish his court in the New World. He saw it as protection from the bloody politics of the courts in Europe.”

“Bloody?” I repeated.

“Thrones are rarely given up. For several decades, violence befell the courts. It was blamed on humans and other creatures. But the truth of what happened was guarded carefully, and I’ve long suspected that many of the fae royals who fell during that time did so at the hands of their own people.”

“But the Wild Hunt,” I pointed out.

Lach scratched at the mark on the back of his neck as if my words triggered the impulse. “That was the second part of my father’s plan. He wanted to establish rules between the courts so that they would stop fearing one another and be united.”

“I’m not sure that worked.”

“He was a bit of an optimist,” Lach said dryly. “But that’s what sent him to the Terra Court. The court that sat on the Axis Mundi was powerful in a

different way than the others. It had access to not only fae magic—both light and shadow—but the magic of the earth as well. Its heiress was notoriously private, however. She accepted no visitors and kept few courtiers, save for a trusted few. Her parents had fallen when she was young, still away at school while she settled into her prime, and she'd been yanked back before she was ready to deal with the politics of a fractured court. He thought that if anyone would agree with his ideas, with the need for change, it would be her. So he went to see her."

"And?"

"She refused to speak to him, but he waited. He had already settled on moving his court, and he wasn't going to do so without an ally. He stayed for nearly a month before she agreed to see him, and when she did, it was love at first sight. But it was forbidden."

"Because they were both heirs," I murmured.

"That's what we were always told." But Lach shook his head. "My father wrestled with his feelings toward her, believing she was the heir to her own court. He decided to give up his own throne so that they could be together.

"But his letter to me revealed the truth. Calista, *the heir*, didn't come to see him. She sent her penumbra in her place, pretending to be her."

"What?" I blurted out. "He was in love with a...penumbra?"

Lach nodded. "I suppose it was panic that made her finally come clean to him. She told him the truth. That she was Anastacia, *not* Calista. Not an heir but a penumbra. She couldn't let him give up his court without knowing the truth, but it didn't change his mind."

I couldn't fathom how Lach had lived with all of this for years, how he had carried the burden of knowing the truth about his parents when no one else did.

"Calista was furious at the both of them, but she saw a way out of her own predicament. She would pass the court to her younger sister, who was more than happy to lie if it meant claiming the throne, and they would leave to be married in the New World. But when they got here, my father married the real Anastacia—and the lie was spread. My mother became Calista to the world, which believed that the heir of the Nether Court and the heir of the Terra Court had wed. My father's penumbra was happy to be relieved of service. He took a binding oath never to tell the truth about what had happened. Calista, the true heir of the Terra Court, stayed out of sisterly devotion, pretending to be my mother's former penumbra to sell the lie.

And when we were born, she became Aunt Stacia and slowly, anyone who might have known the truth forgot.”

“And they never told anyone?” I could hardly believe it possible they kept a secret like that for so long.

“He left the letter for me. I think he suspected they were going to their deaths and that when that time came, there would be no way to hide the truth. If the Terra Court bloodline fell, the magic of the throne would not pass to me, and everyone would know it was without a true heir. Without someone from its bloodline to claim the throne, another could try to claim the Axis Mundi for their own court, and in doing so make themselves more powerful than all the rest of us combined.”

He turned haunted eyes on mine. “And so I found myself, still in uniform, holding a letter that could tear our world apart when Oberon and Bain arrived demanding I choose between my courts.”

Not a choice at all.

“But the throne is without an heir now,” I said slowly, trying to ignore the weight of the ring on my finger. “Why has no one tried to claim the Axis Mundi?”

“Everyone believes its magic runs in my family’s veins—that I might have given it up in that moment but that I would not allow it to be taken by another. I’ve made sure they feared me, feared what I would do if they crossed me.”

“But Oberon...” Now I understood why he wanted this ring.

He nodded as if he could read my thoughts. “I didn’t see it coming. I have no idea how he knows or what he suspects. But there’s only one reason he wants that ring.”

To claim the Axis Mundi and with it the magic of both our worlds.

“And if he had it, the first thing he would do is wipe away any competition.”

“He said if I gave it to him, he wouldn’t touch your family,” I whispered.

“Haven’t you learned yet, princess? The devil is in the details. *He* might not touch us.”

But he could find others who would, and I had almost given him the key to everything he wanted. Bile rose in my throat. I was going to be sick, but I choked it back.

“He said something about magic converging.” I tried desperately to remember everything that had passed between us. Oberon had lied to me

about many things, but he hadn't hidden his desire to claim the throne. "That without the Terra Court, there would be chaos."

Lach nodded, his face growing solemn. "Our magic is changing, mixing together in strange ways. Aurora spoke to me at Mabon, asked me to consider reclaiming my mother's throne. She told me that Sirius is convinced the problem stems from the lost Axis Mundi." He rubbed his temples. Aurora was a friend and the heir to the Astral Court. Her younger brother, Sirius, tended to have ideas of his own. "I couldn't tell her the truth. If anyone knew... But I'd suspected as much for years and had been searching for Stacia—I mean, Calista. The real Calista. I had begun to think something terrible had happened to her, and then you showed up wearing that ring." He stopped. We were only a street away from the Avalon, and this conversation felt far from over. "I should have told you the truth, but I didn't know if I could trust you. If anyone else found out, they might have tried to take it to go after the throne."

I shook my head. "Well, genius, you didn't tell me, and they almost did."

"That fact hasn't escaped me."

"So, no one else knows?" I lifted an eyebrow.

The edges of his smile faltered. "Roark does, but only because I'm shit at keeping secrets from him."

"Noted."

"He's the only one who suspects what I suspect." He took my hands, gripping them tightly. "It's not a coincidence that you showed up in my court after all this time."

The world tried to slip out from beneath me, but he held me steady.

"The night you came to the Avalon, something drew me outside. Some instinct I couldn't explain. I stepped out for just a moment, telling myself I needed a break from all our guests, and I found you—wearing that ring."

I was having trouble breathing.

"So, I let you inside, determined to find out who you were and why you had the ring. And then, you begged for your brother's life..." He swallowed hard. "My aunt would have done that for my mother. At least, she would have before everything went wrong, and some part of me knew that you were linked to her somehow."

No. I wanted to say the word, but it wouldn't come out. "It might just be a coincidence."

Lach inclined his head. "Maybe. But that night in my office, you offered

me the ring in exchange for Channing's life, and when you slipped it just slightly off your finger—" He paused and met my eyes. "I saw something."

I sucked at the air, trying to force it into my lungs. But he had refused the ring—only to make a bargain around it. Obviously, Lach believed what he was saying. Me?

What was I supposed to think? That I was some lost fae heir?

I waited for the information to sink in and take root. A laugh gurgled out of me instead. Concern drew his eyebrows together as he stroked my hand.

But I leaned toward him, examining his eyes in the dim moonlight.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm checking for a concussion. I think you hit your head." A traumatic brain injury might explain all of this.

"I know it's a lot to digest—"

"It's *impossible* to digest," I cut him off. I'd spent my childhood waiting for a fairy tale that never came, wanting to believe my parents would show up and say that it was all a big mistake, that they loved me and wanted me. When I grew up, I let go of that fantasy. Now he expected me to buy into a new one? "And none of it explains why I can't take the ring off."

"Because there's magic binding it to you," he reminded me gently, as if he knew forcing more proof might break me.

"Fine." I pulled at the ring, but it didn't budge. I let out a frustrated sigh and thrust my right hand toward him. "You try."

Lach watched me closely as he tried to slip the ring from my finger and failed. So much for Oberon's theory that marrying me would trick the ring. After all, according to Lach, we were pretty much married. Then again, he also thought I was a princess.

Princess.

He called me that from the day we met. Not a taunt. Not an endearment. Had he been warning me? Had he been testing me?

My thoughts spiraled like water slipping down a drain. That wouldn't do me any good. I needed to get a hold of myself, assess the situation, and figure out how to treat the problem.

Lach remained before me, gripping my hands, an anchor that might just as easily drown me as keep me grounded. But it was enough to help me see what I had to do.

"I need to get this ring off," I told him. "Maybe then you'll see that I'm nothing special. The witches who helped me in Ireland told me there were

people here who could help with it.”

“We have to be cautious about who we approach with this,” he said slowly, as if choosing each word with care. “There are plenty of creatures in the city who would still sell us out to Oberon no matter what they’ve pledged.”

“And I can trust you?” I asked. His eyes darkened, but I pressed on before he could say something sweet and unmoor me. “Oberon tried to make a bargain for this ring to claim the Terra Court throne. Is that why you wanted it?”

A direct question. Lach didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

“And now?” All he had wanted was a stupid ring, and he had gotten stuck with a mate instead. The throne. That was what this was all really about.

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “That’s for you to decide. I’ll respect whatever you choose.”

A retort died on my lips as I stared into his eyes, finding only sincerity.

But he had to want more than that after all this time. “And if you’re wrong, if I’m not what you think I am?”

“I know exactly who you are, Cate. The ring changes nothing between us.”

But that was a lie. “Yes, it does.”

Lach’s jaw worked for a second before he released me and started forward again. “Will you ever believe me?” he asked as I caught up to him. “Or will you hold the bargain against me forever?”

The anguish in his voice threatened to undo me, but I held firm. “You know that I have a point. It’s not just about the ring or the Terra Court. You think I’m fae.” I struggled to even say the word. “You’ve thought that the whole time! How can you love me?”

“I’m beginning to wonder,” he grunted, shaking his head.

“You don’t even know me.” Yes. Fighting felt right, or at least easier.

He twisted toward me, the anger in his eyes blazing. “Maybe I don’t. Because I thought you were fearless, but you’re acting like a coward.”

I flinched, his words hitting too close to the mark. “Say. That. Again.”

“Cate.” He hesitated, his eyelids shuttering. “I’m sorry—”

“Say it again, Gage,” I cut him off. “I *dare* you.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, wincing like the brand of the Wild Hunt stung.

We fell silent again, moving more quickly, both ready for the shelter of

the Avalon. The hotel glowed in the night like a welcoming beacon, promising a reprieve from the tangle of information ensnaring us. Because what was there left to say? I knew everything now, and it would change things between us. Because how long would he love me if he survived the Hunt? When I proved to be fragile and fleeting and human? I barely managed to choke back a sob.

His expression softened, his fury dying out like an ember as we reached the front steps where we first met. That night felt like a lifetime ago. In a way, it was.

“What about the magic?” he asked.

“What about it?” I blinked, confused.

“The mating bond won’t seal without selfless love,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“What has magic ever done for me?” I ignored his pleading eyes, ignored the ache swelling inside me, and raced up the staircase.

Shadows swept toward the revolving door like he might use his magic to stop me. But before they reached it—before I reached it—it spun to reveal Ciara, arms crossed and glaring, the family signet glinting on her finger.

“You’ve got some explaining to do.”

Chapter Fourteen

Lach

“Can it wait?” Cate tipped her head in my direction. “I need to sleep, and then I have dibs on killing your brother.”

Ciara paused, her forehead creasing before she nodded. “Understood.”

But she pulled Cate into a tight hug, then tossed a haughty smirk over Cate’s shoulder before pulling away and vanishing inside.

Unbelievable.

“First her. Now you. Everybody talks a big game about saving me from the Wild Hunt but only so they can kill me,” I grumbled as we stepped into the marble lobby. It was nearly midnight, and the night clerk glanced up with a frown, paling when he saw me. He promptly disappeared into the back office.

“And what does that tell you?” Cate whispered as we crossed to the bank of elevators. “Don’t worry. I have plenty of things to tell your sister that will distract her.”

The doors slid open, and I held a hand across the threshold, keeping my voice low in case any more staff were nearby. “You can’t tell anyone about the Terra Court.”

We’d been too busy fighting to get to that.

She waited until we were inside before she started another one. “What do you mean I can’t tell anyone?”

I’d give up more of my soul to steal a few extra minutes alone before we dealt with what waited outside my door, but something told me her patience was running a tad thin. “Just for now.” I started to reach for her but thought better of it. “I think it’s possible that someone is betraying us. Someone on the inside.”

She blinked as if I had suddenly spoken in tongues. “And you think that person is Ciara?”

“Of course not,” I hissed, hoping my sister wasn’t spying on us through

the security cameras. “But she’s not great at keeping secrets, so until we know what we’re dealing with, I think it’s better if this stays between us.”

“And Roark,” she added flatly. I could tell what she thought about that. She looked at my hand. “At least you’re not wearing that signet ring anymore.”

“I never let him hear anything,” I promised her. Not that it mattered. At this point, I wasn’t sure she would ever let me touch her again. Not only did she think I was delusional, but she was more upset about the mating bond than I had expected. It was a lot of information to process, and all I could do was give her time.

Part of me wanted signet rings of our own. If only so I could figure out what she was thinking. We were mates, but she was still such a mystery sometimes. But I wouldn’t ask her to let me inside her head before she had decided if she would let me inside her heart.

The compartment seemed smaller with each floor the elevator ascended until it felt like there wasn’t enough room for the two of us. I was suffocating, and she was the air I needed to breathe. Cate grasped the handrail as we arrived on the top floor, her knuckles white. But when the doors opened, no one waited on the other side. Even my quarters were mercifully empty. I guessed my family’s sudden courtesy was a gesture more to her than me.

Cate hesitated when I led her to the door of my room, staring at the mammoth round bed covered in silky black sheets.

“You said you needed to sleep.” I stepped back, leaving the choice up to her.

Half of me expected that she would push past me and continue down the hall to her old room. But instead, she walked inside. I waited for her to ask me to join her.

She closed the door in my face instead.

No one bothered us during the night. I couldn’t decide if it was a miracle or torture. By the time dawn seeped through the windows of my living room, I was on my third glass of Scotch and no closer to answers. Cate had every right to be mad at me. I’d crossed a line. More than one, if I was being honest. She deserved the space to sort out her feelings.

That didn’t stop me from pacing in front of the bedroom door, hoping it would open.

It didn’t.

But knowing only a wall separated us was like an itch I couldn't scratch. I was about to let myself in when Ciara barged into my quarters. Her eyes skimmed over my wrinkled clothing and the nearly empty glass in my hand. "I take it things went well."

"There were complications." I drained the last of the Scotch, washing down the sour words.

She huffed, some of last night's smugness settling on her face. "I can come back."

"No." I rose to my feet. "You might as well call everyone for a meeting." There was no point avoiding the others, and I needed an excuse to wake up Cate.

Ciara nodded, but halfway to the door, she stopped. "I'm glad she's home." She cleared her throat. "That you're *both* home."

I forced a smile. I wondered how long that feeling would last.

There was no answer when I knocked. Opening the door, I found the bed empty, and fear roared through my blood, settling when Cate peeked out from the chair perched by the fire. She groaned as she stood, hastily smoothing her dress. Judging by the circles rimming her eyes, she hadn't slept much, either.

"You have about two minutes before my family ambushes us," I warned her.

"I'll change." She sauntered past me to rummage through the wardrobe, frowning when she found only suits and slacks and guns.

"Hold on." I slipped down the hall to the final bedroom. Her scent lingered in the space like she'd been here only yesterday, but she wouldn't be needing this room anymore. Not if I had anything to say about it. I swiped an armful out of the top drawer of her dresser and snagged a few hangers from the closet.

Cate was wrapped in a towel when I returned, the red dress shriveling in the fireplace. I didn't comment as I hung the dresses next to my suits. Then moved to make room in the sock drawer for her lacy underthings.

"Am I moving in?" she asked quietly.

A reminder that I was still in trouble.

"I thought you might need a few things in here." I slid the drawer shut after hooking a pair of lacy panties on my thumb.

Her brows lifted as I tossed them to her. "That was optimistic of you."

Nothing with Cate was ever easy. But I wasn't about to give up, no matter

how little time I had left to share with her. I would prove to her that everything between us was real, starting with the sock drawer.

Turning, I leaned on the armoire and slid my hands in my pockets. “By all means, go out there like that. I prefer knowing you have no underwear on. Makes it easier.”

She glared but slid on her panties. I moved out of the way so she could grab her own clothes, then took out fresh ones for myself.

We dressed silently, stealing glances at each other, half heated with lust and half teeming with wary energy until she groaned and marched into the bathroom. The door shut with an ominous *click*.

I was working on my tie when it opened again. When I turned toward her, words failed me.

“Ready,” she announced, raking fingers through her loose waves.

Every time I saw her, she was more beautiful, but this morning, she glowed. Her dark hair was swept up, revealing the slender curve of her neck. A faint blush colored her cheeks—the lingering proof that we’d done more than talk last night. But it was the determination shining in her brown eyes that made my heart swell with pride. Her steps faltered as she caught me staring, and she looked down, brushing a few lingering wrinkles from her sage-colored sheath.

“You’re perfect,” I said as she fussed. Her flush deepened as she lifted her gaze to meet mine. The mating bond strained between us, and I tore my attention away before I acted on it. “I’m ready, too.”

“Hold on.” She stopped me before I could turn the knob. She took a step closer, reaching up with tentative hands to adjust my tie. “There.”

I caught her wrist gently before she could turn away. “I love you.”

“How can you be sure when—”

“No,” I cut her off. I could give her space. Time. Almost anything she needed. But I refused to entertain doubts about that. “You can question my authority. You can question my decisions. You can even question our future, but you cannot question that. I love you.”

I would keep saying it whether or not she believed me, and somehow I would prove it to her.

Pulling Cate closer, I hooked an arm around her waist. It took everything in me not to press her against the door and kiss her senseless. Her throat slid, eyes darting to my mouth as if she was thinking the same thing.

“We should get out of here,” I said roughly.

She nodded, taking a step away from me, as if distance might soothe the electric need running between us.

We made it a few feet into the hallway before Ciara accosted us.

She threw her arms around Cate, who managed to stay upright and return the hug.

“She already got a hug. Why aren’t you this excited to see me?” I grumbled.

Ciara stuck her tongue out over Cate’s shoulder.

“You showed up beaten to a bloody pulp,” she reminded me. “I wasn’t about to reward your behavior.”

I rolled my eyes, but Cate looked between us, alarmed. “A bloody what? What happened?”

“Bain—” Ciara started.

“It’s not important,” I said quickly, but Ciara whispered the story to Cate, earning a fair share of alarmed gasps from my mate. I gave up and started toward the living room before the others came looking for us and joined in on the flagellations. My sister didn’t release her hold on Cate, clinging to her arm as she babbled about everything we’d missed in our absence. Finally, Ciara sighed happily. “I’m just so glad that you’re here.”

“Me too.” But it sounded like a pretty lie.

“You look tired. Been busy?” Ciara winked at her.

At least someone was enthusiastic about our relationship.

I checked my arm to make sure the mating bond was concealed. If Ciara spotted it, she wouldn’t keep her mouth shut, which might scare Cate further. Cate tracked the movement but didn’t say anything. The rest of the welcoming committee was more composed.

Roark nodded at Cate, and she smiled warmly at him, but it faltered as her gaze drifted to Fiona.

“Hello again.” Fiona glared at her from the chair by the fireplace.

Romy placed a hand on her shoulder, murmuring something before she turned to my mate. “I’m Romy—”

“My number one fan,” I muttered. Everyone ignored me.

“Fiona’s *girlfriend*,” she continued. “We’re so glad to meet you.”

“Oh, we’ve met.” Fiona’s mouth puckered as she stared at Cate. “I guess I was wrong when I told you that fae don’t m—”

“Watch yourself,” I growled.

But Cate only rolled her eyes, taking a seat next to Ciara on the couch.

“Care to explain what took you so long last night?” Ciara asked me.

“The Hunt tried to grab us.”

Roark shot me a surprised look. “What? How?”

I filled them in on what had happened when we nipped back from Dublin, stopping when we reached the library.

“A library?” Ciara repeated. “How did you wind up there?”

“No clue,” I lied smoothly. I had my theories about that, too.

“You’re lucky you wound up in New Orleans.” Roark scratched at his jaw. “I guess this means you won’t be nipping.”

“Yes,” I agreed grimly, “but you should all be careful. They could try to grab any of you.”

“Do you really think they would use one of us to get to you?” Fiona asked.

It was a possibility. “As far as I know, no one has escaped the Wild Hunt.” Not for long, at least. “We have no clue how they’ll react to being outsmarted.”

“But we’re here now,” Cate said softly.

Ciara swiveled toward her, tucking one leg under the other. “We had every magical creature in the city looking for a way around Lach’s curse.”

“I wouldn’t call it a curse,” I interjected, but they ignored me.

“And half of New York,” Romy added.

Ciara nodded, her gratitude obvious. “I swear we nearly gave up, but a familiar named Thalia had a stroke of genius.”

“A familiar?” Cate frowned.

“One of the covens of witches,” I explained. “They’re called familiars because of their relationship to vampires.”

“Witches are familiars,” she said like she was piecing this information together.

Romy spoke up. “Not all of us.”

I sighed. This could get complicated.

“When our magic was cursed a couple of centuries ago, some witches sought protection from vampires,” Romy explained. “Familiars. Others maintained their relationship to the goddess. We believe she still watched over us even during the curse. The devout. But, of course, some witches turned to dark arts, others to green magic, some to voodoo. But most of us consider ourselves to be either devout or a familiar.”

Cate’s eyebrows ratcheted up another notch. “I might need a chart.”

“Later,” I promised.

“In case you’re wondering, the bona fides spell is finally stable,” Ciara announced. “Every creature in the city has taken the pledge or left town.”

Cate’s throat slid as she digested this information. “And that will keep the Hunt out?”

“‘Bona fides’ literally means in good faith. No one who won’t swear the oath in good faith to the Nether Court can set foot in New Orleans. The Wild Hunt belongs to no court. They’ll never swear an oath of loyalty,” Roark told her. “So they can’t step foot inside city limits.”

Cate nodded, looking a little dazed. “You got every creature in New Orleans to swear an oath of loyalty?”

“Most of them already had,” I said as casually as possible. “It’s considered to be bad manners if you’re in the city without permission. Now it’s just impossible.”

“What about the tourists?”

“Humans can come and go,” Ciara said with a wave of her hand. “None of them stands a chance against us. But if any creature, fae or otherwise, tries to set foot inside city limits, they’ll find that they can’t.”

Cate stayed silent for a moment before she finally nodded. “It’s actually genius.”

“It’s a Band-Aid,” Roark said quietly. Cate’s eyes flashed to me for confirmation.

“It worked,” Ciara reminded him.

“For now. It bought us time to get this curse removed and keep the Hunt—and Oberon—out of New Orleans.” He crossed his arms and leveled a serious stare in her direction. Things had been tense between them since I’d returned, and it seemed to be getting worse every day. “And you know what will happen if he can’t return to the Otherworld.”

“He can’t return to the Otherworld?” Cate asked slowly.

“The spell is powered by the covens. It won’t work in our world.” Ciara shook her head, her nose wrinkling in frustration.

Cate stared at me. “You can’t return to the Nether Court?”

I nodded.

“But Fiona and Romy are going to look for a long-term solution,” Ciara said. “They’ll find a way to take care of this.”

Cate blinked with surprise and looked at Fiona.

“Believe it or not, I don’t want my brother dead,” Fiona drawled. “Well,

at least, I don't want him dead most of the time."

"Please don't start," Ciara said through gritted teeth. "We're together for now."

"Not for long," Fiona informed her. "We heard back from the Astral Court. They'll let us use their labs."

Cate sat up a little straighter, looking happier than she'd been since our talk. "You're going to see Sirius?"

"Yes," Romy said. "He's willing to analyze a sample of Lach's blood to see how the memento mori curse works, and there are covens in Prague with grimoires that date back further than my family's. We're going to find a way around this." She squeezed my sister's shoulder, but Fiona's sour expression didn't change.

I suspected Fiona cared more about getting away from New Orleans than finding a loophole to remove the death mark on my neck.

Cate bit her lip, eyeing Romy. "Do you know anything about the Belle Mère?"

"Yes." Romy held up her hand to show the triple-moon tattoo inked on her skin. "She is the patroness of my coven."

"The witches who helped me escape said I should seek out their sisters." Cate glanced around the room, hesitating on Fiona, like she'd rather not admit this vulnerability in front of my icy sister.

"We're leaving today," Fiona said. "You will have to find someone else."

Cate didn't shrink from her glare.

"My sister, Willow Broussard, might be able to help. She tends to be a bit of an outsider. You can trust her."

Like Romy.

Cate smiled gratefully.

"Speaking of, the covens want a meeting," Roark said. "They aren't happy."

"When are they happy?" I asked.

"Ciara made this happen. But that doesn't mean that they aren't going to fight you on it."

"I suppose I should remind them they're here under my protection."

No rest for the wicked. Dealing with the city's various factions was one of my least favorite parts of the job, but it was unavoidable.

"Tensions are high," he warned us. "We can't tap as much magic as normal from the Otherworld to help shore up the spell from our end."

But Fiona interjected, "It's not just because of the spell. Someone put down a rougarou last week off Esplanade."

"A what?" Cate asked across the room.

Ciara leaned to whisper. "Kinda like a werewolf."

"A rougarou?" I repeated. "I didn't know we had any in the city. Have the werewolves dealt with it?" If a werewolf had bitten someone, they needed to hold the guilty party accountable.

"You know how insular the packs are," Roark said. "They'll deal with whoever did it privately." And publicly, none of them would claim the creature, since rougarous weren't born werewolves like they were. They were cursed. "But it's been decades since one was caught in the city. Second Parish is in an uproar over it, thinking the bona fides spell drew it out. They fought hardest against the spell."

"And I would've thought the vampires would be the biggest pain in my ass," I grumbled.

"Don't worry. They'll still be a pain in your ass. Baptiste wants to discuss the clover problem." He grinned and clapped a hand on my shoulder. "So, the sooner we get this meeting over with, the better."

Vampires weren't known for their patience. We needed to keep the witches happy or risk the bona fides spell, and my sister's success proved she should be the one at the head of the table. "Ciara is still in charge."

I was on borrowed time, and she needed to be prepared in case things went south.

"No way." Ciara abandoned the couch and stalked toward me. She twisted off the signet ring and thrust it in my direction. "I never asked for this. You are still the Prince of the Nether Court."

Over her shoulder, Cate bit back a smile.

"Not this again." Roark sighed, throwing up his hands.

I didn't take the ring from my sister. "It sounds like you handled everything well."

"Of course I did. But I need a margarita, a massage, and a nap. Not necessarily in that order." She stamped her foot. "Make Fiona take it."

"I'm leaving," Fiona reminded her with mock sweetness.

"Okay. Shaw, then," Ciara implored.

"Not an option." He was just a kid.

"Where is Shaw?" Cate asked, looking around the room like she'd just realized he was missing.

Shit. My sister and I shared a look.

"You didn't tell her," she accused.

"Tell me what?" Cate asked slowly.

I took a deep breath. This was going to hurt. "At the hospital."

Cate jumped to her feet. "Hospital? What's wrong?"

I held up a hand before she ran out of the damn building. "Don't freak out. Nothing's wrong."

"You wouldn't have to tell me not to freak out if everything was okay." She crossed her arms as her chest began to heave. "Out with it."

"He's keeping an eye on Channing."

"Channing?" His name came out strangled. "But Oberon said..."

"Let me guess. Oberon lied to you about your brother?" Fiona said with a snort of disdain.

Cate's face crumpled, and I resisted the urge to rip Fiona's head off.

I was at Cate's side instantly, lifting her chin. "Oberon lies," I whispered. "Channing is okay now."

"But why is he in the hospital?" The hitch in her voice broke my heart.

"He was shot."

She swallowed hard as she digested this news. "Again?"

"Yeah. He was in a coma, but he's awake now."

Her eyes narrowed on me. "Why do I feel like there's more to this story?"

Definitely should have told her this before. Now I had an audience for my inevitable evisceration.

"I might've had to use vampire blood to wake him up," I confessed. Cate squawked, but I hurried on. "He was the only one who knew where you were. I did what I had to do."

Her lower lip trembled. "Will he be a vampire now?"

I exhaled hard. I deserved worse than a reasonable question.

"You have to die with vampire blood in your system. It's actually pretty hard to do, since vampire blood has healing properties."

"And you're sure?" she pressed.

I kissed her forehead. "Positive. You can visit him as soon as possible—"

"Now." She pulled free from me and turned to Ciara. "Will you take me?"

So, being reasonable might not be the same as being forgiving.

"Of course." Ciara jumped at the chance, undoubtedly to get out of the meeting with the covens.

I stopped myself from telling her she couldn't. If Cate wanted her there

instead of me, I would respect it. But I wouldn't like it.

Cate didn't bother to look at me as she stormed out of the room.

Ciara stood to follow, giving me a smug smile. "I think you're in trouble."

"No shit," I muttered. "Just keep an eye on her."

She nodded before hurrying after Cate.

Silence fell over the room. Fiona finally broke it. "Wow. She really loves you," she said dryly. "I can see why you threw your life away, at least."

"Fi!" Romy grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the chair. "Let's go pack and have that talk about not saying everything we're thinking out loud—*again*."

I stared at the door as they left. Crystal clinked behind me, and a second later, Roark passed me a glass of whiskey.

"Ready to face the music?" he asked as he raised his glass in a toast.

I took a sip, too numb to feel the burn. Everything was a mess. "I think the covens will be more forgiving than Cate."

"That's optimistic." Roark laughed before downing his drink in a single swallow. Then he clapped a hand on my shoulder and pushed me toward the door. "But there's a first time for everything."

Chapter Fifteen

Lach

We were late as sin by the time we strode into the Avalon's largest conference room. An eclectic collection of creatures was gathered around the grouped conference tables, each coven having brought four or five representatives, and every single one of them looked like they were contemplating murder. Namely, *my* murder. But what was new? Even my mate had it out for me.

I pushed the thought from my mind. I couldn't afford to be worrying about shit like that in a room full of the most powerful, and therefore dangerous, creatures in New Orleans.

Each coven had self-divided among the others' tables. On the right, the devout witches of the Second Parish Coven who made their home in the city's affluent Garden District glared across the table at the familiars and vampires who comprised most of the First Parish Coven and controlled the French Quarter as a result. On the far side of the room, the werewolf contingent from Third Parish looked bored to find themselves stuck in another meeting. As a rule, the pack resisted being dragged into the constant political battles of the other parishes, and since their magic couldn't be used for spellcasting, they were only here in case a vote was called—a rare occurrence when I was in the room.

All in all, there was no love lost between any of the bickering factions present. Anytime we walked away from a meeting without bloodshed was a small mercy.

Romy and Fiona had already left for the Astral Court, which was probably for the best. My sister seemed to prefer collecting enemies to making friends.

Roark claimed a seat to the side of the table, leaving me the central one. The one my sister should be occupying as acting heir. The memento mori burned on the back of my neck like a reminder that a throne was no place

for a dead man.

“Think we should do an icebreaker?” I muttered to my penumbra. His soft laugh was more of a sigh as I gripped the back of the chair. I remained standing, surveying the room, waiting for any lingering conversation to die. “If we could settle down...”

Setting off a bomb would have been less destructive.

“Settle down?” Corinne, a familiar from First Parish, shot from her seat, her red hair whipping around her shoulders. “We are burning through our magic for you, and the first thing you say is to *settle down*? That spell caused a magical outage for all of us, but we should just fall in line, right?”

Murmurs rippled through the room, associates from every coven nodding. The tension was palpable, hanging like a dark cloud over the space. How had Ciara convinced any of them to work together long enough to raise the bona fides spell?

Corinne continued, her voice going higher with each syllable. “We are being dragged into a fight over *fae* laws. This has nothing to do with us, but if you can’t—”

I raised a hand to stop her before she burst a blood vessel. “Poor choice of words.” I paused, weighing my next statement. “There’s nothing to worry about. I’m sure the outage was a fluke.”

The room exploded. Half the people present were on their feet, and everyone was shouting. At me. At each other.

Okay, so that was also the wrong thing to say.

A reed-thin witch rose and pointed a finger across the room, looking down his beakish nose at the werewolves gathered there. Ambrose, one of the elders of Second Parish, never failed to make his disdain for other covens known. “What about the rougarou? We’re trapped in the city, and they’re letting their mutts loose.”

Taran’s lip curled, a low snarl rumbling from his chest. It wasn’t wise to offend the leader of the Third Parish pack. The broadness of his chest and shoulders belied his true nature. Even in his human form, he could rip most of the people here limb from limb.

As accusations continued to fly, my temples throbbed.

The only thing keeping Corinne from coming over the table was Étienne, a vampire elder, holding her back. His dark hair fell across his eyes, shielding his face, but I could tell by the muscle twitching in his strong jawline that he was rapidly losing his patience with the situation. The

female vampire to his right met my eyes and smirked as she tossed a glossy, platinum curl over her shoulder. Baptiste was one of the few not screaming. Which was strange, since yelling at me was usually one of her favorite hobbies. Their third, a younger vampire I'd never met, sat quietly at Baptiste's side. He was unusually scruffy for his species. Between the thick stubble shadowing his face and his shaggy brown haircut, he looked like he might fit in better with the werewolves. But the pitch blackness of his eyes suggested his silence was the result of reining in blood rage, not disinterest.

We needed to lock shit down. Now.

I glanced at Roark and found his head drooping in resignation, propped up by a single finger pressed between his eyes.

Sighing, I sent shadows to swallow the room, smothering every light. The arguments died, snuffed out by the darkness. When the room had fallen silent, I raised my voice. "Perhaps someone could explain why we're all panicking."

"Turn the lights on, please," someone called in a small voice.

I allowed a crack of it through the darkness, enough to test the waters. When they all behaved, I sent the shadows back to the corners of the room.

"The outage may be a harbinger that the goddess is displeased with the bona fides spell," one of the devout beside Ambrose said.

The whispers began again, half the room agreeing with her, the other rolling their eyes.

"And a rougarou is a bad omen." Corinne's voice sliced through the growing tumult, sharp as a razor and directed at me. "Even the wolves can agree on that. If our magic is overtaxed, we can't protect ourselves."

A cold surge of dread trickled through me. But it would be suicide to show even a hint of weakness. And it wouldn't be the first time the familiar had exaggerated a situation. I sat instead, stretching my arms behind my head and frowning. "Overtaxed? Is that how it works for you? Fae magic must have better stamina."

Roark cleared his throat. A warning.

"A bona fides spell of this complexity can be quite draining," Baptiste said before Corinne could respond. "Perhaps you could do better, Lachlan."

"The prince"—the way Roark said it sounded more like *the dick next to me*—"is just trying to understand what happened."

Baptiste raised her brows, looking directly at me. "Is that so?"

I glanced at the others assembled in the room. "What do the rest of you

think?”

If Corinne was right, if the spell couldn't be maintained, Roark and my sister would find themselves in charge of this mess sooner rather than later, and things didn't appear to be working out between the two of them. No wonder he was smoothing things over. The creatures of New Orleans were usually at one another's throats, but things had gotten to another level.

Ambrose sneered at Corinne, his disdain for her etched in every line of his face. “You can't expect a familiar to have faith in true magic. The goddess abandoned them when they whored themselves to vampires.”

But a witch I didn't know from his side of the table spoke up. “A spell I was working on for a client failed. A simple outage wouldn't have caused that.”

He glared down at the betrayal. “Maybe you screwed it up.”

“I didn't.” The witch sounded weary. “I've performed that spell a dozen times.”

Whispers snaked through the room, and I gripped the table's edge, prepared to send another wave of shadows to silence the inevitable argument.

“Every meeting is like this,” Roark whispered beside me, his lips barely moving. It was a gods-damned miracle they'd managed the spell at all.

My hand twitched toward my suit jacket and the holster concealed beneath. One gunshot might solve a lot of problems. If only I could decide whether it should be a warning shot or an object lesson.

Before I could make the call, Étienne stood, slamming his fist on the table. “Enough!” The vampire looked my age, but he had hundreds of years on me. He'd worked with my father, and I got the impression he felt the need to look out for me. “We all pledged our loyalty to the Gage family.”

“We were forced to,” Ambrose said bitterly. “There was no choice when we voted to put that spell into place.”

“No,” Étienne challenged him. “Long before the spell, all our bloodlines came to New Orleans because it promised access to magic when we lost ours. When other creatures suffered, we thrived. Perhaps it is easier for some of us to forget that. They did not command our allegiance. We owed it to them.”

The tense silence continued as he settled into his seat, and I seized the opportunity. “You are all welcome to leave New Orleans if you choose,” I said, letting the undercurrent of threat slip through. “But don't come back.”

Roark glared next to me, backing up the threat. The bona fides spell hinged on everyone's cooperation. But I also knew these were literally creatures of habit, too entrenched in their own lives to abandon their homes to prove a point.

Silence stretched for a moment before Baptiste tapped the table. "It's not only the spell stirring our people's anxieties," she said, shooting me a pointed look. "It's the sudden lack of clover. They feel trapped. Perhaps if there was a way to escape..."

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes. Leave it to Baptiste to stir the pot.

My decision to halt the supply of clover didn't sit well with everyone, but the drug had become far less recreational after Oberon introduced a deadly taint to the supply. Now New Orleans was without its preferred vice for the first time in over a century.

I leaned forward, locking eyes with her. "Stick to the restaurant business, Baptiste," I said, dismissing her ploy with a casual flick of my hand.

"Our opium dens could provide a sanctuary in this time of need. Rumor is that even your people need relief." Her smile was sweet, but I knew from experience that it was a trap. "Or are the rumors true? That *your human* objects to such vices?"

Shadows curled around my fingertips. I hadn't summoned them, but I didn't dismiss them, either. Instead, I scanned the room slowly, marking each soul present.

"I will only say this once. Those of you who value your lives will refrain from even *thinking* about my girlfriend. And as for the other rumors"—I paused, fixing Baptiste with a look that bordered on a threat—"they're just that. *Rumors*."

Her smile widened. This was nothing but a game to her. "We'll see."

Ambrose stood, grabbing his tweed coat from the back of his seat. "We agreed to the spell, but Second Parish doesn't need help, especially from vampires. Keep your poison out of the Garden District or—"

"Is that a threat?" Baptiste asked.

Étienne laid a gloved hand over hers, and Baptiste's mouth clamped shut. Even she wouldn't dare disobey a sitting member of the Vampire Council. He tipped his head to Ambrose. "The boundaries will be respected. Our business will stay in the French Quarter. "

A muscle worked in Ambrose's jaw, but he nodded. He glanced to his companions, fixing the witch who had spoken against him with a glare.

“Let’s get out of here. You can restart your spell.”

She pulled a face behind him as she trailed him out the door, the other covens following suit. Corinne muttered under her breath as she stalked past, probably hexing me. Only Baptiste and Étienne lingered. In many ways, vampires were the creatures most similar to my kind. They’d been maneuvering politics between species for centuries. That made them powerful allies when they chose to be, but while Étienne had sworn allegiance and seemed to respect my authority over the city, he still answered to the council. Baptiste was a bit more complicated.

The vampires approached us. Étienne gestured for Roark to speak privately with him, leaving me to contend with her.

Baptiste sauntered closer, placing one hand on her young companion’s shoulder. “Caleb, darling, go get the car.”

He nodded once, eyes skirting in my direction as he passed as if sizing me up. I bared my teeth at him, and he hurried along.

“I see you got yourself a new pet,” I said to Baptiste as he disappeared toward the lobby.

She batted her eyes at me as she fiddled with her red leather gloves. They matched her lipstick exactly. “This one is breaking in nicely.” She swept a lingering look over my face, frowning slightly. “If only all men were so easily trained.”

Somehow, I suspected that sentiment applied even more strongly to *me*.

“Can I help you with something?” There was no point in pretending that this conversation was anything other than transactional.

“You can change your mind about the opium dens...”

Never missed a trick.

“I’ve got things under control,” I said, leaving no room for misinterpretation.

Baptiste hesitated, something unreadable passing in her golden brown eyes. But she forced a wan smile. “Is it true? Is this girlfriend a human?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you that,” I admitted.

“I’m not going to bite her! I’m just surprised. Humans are so fragile.”

“There’s nothing fragile about Cate.” I laughed at the thought.

Baptiste blinked, smiling slightly. “Perhaps I need to meet her.”

A meeting was probably inevitable. Most of the leaders of the city’s covens would want to meet the woman attached to the rumors swirling about me. But given my history with Baptiste, I suspected it was about

more than curiosity for her. It would be a cold day in hell before I volunteered to introduce the two of them.

"I really didn't believe it when I heard about the Wild Hunt," Baptiste continued. Was that concern in her voice? Impossible. "And then my brother told me you went after the Infernal Court. I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised when you called me for help. How did that work out?"

My eyes narrowed. "I'm sure he reported right back to you."

"Who? Dante?" Baptiste shrugged. "Of course, but I'm hardly keeping track of a human." She winked. Only one of us cared about mere mortals. "I was trying to be polite."

"That would be a first," I said dryly.

"I suppose you aren't the only one allowed to change." She brushed her glove along my arm as she moved toward the door. "If you grow tired of her, I'm feeling a bit cooped up lately. You could stop by the restaurant or the casino."

I shifted out of her reach. "I'm certain Caleb can distract you."

She cocked her head, a dazzling smile breaking over her crimson-stained lips. "I suppose he keeps me busy."

Étienne and Roark broke apart as she exited the room. The vampire paused instead of following after her. "I am genuinely pleased that you are back," he told me, something paternal in his otherwise youthful smile.

"You may be the only one," I said grimly.

"Don't let the others fool you. Many of us remain indebted to your family."

Many but not all.

Étienne bent his head to Roark. "I appreciate your assistance."

"Of course." My penumbra inclined his own. "We'll look into it."

The vampire strode gracefully from the room, taking the last remnants of tension with him.

"What did he want?" I asked Roark when he was gone.

"Our assistance," Roark said through gritted teeth. Or maybe not all the tension. "If you took the signet back from Ciara, you wouldn't have to ask me for details."

"I'll pass." I'd maintained my poker face during the meeting, but I had my own reservations about the strength of the bona fides spell. Ciara needed to be prepared to take the throne. Roark needed to accept that. It meant working on their relationship, whether they liked it or not.

He raked a hand through his hair. Symbols blinked over his knuckles as his eyes narrowed. “A witch is missing from First Parish. Thalia. No one has seen her for two days. She was a friend of Corinne’s—Étienne thinks that’s why she was so worked up at the meeting.”

“She’s always that worked up.” But I frowned at the news. “Do they have reason to be worried?”

Roark chewed on his lip ring for a second. “With the bona fides in place, they know she can’t have left the city, but no one can locate her.”

The last thing we needed was more friction between the covens. “Have our people make a sweep. It’s probably nothing.”

But these days, nothing was ever simple in New Orleans.

“I think it actually went well,” Roark said as we stepped into the lobby.

I snorted, not feeling an ounce of amusement. “Compared to what?”

He held up his hand, ticking off a list on his fingers. “No blood. No bodies.”

“What a standard we’re setting.” I nodded to a group of passing guests. It was strange to see humans back in the Avalon, but we couldn’t keep it locked down forever. Every choice we made was a message to both those outside the city and those inside it.

The Gage family was still in control. We weren’t ruffled. We weren’t afraid. It was the same bloody business we’d always handled.

Roark fell silent as they passed.

Even without the signet ring connecting us, I knew something weighed on his mind. “Out with it.”

“Have you told her?” he asked.

“What?”

He crossed his arms, the fabric of his jacket straining like it was trying to stay in check—and near failing. Roark lowered his voice so no one could hear us over the usual noise of the lobby. “What will happen if you can’t return to the Otherworld? What happens if *she* doesn’t return?”

I knew what he was implying. “That’s a touchy subject at the moment.”

“You can’t stay here forever, Lach, and neither can she,” he added quietly.

I knew that, but knowing it didn’t mean I could change anything. “It’s a moot point until we find a way around the memento mori.” I drew a breath so deep that it burned my lungs. “Besides, I’m not sure she wants any part of our world.”

Roark shook his head. "She wants you, and you belong in the Otherworld." He pointed around the gleaming marble of the hotel. "Not this one."

We stood in silence, neither of us quite knowing what the other was thinking for the first time in our lives.

"Need to blow off some steam?" he asked.

I huffed. "What do you think?"

"Want to shoot something?"

Or maybe he knew exactly what I was thinking. "Oh gods, yes."

Chapter Sixteen

Cate

Ciara's driving had not improved in my absence. I gripped the grab handle, holding on for dear life as she took a hairpin turn like there was a checkered flag waiting on the other side. Naturally, she was oblivious, chattering merrily the entire time, as if crashing was the furthest thing from her mind. Then again, *she* would recover if we did.

Lach was wrong. There was no way that I was a fae. I still feared death. None of them ever seemed to worry about it.

"You know the bona fides spell won't protect us from dying in a car accident, right?" I asked when she reached to adjust the mirror. At least, the spell wouldn't protect *me*.

If *you're human*. I shoved the thought from my mind.

She checked her lipstick, narrowly avoiding a bank of parked cars. "You worry too much."

"I worked in a hospital," I reminded her.

"Since I'm such a bad driver, I guess it's a good thing we're on our way there," she teased, but there was a nervous energy to her behavior that belied her cool attitude: eyes darting to check the mirrors, constantly glancing out the windows. I hadn't seen her this on edge since Bain was in town.

Scrounging up some faith, I released my hold on the handle. I wiggled in my seat to face her, doing my best to ignore the city whizzing past her window at breakneck speeds. "What's going on with you?"

"I'm just making sure that no one is following us," she admitted.

I blinked. "Why would anyone be following us?"

She looked over at me, sighing deeply.

"Eyes on the road!" I barked at her.

She dutifully turned back to it. "Because Roark is always around now."

I don't know what I had expected her to say, but it wasn't that. "Roark?"

You think he's following us?"

"He takes his job as penumbra very seriously." Her pert nose wrinkled like she actually smelled him coming. "He's always around, checking on me, asking if I need anything, reminding me to eat and sleep."

"Sounds like absolute torture," I said dryly. "Maybe he's just worried about you."

"I know he is... *Shit*." She propped her elbows against the steering wheel to yank the signet ring off her finger before dropping it in the Porsche's cupholder. "And he probably heard all of that."

"Lach says that he could tune Roark out when he was wearing it." I frowned. "Please don't tell me he was lying about that."

I liked Roark, but he didn't need a front-row seat to my love life.

Ciara's shrug didn't ease my fears. "So I've been told," she said. "The trouble is that I never *remember* and I'm not even sure if I'm doing it correctly. I mean, could you imagine if someone heard all of your thoughts?"

I could see her point.

"If Lach knew the constant whiplash of emotions I felt toward him, he probably would have left me in Dublin," I admitted.

"I doubt that." Ciara shook her head, sending her inky hair swirling around her shoulders. "But Roark is my brother's best friend. He hardly acknowledged my existence before this, and now he's stuck babysitting me."

I bit my tongue. More than once, I had noticed the Nether Court's penumbra watching over Ciara, especially during her short-lived engagement to Bain. I doubted he saw spending time with her as a chore.

"And Lach acts like he's really abdicated the throne," she continued, "but he never even asked me if I wanted it. Technically, Fiona is older than me. It should be her."

"Maybe he thinks you're the best person for the job."

She snorted, drumming the steering wheel with her manicured fingernails. "Fiona would be so much better than me. Hell, *Shaw* would be better than me."

"Why would you think that?" It wasn't that I thought less of her siblings, but Ciara had always seemed so self-assured. Maybe the sudden responsibility had unmoored her. I knew a thing or two about surprises; they screwed with your head. "You're more than capable of taking charge of the

court. It's thanks to you that your brother was able to return to New Orleans."

"The witches did that."

"And who got them to work together?" I pointed out.

"You might be impressed now, but wait until you see how dysfunctional they are. I'm just hoping they keep cooperating."

I didn't like the sound of that. "If they're anything like the witches who helped me at the Hallow Court, they will, and you've got the rest of us now."

She smiled over at me—the first genuine one since we'd gotten into the car. "So, are you glad to be back?"

That was a loaded question.

"I am." Despite everything, I meant it.

"I bet you are," she said with a laugh. "I can't imagine being trapped with Oberon. He's so uptight. And so weird around other creatures, like he finds them completely disgusting. I bet he's a total germaphobe."

That was potentially the nicest thing anyone could say about Oberon. "His place was unusually spotless."

I tried not to think about that locked room in the bowels of his court, tried not to think about those eerily silent halls, tried not to wonder how long it would be before he came after us.

Because I had no doubt that he would. He wanted my ring enough to kidnap me. Enough to marry me. Enough to start a war. And the damn thing was attached to me like a parasite.

"You got quiet," Ciara said. An invitation to talk.

But I didn't know what to say, especially with Lach's warning ringing in my ears. "I'm just tired."

"I bet you are." She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. "Because you're banging my brother!"

She pounded the steering wheel, hitting the horn. Pedestrians scattered as it blared, a few flipping her off. But she didn't seem to notice.

"You have an unhealthy obsession with our sex life." I should have known the fae weren't uptight when they hosted an orgy as part of a wedding celebration.

"I'm just glad to see him happy," she confessed. "He deserves it, even though I'm pretty sure he doesn't think that's true. And when Oberon took you... I've never seen him like that. Nothing was going to keep him from

you, even the Wild Hunt.”

The words twisted my heart because I knew they were true.

“He could’ve gotten himself killed.” With everything hanging over our heads, I kept returning to that. Not just that he had chosen *not* to go into hiding, but that I was the one who should be on the run. MacAlister’s blood was as much on my hands as it was on his. And now with things between us even more complicated, I wasn’t certain we had enough time to figure everything out.

I was no closer to untangling my feelings when she pulled into the hospital’s parking lot a few minutes later.

“It’s pretty romantic,” Ciara said after the long silence, “if you think about it.”

“What?” I asked, distracted by the fact that she was parked in the chief of medicine’s spot. Garcia wouldn’t like that.

She unfastened her seat belt but didn’t get out of the car. “That man would die for you and smile with his last breath.”

Barb made us sign in at the front desk, lecturing me for taking so long to visit my brother. By the time she buzzed us through the security door, her words had hit their mark, and oily guilt welled inside me.

“Fair warning, Haley chewed out Lach, too,” Ciara whispered as she stuck her visitor’s badge to her leather jacket.

Channing must have been in bad shape if she’d had the nerve to do that.

Ciara grabbed my hand and squeezed. “It’s not your fault. You would have been here if...”

The familiar scent of bleach stung my nostrils as soon as we were through the doors. But no nostalgic longing hit me. A month ago, I’d been begging to keep my job. Now? Everything looked the same. I could walk over and pick up a chart from the nurse’s station. Grab syringes and specimen collection kits from the supply closet. Rush to the crash cart if someone coded. But I didn’t recognize the nurses chatting at the counter. I was wearing a visitor’s badge. This wasn’t my world anymore. I didn’t know how to feel about that, especially in light of everything Lach had told me since my return.

A nurse stepped into the hall as we passed, rubbing her temples, before doggedly continuing to the next room. If my brother had never been shot, if I had never gone looking for the Avalon hotel, if I had never made that bargain, it would be me pulling a double shift, circles lining my eyes as I

pounded coffee to keep myself alert.

“Do you miss it?” Ciara asked as we made our way down the hall.

“Not exactly.” I tried to sort through my thoughts. “I don’t miss the hours and the stress and the shitty pay. But I miss the adrenaline rush.”

She rolled her eyes. “I guess it’s a good thing our family is so *boring*.”

That was a fair point. I didn’t know how to feel because I didn’t have time to miss it. But the life-and-death stakes of the hospital felt slightly different than being in love with a man marked for death. I could walk away from my job—in a way, I had.

I couldn’t walk away from Lach.

My pulse sped up instinctively as we reached the private half of the trauma center—the conditioned response to rarely being allowed back here before. It ratcheted to eleven when the chief of medicine strode straight for us.

“Ciara!” Dr. Garcia greeted her so warmly that my mouth fell open.

I had no idea he could smile. It was like stumbling upon an unknown wonder of the world.

When had they gotten so chummy? Garcia turned and stared at me for a few seconds, all traces of friendliness vanishing.

“Hello,” I said when he didn’t speak.

“Cate.” He nodded once. That was more like what I expected. “We don’t see you around here very often.”

Ciara wrapped an arm around my shoulders and squeezed. “Lachlan can’t bear to be without her for very long.” She batted her lashes at him. “You know how it is with soulmates.”

I sputtered in surprise, nearly choking on my own spit. Ciara frowned and whacked my back. Garcia looked equally perplexed. His bushy brows drew together before a new smile appeared. This one didn’t quite reach his eyes. “We’ve been taking good care of your brother. The vampire blood helped, of course.”

Hearing those words out of Garcia’s mouth was nearly as shocking as seeing him smile. “*Vampire?*”

“They didn’t tell you? The damage was quite extensive, and frankly, I’m not sure he would have made it without it,” he said, lowering his voice conspiratorially to add, “not that I particularly like having a vampire hanging around my hospital.”

If he winked at me, I might have an actual heart attack. Garcia knew.

Which meant he knew about Lach. Which meant... Where was that crash cart?

Ciara eyed me nervously like she expected I might faint. Judging from how my head was swimming, she might not be wrong. She gripped my elbow, her fae strength keeping me upright. "We better get in there and see him while he's awake."

"I'm off to check the inventory." Garcia tipped his head to me. "Let me know if you need anything."

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I nodded.

"You didn't realize that he knew," Ciara guessed as she steered us toward Channing's room.

"I think my whole life is a lie," I said numbly.

Ciara laughed, not realizing that I was serious.

Everything was a lie.

My ring. My job. My world.

"Garcia doesn't seem very happy about the vampire Baptiste sent," she continued. "I bet he's off to count the blood bags."

We found a man blocking the door to Channing's room when we reached it. Tall and wiry like my brother, he filled the entire frame. Something about him held me back, but Ciara popped onto her tiptoes to tap his shoulder. He glanced down, smiling when he saw her. "Oops. Sorry."

"Cate's here to see her brother. Dante, this is Cate," Ciara said, motioning to me. "Dante healed your brother."

He turned, and I found myself staring at his high, elegant cheekbones, the sensual curve of his mouth. His eyes were so black that I couldn't make out even a sliver of iris. "It's nice to meet you."

He was perfectly polite and gorgeous, but my wariness remained, deepening as he reached into his jeans and pulled out a pair of leather gloves. I resisted the urge to back away. For once, my survival instinct had kicked in when it was supposed to, but I held out a hand to the vampire.

He tugged the gloves on, fastening them neatly at each wrist, before he shook it. "I just came by to shoot the shit with Shaw and Channing."

"You're welcome to stay," I told him.

"No, I should get going." He waved into the room behind him. "I'll catch you later. We're going to hang when you get out of here, right?"

My heart leaped when I heard Channing's grunted response. "Sure, bro."

Dante said goodbye to us, and I tried not to stare as I processed watching

a vampire leave my brother's hospital room.

"I should be used to this by now," I muttered.

"Vampires have that effect on you," Ciara said dreamily.

But I shook my head. "No, I mean this." I pointed to the hospital surrounding us. "Channing getting hurt, getting in trouble. I tried to keep him out of this world."

And somehow, he'd wound up shot. Again. Maybe it was a good thing he knew a vampire—I clearly didn't know how to keep him alive.

"You can't choose someone else's path. You can only choose if you're willing to walk alongside them." She searched my face. "Are you?"

I wasn't giving up on my brother, no matter what trouble he found himself in, but that didn't mean I was okay with what he'd done. "Is it wrong that I'm still mad at him for going to Oberon?"

"If it makes you feel any better, Lach already let him have it," Ciara whispered.

It didn't, but I smiled anyway. Maybe I finally had someone on my team.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped into the room.

Shaw shot up from the chair in the corner before I could turn toward the hospital bed. "Cate!" He rushed toward me, enveloping me in a hug. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you alive."

"I won't be for long," I croaked, "because you're crushing me to death." I tallied my lack of superhuman strength—or, for that matter, my weakness to theirs—in the human category.

The youngest Gage released me, taking a sheepish step backward. "Oops. I still can't believe that Oberon and Titania..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I must have pretty bad taste in women, huh?"

That was putting it mildly, but I forced a grim smile. "I thought Oberon was my friend, too."

He looked grateful for the out. "I'm sorry I didn't come by the Avalon earlier."

"Cause he's stuck babysitting me," Channing called.

"Stuck, huh? You're the one who won't get out of that hospital bed," Shaw said.

"Because I was paralyzed just a few days ago," Channing argued, his tone souring.

I stumbled a step when I saw him, heat prickling my eyes as I swallowed this news. "Paralyzed?"

No one had mentioned this.

“I’m not now.” But the swift response did nothing to stop my tears from falling.

“Why don’t we give you a second?” Ciara hooked an arm around Shaw and dragged him out of the room.

Channing turned a pair of round, innocent eyes on me. “Hey, sis.”

“Why does that sound familiar?” I didn’t budge from the foot of the bed, unsure what to say to him. Anger and relief and disappointment and frustration swirled inside me, each emotion vying for their turn.

“I’m sorry,” he said after a moment. “I thought I was protecting you.”

And somehow that was all that mattered.

Because that’s what we did—that’s what we had always done. We looked out for each other. We tried our best, and when we didn’t, we owned it.

I was still angry, still hurt by his actions, but the truth was, I wouldn’t have done anything differently than he had. “I’m sorry, too.”

“What for?” He scratched his eyebrow like it might jog his memory. “I’m the one who sold you out to that psychopath.”

“I kept you in the dark. I didn’t leave you any other options.” And I had made a bargain to save his life. How could I blame him for doing the same thing?

But Channing shook his head. “There are always other options.”

It was possibly the wisest thing he had ever said. Clearly, he had been spending a lot of time with Shaw.

We both fell silent. It wasn’t the comfortable silence of friends or family, the kind that came without expectation. It was the lingering, awkward silence of two people who cared deeply about one another but had forgotten how to talk to each other.

Channing was the one to finally speak. “Nothing’s ever going to be the same between us again, is it?”

Fresh tears hit my cheeks, and I wiped them away quickly. “No, probably not.”

He dropped his head, and his hair—always too long—fell to cover his face.

“But that’s not a bad thing,” I continued. “People change. They grow.”

In the end, the root of all love was choosing whether to grow together or whether to grow apart.

He lifted his head. “Are you with him?”

I didn't have to ask who he meant.

I nodded. "Yes."

Maybe I didn't know what that looked like. Maybe I had a lot to sort through. But Lach was a part of my life now.

"By choice?" he asked quietly.

Choice? The question triggered the memory of today's conversation with Lach. I could reject him. He'd told me so himself. I could refuse to accept that he was my mate, and he would respect it.

Lach had given me the keys to my prison, which meant the mating bond wasn't really a prison at all.

But there was still so much we didn't know about each other.

Channing cleared his throat after a few moments of silence. "Now you're worrying me."

My smile was tight but genuine. "I'm just trying to figure out how to tell my brother that I'm involved with the Gage family."

"Dammit, Cate. We swore to each other," he said lightly, the words conjuring a similar conversation we'd had in a room just like this one not so long ago.

"At least you're not cuffed to the bed this time."

Channing picked at the tape covering his IV. "I'm pretty sure your boyfriend would prefer that I was."

"I'll talk to him," I promised, and I would. About Channing. About life. About the future. About everything. "In the meantime, can you do me a favor?"

"Anything." He winced as he tried to sit up. "As long as I don't have to give up my pain meds yet."

I guess vampire blood only got you so far.

"Stay out of trouble." I leaned over and ruffled his hair.

"I always try."

Far from reassuring. But he would live, I reminded myself as I said goodbye, heading into the hall to find Ciara.

Channing would walk. He would get another chance, and yeah, he would probably fuck up again. The real question was: What place should he have in my life? My complicated, dangerous life. I'd nearly lost him twice to this world. The trouble was that I didn't know how to let him go. He was no longer all that I had, and maybe it was selfish of me, but despite that, I still wanted him around.

Ciara was perched on the counter of the nurse's station, studying a worn copy of *Vogue*. She tossed it back in a stack as I approached and hopped down. "You look really serious."

"I think you're supposed to look serious when your brother has been shot."

But she rolled her eyes. "My brothers get shot all the time."

Okay, maybe I didn't need to hear that. "That is not reassuring."

"Sorry." But her smile was anything but apologetic. It was a fact of life for her.

I guess that made it a fact of life for me, too. Not that it wouldn't take some getting used to.

Once we'd gotten into the car, I barely noticed her driving as she headed across town toward the Avalon.

My decision was made before we were out of the French Quarter. I was part of both worlds, like it or not, and I was never going to survive—we were never going to survive—if our whole lives were built on secrets. I needed to seek answers about my ring, about my parents, about everything, even if it meant finding something I didn't like. Romy had given me a name: I would start there. But that would take time, and seeing Channing in the hospital had reminded me how instantly life could change. I'd kept the truth about my bargain with Lach from him, and it had nearly cost my brother his life. I wouldn't make that mistake again.

"I think Channing should move into my place," I mused as she turned on Iberville. "We can keep an eye on him there."

"About that..." Ciara hesitated for long enough that I knew more bad news was coming. "When Channing was shot, it became a crime scene... and the landlord might have had you evicted."

"Evicted?" I shot forward so fast that my seat belt locked, practically strangling me. "How could he even do that?"

"It's not a big deal."

But it was a very big deal to me. One more chapter in my old life had ended, the book closing without me even realizing it.

"Lach wouldn't have let you go back there," she said when I remained quiet. "We got all your stuff. It's boxed up in your old room at the Avalon."

I tried to force a smile but couldn't get my lips to obey.

"And don't worry about Channing. He's family. We'll get him on his feet and keep him out of trouble," she promised.

Because that's what families did.

And my family no longer consisted of just Channing. Ciara was my family, and Shaw and Roark. Even Fiona—whether she liked it or not. I was one of them. That's what Lach had wanted me to see, but I saw what he didn't.

We needed to keep our families close, not push them away. "I have to tell you something."

The car slowed, Ciara glancing nervously at me. "The tone of your voice tells me that maybe I shouldn't be driving."

"Maybe not." Emotions bottled inside my throat. Maybe my ring belonged to a fallen court. Maybe it didn't. It was easy to keep a secret that didn't feel like mine. No, it was the other secret that weighed me down. If I didn't have some help carrying it, I wasn't certain that I could.

Ciara swerved the car into a spot on the street, half her tires on the curb, and spun toward me. "Out with it."

"Something happened." Was I really going to tell her? Because admitting it might be the first step in accepting it, and that was a whole different problem. "And I don't really know how to feel about it."

"Is everything okay?" She clasped my hand. "You can tell me anything."

Somehow, I knew that. Somehow, I'd always known that. Because Ciara had been like a sister since the day we met. So it made sense that she was the one I would share this with.

And maybe I needed her to inject a little joy into this situation, because I was still a little numb. "I don't want Lach to know that I told you."

She nodded her head solemnly, crossing her heart with her free hand.

I considered covering my ears, but in the end, I just braced myself for the imminent squeal.

"Your brother and I are mates."

Chapter Seventeen

Lach

The bayou was out of the question. Though part of me wanted to test the waters with Goemon after our encounter in New York, there was no way that Roark was letting me step foot outside New Orleans. So, instead of enjoying the calm of unloading a clip in the swamp, I found myself stuck in a sterile private range that boasted about as much charm as a hospital waiting room.

By the time we left the Avalon, stopping for our guns and to alert our people to search for the missing witch, I was on edge.

“Look at the bright side. Now you have a membership.” Roark laid his steel case onto the gun rest and unfastened it.

“How is that a bright side?” I grumbled as he passed me a box of ammo.

“It’s not like you’re leaving the city limits anytime soon.” Shaw lounged against the partition, fiddling with his earmuffs.

“Thanks for the reminder.” I slid a cartridge into my 9-millimeter’s magazine. I was not going to shoot my brother today.

He had shown up after Cate arrived at the hospital, claiming Ciara told him he needed to give Channing space to speak with his sister and to go bug me. Maybe I did need to take back the signet from Ciara if she was going to use its connection to Roark to punish me with attempting bonding. Something we had never been very good at.

“Tell me who I should worry about with the covens,” I ordered Roark as I finished loading. I had an idea after the meeting, but knowing who had volunteered and who had been forced to help the family told me who to watch out for.

Roark hesitated, his eyes flicking to my brother.

“I get it,” Shaw muttered, finally tossing the earmuffs to the side. Like our guns, his had a built-in silencer—an absolute necessity, given our advanced hearing. He stalked into his own booth.

No matter how hard I tried to keep him out of this life, he wormed his way back in. I'd hoped when he left school, he'd choose a different path.

Roark waited until Shaw started his first round. "It's pretty clear where everyone stands."

"The witches didn't seem happy." I knocked off a shot, sending it through the center of the target. The gun's vibration in my palm felt like the promise of action in the midst of all this upheaval.

"Second Parish is torn over the bona fides. Half wanted to help you."

"And the other half want to see me rot in hell." Nothing new there. The coven had been here when my parents arrived to set up court, offering them a way around the curse that had stifled their magic. Not everyone who followed the goddess had agreed with bowing to the fae then. Not much had changed since, but now that their magic was back, the bargains we made with the coven were fewer and further between. "You would think they'd be happy to have me in their debt."

"Pretty sure that's what swayed them," he admitted.

"And First Parish?"

"The idea came from a familiar, but you know how it is in First Parish. The vampires were all in our favor."

But while powerful, they only made up a small portion of New Orleans's oldest coven.

First Parish had been a melting pot since the city's earliest days, welcoming ancestral magic, voodoo, and the darker magics as well as vampires, fae, and other species into the Quartier Enchanté, the hidden, magical heart of the French Quarter. Many of the witches who lived there had aligned with vampires for protection even though they had to come to us for magic.

"Why do I feel like I'm going to pay for that support?"

Roark snorted. "Oh, you are definitely going to pay for it. Baptiste has already made it clear that if her businesses suffer, she will cut off your balls."

That sounded like my ex.

"And don't think she doesn't know you went to her brother for help with the Infernal Court," he added.

The last thing I needed was to owe her on three counts. "What does she want?"

"To be sure that her supply chain doesn't dry up while the spell is in

effect and that the tourists keep coming.”

“See to it.” That sounded too easy.

“I think the vampires consider it a business opportunity. Baptiste isn’t the only one who brought up opium to replace clover,” he warned me.

The shit was allowed in their private dens because it didn’t affect our own business. They saw this as a chance to move in on our territory. That was a slippery slope. “Over my dead body.”

Roark lifted a brow. Poor choice of words. I aimed at the target, frowned, and sent it back another fifty yards.

“Third Parish did what they could. You know how it is.”

I nodded, sending a few more shots sailing through the target. Calling the creatures that made up Third Parish a coven was...charitable. The Marigny neighborhood had always welcomed misfits and loners of every species. Apart from the werewolf pack, the creatures that lived there kept to themselves, and they never agreed on anything. Their golden rule was live and let live—but kill anyone that’s a threat. It was a miracle any of them had committed to helping.

“Everyone is on edge because of the situation,” Roark said. “Things have changed since the curse lifted. They might help us now, but...”

“Their magic can’t touch ours.” Even with our access to the Otherworld choked, the city was built on fae magic thanks to my parents. I knocked off five shots in a row until there was a gaping hole in the head of the target.

He nodded after a moment. “We know what we’re made of.”

“They think the mark has made me soft.” I pulled out my empty magazine and started to reload it.

“It’s not the mark that everyone is talking about,” Shaw called from the other side of the booth.

Of course he was listening. I paused to reload.

Roark cast a sidelong glance at me. “What have you heard?”

Shaw had always hung with a diverse crowd. He had been the only one of us to attend the academy—a sign of goodwill on the part of our parents. Most of us had spent our time in the human world under the care of private nurses as we settled into our primes before returning to live the rest of our years in the Otherworld, where our aging stopped. But the world was changing by the time Shaw was old enough to go. He had been in the same grade as Sirius, and I’d met a few of his friends throughout the years. Vampires. Witches. A few direct descendants of the Olympians, although

they rarely came this far south. If anyone knew what the other creatures of New Orleans were saying about our family, it was him.

Shaw stepped into the space behind us and shrugged. "They're talking about Cate."

I stilled, bullet in hand.

"What are they saying?" I asked through gritted teeth.

Roark tensed, his shoulders squaring, and I knew he was deciding if he needed to step between us.

"Rumor went around that she's the reason you got marked by the Hunt. People are curious, asking who she is, trying to find out where she came from, taking bets on whether or not wedding bells will ring." He grinned at that. Shaw liked Cate. "Incidentally, if you want to give me an inside scoop on that one, there are some pretty good odds right now."

"They've only known each other a month," Roark said roughly, giving no indication that he knew the truth. He was the only one, other than Cate herself, who knew with certainty that we were mates.

"Mostly, they're surprised that she's human."

I finished loading my magazine and slid it in. Turning, I emptied it into the target, but the edge of frustration haunting me didn't diminish. I didn't need a reminder of that debate.

"Everything okay?" Shaw asked. I glared daggers at him, and he held up his free hand. "I'm asking as a brother. I swear to the gods, I'm not going to place a bet on your love life."

"Tread carefully," Roark advised him in a low voice.

"Everything is fine," I said in a clipped tone. "She's going through a lot. I thought she'd be happier to be back."

A half truth, but I couldn't tell him the rest. Not while Cate was still considering whether to reject the mating bond. The last thing I needed was my little brother feeling sorry for me.

But he stared at me. "She isn't? I mean, she seemed a little emotional about Channing."

"She was abducted," Roark reminded us, "and she's barely had a minute to catch her breath."

Except I thought she loved me. She said she did, but I couldn't shake the feeling that the revelations about our mating bond had changed that. Or at least made her question things between us enough that she hadn't believed what I told her. I wasn't sure where that left us.

Shaw shrugged, placing his weapon on my booth's gun rest. "Look at it from her perspective. I'm sure she's happy to be back, but it's just one crisis after another." He hitched a thumb at the door. "Out there, there's always business to deal with, and you haven't been in a relationship in a long time."

"And you have?" Roark laughed.

"Probably more than you have, old man," he shot back. "All I'm saying is that maybe you need to romance her a little."

Roark and I shared a look.

"Romance?"

"You do know what romance is?"

I frowned as I finished reloading. "I have been around a little bit longer than you."

"That doesn't instill confidence," he said. "You made that bargain with her, locked her up, forced her to go to all this weird fae shit, and, by some miracle, she seems to have fallen in love with you."

"Yes, it is a mystery," I said in a dry voice.

"Exactly," he said, missing my sarcasm. "You two have never even been on a date."

I glared at him. "We've been on a date."

"Sex doesn't count."

"We have been on dates," I insisted.

"You dragged her to the midnight feast and a handfasting and what else?"

I frowned as I tried to remember. "I took her to the bayou."

Roark covered a smile with his hand.

"The bayou? Everyone's dream date," Shaw said, rolling his eyes. "Where's the romance? You need to sweep her off her feet. Take her to Baptiste's place. Buy her some flowers."

"If Lach steps foot in Baptiste's restaurant with a date, she'll poison him," Roark said.

"Then find somewhere else," he said. "You broke the bargain, right?"

"I did," I said, studying him. "How do you know that?"

"All I've talked about for a week is Cate's brother, the Wild Hunt, and this bona fides spell. You think I didn't hear about the bargain?"

I shot an accusing look at Roark. "They were going to find out," he said with a shrug.

"My point is that you have nothing keeping her here," Shaw said,

reaching for his gun. He swiveled back to face the target and took aim. I hated that he had a point. Before, Cate had been bound by the bargain to return to me every night—whether she liked it or not. Now? “You better find a way to make her stay.”

For once, I agreed with my brother.

I was still considering Shaw’s advice as we left the shooting range an hour later, somehow feeling heavier than when I walked inside. I scowled as the afternoon sun assaulted us. Even the weather was in a better mood than I was. The shit with Cate was eating me alive.

“What if I bought her a car?” I asked the two of them. I’d never replaced the Volvo after its urban campfire.

“A car?”

“A *really* expensive car.”

Shaw shook his head as he drew a pair of sunglasses out of his suit pocket. “That’s not romance. That’s a bribe.”

“She needs one. It’s not a bribe.”

“Romance is about intimacy, learning about someone by peeling back layers, sharing things.”

I stared at him for a minute before shaking my head. “I’m sorry, but where are you getting this shit?”

He’d never even brought a date home.

“I know things,” he said defensively.

“I hate to say it, but he’s right,” Roark added.

Traitor.

“Fine. No car,” I conceded.

“Take her on a date.” Shaw repeated his earlier advice.

I sighed. I’d spent the better part of the last century ghosting between the Nether Court and the Avalon, rarely venturing into New Orleans to maintain my reputation. Now, when things were at their most precarious, I had no choice but to turn to the city—and I didn’t know where to start. “Where?”

“Maybe...” Shaw’s suggestion trailed away as the light faded overhead. Not a simple cloud passing—the street darkened like twilight had fallen unexpectedly.

We all looked up as an eclipse gradually erased all trace of the sun from the sky so thoroughly that twilight faded to midnight. The sight pricked at my memory.

“Didn’t Ciara say something about a spontaneous eclipse?” I asked.

“Yep,” Roark said grimly. “There was one during the outage.”

Shaw whistled. “This can’t be good.”

No, it definitely was not.

Shaw strode toward his car, not bothering to take off the sunglasses. He opened the door to the Mercedes before turning back in our direction. “Let me know if you need help with Cate. I’d hate to see you lose her.”

I flipped him off as he slid behind the wheel.

The sun reappeared just as Roark’s phone rang. We shared a strained look. “You’d think I was a one-man customer service department.” His scowl deepened when he saw the screen, but he took the call. “Yes?”

I didn’t bother trying to listen. If there had been another outage, I’d rather enjoy a few more moments of ignorant bliss. But Roark’s face was grim when he hung up the call.

“One of our guys found the witch.”

Something in his voice told me the detail he was leaving out.

Dead.

I scrubbed at my jaw, my headache rapidly returning. “And?”

“They called us first. We better get over there. It’s...”

Enough said.

The sun slipped below the horizon in a sliver of crimson as we made our way a few blocks north to the outskirts of the French Quarter. Neither of us spoke much in the car. We’d grown accustomed to each other’s moods over the years, but this felt different somehow. I understood now why my father had released his penumbra, why Mother and Aunt Stacia had slowly grown apart. I’d never kept secrets from Roark. I had never had anything worth keeping from him. Even now, he knew more about my and Cate’s situation than anyone else, but I didn’t miss the signet ring apart from the convenience of being able to reach out to him anytime, anywhere. Roark had respected my privacy when Cate and I had finally crossed the line into being something more. But now that we were mates, she was the one I wanted in my head.

Roark drove in stony silence, ink shifting and swirling on his forearms. I wasn’t the only one with things on my mind.

He was probably thinking about the dead body waiting for us, more in control of his thoughts and emotions than I was after my disastrous conversation with Cate and the follow-up punishment of the coven meeting.

The parking garage was perched on the corner of Treme and Iberville,

just far enough from the hustle of the city's busier tourist areas to be quiet this time of day. Roark stopped the car on the street and gave me a grim smile.

"Welcome home."

I hadn't ventured much outside of Waverly, our pocket of New Orleans, in recent years, choosing to spend my time between the Avalon and the court. The business that drew me to other parts of the city was always bloody. This evening was no exception.

"Next time, get me balloons," I said as I reached for the door handle. "Maybe a nice fruit basket."

Roark didn't laugh.

A dead witch was the last thing we needed with coven relationships strained, and we both knew it.

Plenty of blood had been spilled in New Orleans, but the price for it was higher when magic ran in the victim's veins—and I would likely be paying it.

The humidity of an approaching storm hung in the air, along with the faint tang of copper. My nostrils flared as I picked up the scent of blood. The sidewalk's broken asphalt crunched beneath my feet as we approached the man who had made the call.

There was a hint of menace to his human glamour, his shoulders just a little bulkier than average, his eyes slightly feral, but the rest of his features remained cool and detached.

"Garren," Roark greeted him.

"Sir." He straightened into more rigid attention, his eyes darting toward me.

"You're the one who found the body?" I asked.

He nodded. "One of the men thought he saw something strange moving in the garage, and then we smelled..." His face paled at whatever his memory recalled. "Boyd is guarding it. I mean, her."

"First time?"

Garren swallowed. "Not exactly. It's just..."

It was different when you saw someone killed in a shootout or hand to hand, the adrenaline cutting through any shame or guilt you might feel. A murder was a different beast.

"Show us," I said before Garren's nerves got the better of him.

The garage was empty save for a few scattered cars. The fluorescent

lights flickered in and out, casting ominous shadows on the graffiti-covered walls.

“Up a floor,” Garren said, leading us toward an out-of-service elevator.

Unless the killer had fae magic, they would have taken the stairs. We didn’t speak as we continued to them, cataloging everything around us for any clue as to what happened or who was responsible. The stale scent of urine hung in the stairwell, chasing us to the next level, but there were no signs of foul play, no signs that the witch had fought back.

“How was she killed?”

“Execution,” Garren said tightly. “It doesn’t look like she’s been dead for long. We were assigned to sweep the area. Boyd smelled the blood.”

It was hard to miss.

I glanced at Roark, trying to remember what he’d told me at the Avalon. “Did Étienne say how long Thalia was missing?”

“A couple of days.” He shrugged. “We need to tell them.”

Getting ahead of this was our only option, but I didn’t relish delivering the news. “I’ll inform Étienne.”

He would know how to handle the situation, but I wanted to understand what we were dealing with first. Something told me that if I went directly to the familiars, Corinne would hex me before I had a chance to explain.

Our footsteps echoed off the cement walls, the second floor entirely empty except for the fae standing guard next to a concrete pillar.

Boyd unclasped his hands as we approached. “We found her purse. It’s definitely Thalia.”

I glanced at Roark, tilting my head ever so slightly.

“Go double-check the perimeter,” he ordered the two guards, “and then get yourselves a drink, but stay close.”

They looked relieved to go. I stepped around the pillar and understood why.

Thalia was slumped face down on the filthy pavement, her blond hair floating in a pool of blood, and a single bullet wound punched through the back of her skull. Her wrists and ankles were bound with zip ties. Cruel. Barbaric. But to the point.

“Execution, all right.” Roark crouched next to her and dipped a finger in the pooling blood. “Still warm.”

She hadn’t been dead for long.

“Who does this to a witch?” He shook his head.

After the coven meeting, I had a few ideas. The trouble was, creatures usually had more creative ways of killing each other. Ones that relied on poisons and potions and were easier to cover up. There was a theatricality to this that chilled my blood.

Roark leaned closer, lifting a bloody strand of hair off her neck to reveal a symbol carved into the nape. The cuts were etched with brutal precision: a winged skull.

“Fuck,” he muttered, eyes lifting to mine. “Think that’s a coincidence?”

I did not. “It’s a message.”

One meant for me.

“Thalia suggested the bona fides.” He stood, wiping his bloody fingers on his pants. “It looks like someone made her pay for that.”

Because of me.

“Someone killed her after you sent out the search order.” I lowered my voice as if not to disturb the dead.

His eyebrow arched. “What are you saying?”

“I think we have a rat,” I said grimly. “Someone told the Hunt I was in New York and where to find me.”

“The mark,” he suggested.

But I shook my head, staring down at its grim twin carved into Thalia’s neck. “They couldn’t track me that quickly. They found me as soon as I stepped foot outside of Romy’s wards. Someone told them where to look. It’s not just that. How did MacAlister get into our court? His invitation was rescinded. Someone had to have let him in there the night he attacked Cate.”

Roark scrubbed the back of his neck. “If they’re behind this, they aren’t exactly being subtle.”

“I think that’s the point.” My mouth twisted. “Why settle for making us pay when they can make us suffer first?”

“What do you want to do about this?”

“Call Gage Memorial to send some paramedics and have Garcia do an autopsy.”

“Shouldn’t we tell First Parish? They aren’t going to be happy.”

“They’re not going to be happy either way,” I reminded him, “and I want to make sure we haven’t missed anything. I don’t want a whisper of this hitting the streets before we know. Can I trust your guys to keep this quiet?”

He tipped his head. “Let’s hope so.”

“Make sure.” I’d learned a long time ago that you had to watch your step when there was a snake in the grass.

Chapter Eighteen

Cate

Telling Ciara had left me with even more questions. Mostly the ones she had asked, things I hadn't even considered. I stewed over them while I waited for Lach to return to his quarters at the Avalon. He'd sent his sister a single three-word message following this afternoon's eclipse.

Dealing with shit.

She'd seemed relieved that said shit had fallen to him instead of her. I hadn't dared ask her what he was dealing with exactly. I didn't have the bandwidth to worry about anything else.

I'd given up waiting when the clock ticked over to a new day. He was avoiding me. I couldn't blame him. I couldn't even decide whether to drag myself to his bed or mine. After the point he'd made about putting my clothing into his closet, the expectation was clear, but the longer he stayed away, the more defiant I felt. Until, at last, I trudged to my room at the end of the hall and got ready for bed.

But the bed felt empty as I slipped under the blankets, cold despite the warm fire glowing in the hearth. The last time I'd slept in it, he had been next to me. And this morning I had woken up in his bed. I lay awake, watching the firelight cast dancing shadows on the ceiling. The longer that sleep eluded me, the more annoyed I grew. One fight and he was going to hide? Not exactly proof of a mating bond.

I was screwing up the courage to stomp down the hall to see if he had snuck in, so I could tell him exactly that, when my door cracked open. I rolled to my side, facing the opposite direction, as he stepped into the room. But he didn't move toward the bed.

"I'll leave." An offer. No, a *reminder* that he would always respect my choice.

I considered for long enough that he reached for the door. "Stay."

A knot coiled in my stomach as his clothing rustled, and my hands fisted

the sheets as the mattress dipped and he slid in next to me. But he didn't reach for me.

"I'm sorry it's so late. There was a murder," he murmured, and I blinked in surprise.

"Murder?" It wasn't what I'd expected when he'd told us that he was taking care of something. "Why not leave it to the police?"

"It was a witch," he said in a tight voice. "Execution style. I needed to contain the scene before the news leaked."

Because the city was split in two—humans on one side and magic on the other—and Lach shouldered the burden of both halves.

"Could Oberon have something..." I trailed away, embarrassed by my paranoia. The Hallow Court prince couldn't step foot inside the city, but I couldn't shake the fear that he would find a way.

"It's doubtful," he said after a moment.

"But not impossible," I pointed out. I nearly turned toward him but stopped myself.

"I don't think he has anything to do with this," Lach said. Because Lach had plenty of enemies within New Orleans—bona fides spell or no. "This felt more...personal."

I didn't ask why. I wasn't certain I wanted to know the answer.

"Do I dare ask how the meeting with the covens went earlier today?"

Surely, better than finding a dead witch.

"About how I expected," he said, his voice fading as he remembered. "They fought over the bona fides spell."

Anxiety fisted my heart. "They aren't going to undo it?"

"No, but they're going to make me pay for it," he said grimly. "The magical outage scared them. It was unexpected. Most of them are drawing off new and more powerful magic than they're accustomed to using."

"That sounds like a good problem."

"Not for us." He shifted closer in the bed but still didn't touch me. "They were dependent on us for access to magic before. Now their loyalty..."

...was in question.

I couldn't accept that. "But they took the oath."

"An oath is only words, even when it's magically binding. True allegiance can only be given. Not demanded. Look at MacAlister. If Oberon has someone in the city..."

He fell silent, and it hit me. He was...sharing. Not an excuse to explain

his absence. He hadn't apologized for not being here when he was needed elsewhere, and he didn't have to. He was just telling me about his day.

Any lingering anger I felt ebbed away as I saw it for what it was: an attempt at normalcy in the midst of absolute freaking absurdity.

It would take some time to get used to the man I loved telling me about witches and spells and magical politics, but he was telling me.

Rawness crept up my throat, and I swallowed. There was only one way this was going to work: if we started sharing instead of shutting each other out. "I told Ciara about the mating bond. I wanted to talk about it with someone."

He was quiet long enough that I questioned my confession.

"Is she planning our wedding yet?" he asked after a minute. There was no trace of anger in his voice, no resignation. Just a touch of bemusement.

"I'm sure I'll be trying on dresses soon enough." The knot inside me loosened a little, and I found myself wanting to share more. "Tomorrow I'm going to find the witch Romy mentioned this morning. Her sister. I want to see if she can help me with my ring... I won't tell her more than necessary."

Lach drew a deep breath, and a moment later, his hand settled on my hip. I nudged a little closer, still keeping our bodies apart. "I shouldn't have asked you to keep it a secret. If you need to tell—"

"No." Despite my annoyance with him earlier, I couldn't argue with his logic. "It's not worth the risk. Oberon already wants the ring. If he found out..."

The hand on my hip gripped it, the weight grounding me—a reminder that he was here. I shimmied my body the final bit of distance between us, and Lach's arms surrounded me. His cedar-and-spice scent hit me, and some invisible force called to me from a place that felt as deep as my soul. It was everything I could do to not turn and kiss him.

"I love you," he murmured.

"You better."

His soft laugh whispered across my shoulder, and I gave in to that need tugging me toward him. Turning in his arms, I offered him my lips, and when he captured them, the kiss was as fragile and unbreakable as the bond between us.

...

I'd never been to this part of the city—I'd never even heard of it. And if it weren't for the careful directions Lach had detailed to me this morning, I doubt I would have found the Quartier Enchanté. The phone he'd given me had only gotten me as far as Jackson Square. From there, I'd been forced to park his Mercedes and continue on foot.

Lach had promised to explain later, as he was running late to meet with Roark to discuss how to handle the murder—a conversation I was relieved to be left out of. I would hear plenty about it later, since his tardiness was due to our inability to keep our clothes on. It seemed there was truth to *that* part of the mating bond. There was horny and then there was this, and whatever *this* was combined with his fae stamina made it rather hard to pass up when he got a certain hungry look in his eyes.

It was nearly noon when I found La Belle Dame Teahouse tucked into a row of squat, single-story shops in a quiet pocket of the French Quarter. I studied the shop's weathered facade from the safety of the cobblestone sidewalk. The sun-faded shutters hinted at having once been a vibrant royal blue, but their age matched the leaded glass windows that obscured any peek at what lay within. A sign on the door dangled on its side, reading neither open nor closed, as if it couldn't decide itself. The only indication of life was the chaotic masses of tulips blooming in the window boxes. I checked the address Romy had given me one more time. It matched the one on the door.

A bell jingled softly as I stepped into a cramped tea shop, and the faint hip-hop playing from somewhere in the back cut off. But no one appeared as I continued inside. Dust wafted through the air along with the rich aroma of cloves and cinnamon and Ceylon tea. A half dozen tables clad in mismatched linens peppered the space, each of their chairs empty. I nearly tripped on a basket filled with small handmade dolls, managing to catch myself by grabbing the back of a nearby chair before I tumbled into a display of incense. Wooden shelves crammed with glass jars lined one wall, antique cabinets the other. I walked slowly, reading their labels as I moved deeper into the shop. Or I tried to. They were all written in French. I reached for one and unscrewed the lid.

A voice stopped me as I leaned to smell its contents. "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

I nearly dropped the jar as a woman dressed in leopard-print satin pajamas emerged from behind the glass-bead curtain that separated the back

of the house. Platinum-blond stripes streaked her blunt black bob like rivers of moonlight, and her shrewd eyes assessed me swiftly. It had to be Willow Broussard.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.” The melodic hint of an accent clung to her words, but I couldn’t place its origin as she wove through the clustered tables with a practiced ease.

I placed the jar back on the shelf quickly. “Is what’s inside dangerous?”

“Dangerous?” Laughter burst out of her, the sound so full of life after the last harrowing week that I found myself smiling. “Not exactly. It’s black pepper.”

“Oh.” I cringed, imagining what would have happened if I’d inhaled. “Thanks for the warning.”

“Of course.” Willow tapped her pursed lips, and I caught sight of a tattoo on the back of her wrist—the triple moon the other devout witches bore. “But I’m guessing that you didn’t come here for ingredients.”

Something held me back from telling her why I’d sought her out. “Ingredients?”

“To make tea.” She gestured to the china cabinets overflowing with porcelain teacups. “So, are you here for a reading or a gris-gris?”

I blinked, wishing I’d taken French in school. “A gris-gris?”

“Spell. Enchantment. I have effigies for blessings and protection.” She grabbed a tiny doll, like the ones I’d nearly tripped over, from a basket on the counter and held it up. “But I don’t do curses. If you’re looking to hex an ex, there’s a shop a few blocks away. Go down to Bourbon and—”

“No,” I stopped her. “I’m here for a reading, I guess. Romy told me that you might be able to help.”

This piqued her interest. “How do you know Romy?”

“I’m...dating Lachlan Gage.”

Willow’s thin eyebrow arched. “So, you’re the one everyone is talking about.”

I managed a tight smile. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. Secrecy was paramount. We couldn’t risk people finding out about the ring, not until we knew more. “On second thought...”

“Look, I hear what everyone’s saying, but that doesn’t mean I talk,” she said, displaying an uncanny knack for knowing what I was thinking. “Whatever your reading reveals stays between us.”

It was the right thing to say, but could I trust her? “You’re Willow, then?”

I waited until she confirmed, bobbing her head. “Romy said you were sisters.”

Her smile widened. “Don’t see the resemblance?” She fluffed her bob with her palm. “About the only thing Romy and I share—other than following the Belle Mère—is that we’re pretty much *personae non gratae* as far as First Parish is concerned.”

“Oh?”

“Dad was from Hong Kong. My mother hailed from one of the oldest families in France,” she explained. “Let’s just say that First Parish is suspicious of eastern magic. The coven wanted him to denounce his ancestral magic, but he refused.” There was pride in her voice that made me smile. “The local coven basically banished my mother for marrying him.”

“But you live here?” I asked. Now I understood what she meant by having something in common with Romy.

“They kicked her out of the coven, but they couldn’t make them leave New Orleans. Mom was stubborn. I take after her.” She winked at me. “It’s not as bad as it used to be. I’ve found my own people who accept me. First Parish tolerates my existence, and I ignore theirs. But it’s not just First Parish talking about you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know.”

“So, did I pass your test?” she asked.

For a second, I considered playing dumb, but I thought better of it. “Sure.”

She tapped her chin. “Thought so.” Her gaze flicked across my face, her thick lashes moving like brushstrokes as she studied me. “Okay, got it.” She nodded toward a nearby table. “Please have a seat.”

I chose one close to the door, where I could see the quiet street outside and make a break for it if things got weird. She bypassed the jars and walked to the china, taking her time as she selected a porcelain cup with painted ivy ringing its rim. Returning to the ingredients, she piled a half dozen jars in her arms and carried them to the table. She hummed as she opened each, pinching a bit of this and that, dropping each directly into the teacup. She then placed it in front of me. “Just a moment.”

As soon as she was behind the beaded curtain, I took a suspicious sniff of the loose mixture of curled leaves, citrus peel, and silver-tipped buds as slender as a needle.

“Don’t worry. I try to refrain from poisoning customers,” she called as

she returned from the back room, a steaming pot in her hands. “When you kill ’em, they never come back.”

“Just...curious.” I set the teacup back on its matching saucer.

She tutted a bit as she poured the boiling water onto the mixture. “But it’s not curiosity that brought you here, is it?”

I considered for a moment. “Not exactly.” I wouldn’t label it curiosity. Part of me didn’t want to seek answers at all. “It’s more necessity.”

“Necessity?” She nodded rapidly like the music was still playing. “*All right*. Let’s not waste time, then.” She circled a finger over the cup, and the liquid swirled. Pulling away after a few seconds, she tilted her head. “You can drink now. Don’t worry—it won’t burn you.”

Burning me was the least of my worries, even if she claimed she didn’t poison her patrons. I raised the cup to my lips, sipping a small amount. The tea was slightly sweet with a hint of tartness that settled into a deep, comforting warmth that traveled down my throat and spread through my body.

“Not only Romy sent you.” Not quite a question. She waved her finger for me to continue drinking.

“Yes,” I murmured and took a longer drink.

“One of my other sisters.” Her brows drew together, one of her eyes twitching. “No, more than one of them.”

I drained the cup before answering with a slower, “Yes.”

“Their essence lingers with you.” She delivered this information like juicy gossip.

“Romy sent me to you, but others directed me to seek your coven.”

“And these others weren’t from New Orleans?”

“No,” I admitted. But I didn’t tell her more. Not when I wanted to see how much she could guess.

“Ireland.” Her nose wrinkled. “Smells Irish.”

My eyebrows shot up, waiting for her to stun me again, but she reached for the empty cup instead, studying the dregs left behind. “You’re at a crossroads,” she told me, her eyes widening slightly before she let out a low whistle. “But it’s not a simple choice before you. It’s a matter of life and death. *Rough*.”

“Yes,” I said, my mouth suddenly dry. “I—”

But Willow held up a finger to pause me. “Magic surrounds you. Light and shadow and...” I hung on her every word until she smiled sadly at me.

“You ask questions but fear the answers.”

“Tell me something I don’t fucking know.” My shoulders slumped as I settled into the chair. “But I don’t really have a choice.”

She reached out and patted my hand. “Yeah, that is the shitty thing about life-and-death situations. The truth can be a dangerous thing. But you already know that...” She paused, a question on her face. “Sorry, this is more of a vibes thing. I can’t actually read your mind or anything.”

“Cate.” That was one question I could answer. For now.

“Cate.” She said it like she was turning it over and trying it on for size. “I was wondering when you would show up.”

I sat up straighter, and she smiled.

“My leaves told me to expect someone a few weeks ago,” she explained.

“They predict the future?” What else did she see in that cup?

“Not exactly. Vibes, remember? Plus, the future is a nebulous thing. There are hundreds of paths we can take, and the future shifts with every decision we make. I just knew you were a stranger, and thank the goddess, because for a minute I thought my auntie from Hong Kong was going to make good on her threat to visit,” she admitted, propping her elbow on the table. “You’ve been showing up in my readings ever since, so I figured it was decisions you were making putting you on my path, because things have been quiet around here.”

“So, this doesn’t tell me what’s going to happen?” I pointed to the cup, not quite relieved.

“Nope. You make a decision, and the future changes. The decision becomes the past, which is a lot easier for most of us to navigate because we can see behind us. I mean really, there’s no such thing as the future. Maybe that will make it less scary for you.”

“It certainly makes me feel more confused.”

She snorted. “Fair enough. But you’re going to have to make a decision if you want me to help you, Cate.”

I sucked in a deep breath, the air burning in my lungs as I held it. Lach hadn’t renewed his objection to me seeking help with the ring, but he had reminded me that no one else needed to know its origins. That made playing show-and-tell with a stranger a little more difficult.

“This ring was my mother’s.” I held out my hand. “I recently discovered I can’t take it off. It’s not stuck,” I added quickly. “It fits like it always has, but when I try to remove it...something shocks me. Something...magical.”

Well, that didn't sound absurd at all.

Her brows lifted. "May I?"

I nodded, bracing for a shock as her fingers brushed the stone.

Nothing.

"I didn't feel anything."

"I'm not trying to remove it." Willow's lips curved as she continued to inspect it, lifting my hand in half a dozen angles to see it from every side. "Spells are delicate things. Intentions are always a crucial ingredient." She released my hand and stared me down. "Quick question—do you want to remove it?"

"I...don't...know."

"Um-hmmm." Something about the way she said it suggested she didn't even need it confirmed—just exactly *how much* could she tell already? She drummed the tabletop lightly. "And why is that?"

"Remember those answers that I fear?" I couldn't tell her more without revealing too much.

"Is there someone who could help you decide?" I opened my mouth to suggest Lach, but she raised a finger. "Not the dark one who walks beside you. That's not his job."

"What is his job?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"I think you already know that." She smiled at me. "Someone gave you this ring."

"My mother. It passed to me when she died."

But Willow shook her head. "It wasn't a gift, then. It's more like someone allowed you to wear it." She raised her brow. "Does that make sense to you?"

My throat swelled painfully. "The woman who took me in. Gran."

"Yes." She snapped her fingers with a flourish. "She's the one who can help you make peace with the ring."

"She's gone, too." Willow's words dashed any hope I felt. So much for finding answers.

But she waved off this information like it was no big deal. "No one is ever truly gone. We can work with that. We just needed to know the right person to ask."

Between the tea and the roller coaster of a conversation, my head was beginning to swim. I started to stand, reaching for my purse to pay her. "Thank you for the help." I took out my wallet. "What do I owe you?"

“Leaving would be another decision.” She cocked her head. “A bad one.” Frustration picked at my fraying nerves. “Well, I can’t ask a dead woman about my magic ring.”

God, I missed when life felt *normal*.

“Why can’t you?” She blinked. “The harvest season draws to a close in a few days, and the veil will thin on All Hallow’s Eve to allow spirits to visit us for Samhain.”

Yeah, normal life had exited the building.

“Do you mean Halloween?”

She grinned. “Sure. I guess that is what someone who was raised human would call it.”

“So, I can talk to dead people that day?” I asked slowly.

“With help.” She pointed at herself. Rising, she shrugged as she collected my teacup. “Just think about it, Cate. Come around midnight on the first, and let’s see if Gran wants to chat.”

I stared at her. “Alone?”

“Your dark guy can come along.” She leaned closer. “It might take some convincing, but he has dead of his own who might want a word.”

I couldn’t wait to pitch that idea to Lach. “I’ll think about it.”

She started toward the back, pausing at the beaded curtain’s threshold. “Look, the truth sucks, but you can’t avoid it. Trust me, it’s better to face answers on your terms than have them meet you on theirs.”

I managed a nod, and she disappeared into the back.

Crisp air soothed me as I left the shop, my mind churning from the strange afternoon. Everything about the witch, from her satin pajamas to her blunt insights, had been unexpected. I replayed everything as I drove the few blocks to Waverly. It wasn’t until I turned onto it that I recalled something strange that Willow had said.

I guess that is what someone who was raised human would call it.

Her choice of words plagued me as I parked in front of the hotel, the questions it provoked chasing me up the Avalon’s steps. But there was one that kept circling back.

What the hell did she mean by that?

I was afraid I already knew the answer.

Chapter Nineteen

Cate

My old life fit into three boxes, and one of them was half empty. My clothes had already been put away in the closet, lost among the new and better ones that had magically appeared. I suspected I had Ciara to thank for that. The rest of my past comprised a dozen or so books, some old scrubs, half-used toiletries, and old photos—a few of me and Gran and Channing but mostly just magazine clippings. I gave up on digging through it, not sure what I was looking for but sure I wouldn't find it.

There was nothing to find.

Faced with insurmountable obstacles and overwhelming emotional turmoil, I did what any sane woman would do: I started a bath. The Jacuzzi off Lach's bedroom was larger than mine, although not as spectacular as the ones in the suites in the Otherworld with their magical taps. But the water heated to the searing temperature necessary to melt away this day, and its relatively normal features were a small price to pay for keeping my boyfriend alive.

I dug around the bar cart in the living room while the water ran, finally unearthing a dusty bottle of ambrosia shoved between the obviously more loved harder liquor. Grabbing a glass, I returned to the tub, peeling off my clothes and climbing into the water. The heat seeped into my skin, but the tension between my shoulders refused to loosen. I opened and poured the ambrosia, placing the bottle on the floor—but well within reach in case more was needed. It felt like years had passed since I'd returned to New Orleans.

How had I only been dealing with this shit for a couple of days?

I sipped slowly, the honeyed warmth of the fairy drink spreading its magic into my blood rapidly, but the heavy feeling persisted. Apparently, this was a problem that even wine and a hot bath couldn't fix.

I finished my first glass, set it on the edge of the tub, and sank under the

water, trying to wash away my questions and doubts, but they followed me. Pushing out of the water, I leaned to grab the bottle as a shadow fell over me.

Lach winced at my ear-splitting scream.

“Holy fuck!” I clutched my chest before my heart escaped through it. “Knock!”

“I did, *and* it’s my bathroom.” He rubbed his pointed ears. “Relaxing?”

“I was trying to. This tub isn’t quite as nice as the one in my old place.” I waved the empty wineglass at him, frowning.

Lach swiped the ambrosia from the ground and passed it to me. “You *are* allowed to go back down there, you know.”

“Without you?” Still, it was tempting—if only for the food and the bathtubs. I took a swig straight from the bottle as another problem occurred to me. “Maybe it’s not a good idea. What if the Hunt held me for ransom to get to you?”

“They don’t work like that. They operate on a code of honor.”

But he didn’t sound certain.

“How did it go with Romy’s sister?” he asked.

“She wants me to commune with my dead foster mom on Sow-something.” I’d forgotten what she’d called it, half from ignorance, half from the muddying effects ambrosia had on the tongue.

“Samhain,” he offered. “So, it sounds like you had a good day, too.” He shucked his suit jacket off and tossed it on a stool nearby. His holster followed with a *thump*.

“It’s getting better every minute,” I said as he loosened his tie. The way my blood warmed as he undid the first button of his shirt had nothing to do with the hot water. “How was yours?”

“We talked to the coven of the witch we found dead. We were trying to get information about Thalia without letting them know we found her body.”

I blinked. “Why?”

“The more we know before the news gets out, the less panic there will be.”

And the less chance the covens would revolt.

He shrugged out of the black Oxford, his grimace the closest thing he gave me to an answer. Which was fine by me now that his smooth, muscled chest was on display. My eyes tracked downward over the dips and ridges

of his abdomen and paused as he reached to unfasten his pants. His fingers stilled on the button. “My eyes are up here, princess.”

“Shhh,” I hushed him, pressing a finger to my lips. “This is the best part.”

His low, rasping laugh slid under my skin and into my bones. Magic had decided this man was meant for me—who was I to argue? He stepped out of his pants, giving me a view of the V-shaped groove that continued like a sign.

This way down.

“Enjoy the ride,” I murmured. Maybe the ambrosia *was* starting to kick in.

“I suppose that means you don’t mind if I join you.” His smirk oozed a masculine arrogance that was well-earned. He took the bottle out of my hands, setting it on the ground before turning toward the tub.

“I don’t think it’s big—”

But Lach was already climbing in with me. “It’s big enough.”

I scooted over, giggling as water sloshed over the side. Not quite enough room for two people to lounge, but plenty if they didn’t mind being close. Lach reached for me, drawing me onto his lap.

I settled into his arms, the final stubborn remnants of tension melting away.

“Do I want to know what you found out?” I asked.

“Not much.” He traced idle circles on my stomach, his finger drifting upward to brush the undersides of my breasts. “We talked to a few members of her coven. They said that everyone liked her. That they were worried about her.”

Frowning, I craned my neck to study his weary face. “So, it was just a random act of violence?”

“Part of me wishes it were, but it can’t be,” he said grimly as he filled me in on details he’d left out last night.

“Jesus,” I breathed when he was done.

“I didn’t want to give you nightmares.” Lach pressed a kiss to my neck, resting his chin on my shoulder.

“I worked in a hospital,” I reminded him. “I’ve seen worse.” But nothing this close to home. I hooked my arm around his shoulder, brushing the memento mori on his neck. “Do you think it’s a warning?”

“What else could it be?” he asked distantly. “Thalia proposed the bona fides—carving the Wild Hunt’s mark on her neck sends a pretty clear

message.”

“But it can’t be the Hunt.” Part of me just needed to have him say, to have him reaffirm, that there was at least one danger we were safe from.

“No, but someone sympathizes with them.” Proof of what he told me last night. An oath was only words. It was impossible to know someone’s heart. “They can’t touch our family, though. Not while the bona fides is intact.”

I snuggled closer to him, watching ink drift down his arms. I wished I could give him peace. Because it wasn’t just the city that we had to worry about. We were safe in New Orleans. For now. But my own thoughts chased me like those tattoos.

“Have we heard from the other courts?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer. A lot had changed in the course of the last few weeks. Only one court remained an ally, after all. That stacked the odds that news would be good against us.

“Ciara spoke with Fiona earlier. She said everyone is being helpful, particularly Sirius.” His lips grazed my skin again, and a shiver of anticipation raced down my spine. Lach circled a fingertip over the peak of my breast, and I bit back a gasp. He seemed completely unaware of the effect of the small, mindless touches. Meanwhile, it was an effort to remind myself that talking was necessary if we wanted to actually solve our problems, especially with the incessant pull of our new mating bond begging for a *deeper* connection. “I suppose I have you to thank for that.”

“Me?” I asked absently. Only half my brain was paying attention. Each second, I found it harder and harder to focus.

“He’s *your* friend.”

“*Our* friend. The Astral Court didn’t agree to help only because of me. Face it—they like you.” I poked his arm.

“A fate worse than death.”

I flinched at his choice of words. He hadn’t meant to hit so close to the mark, but...

“I’m sorry,” he said roughly. His arms moved under the water, circling my waist and tightening around me. “I’m not that easy to kill, princess.”

I swallowed in a futile attempt to fight the rawness creeping up my throat. “I know. I’ve tried.”

“Exactly.” He nipped my earlobe. “Between my disregard for the rules and your homicidal instincts, no one can touch us.”

I forced a laugh, but that hollow fear lingered.

“Have you decided about Samhain? This séance?”

I might have appreciated his obvious attempt to redirect the conversation if he'd chosen another subject.

“No,” I admitted. “I was hoping to find my answer at the bottom of that bottle.” I tugged free of his hold, half lurching out of the tub to grab it.

“No one finds answers at the bottom of a bottle.”

I swigged from it anyway. “Summoning dead people wasn't how I planned to celebrate Halloween.”

“Samhain is on the first of November,” he challenged me, brow raised. “What's your next excuse?”

“It's not an excuse. She said we would meet at midnight.” I twisted around, moving to the other end of the bathtub, where I stood a chance at finishing this conversation instead of mounting him. I tangled my legs with his to make the new arrangement work. “I want to do Halloween.”

“You do?” he asked slowly.

“I never have.” I lifted a shoulder as I took another drink.

“Even when you were a kid?”

“Tragic childhood, remember?” I kept the words flat and lifeless so he wouldn't take them too seriously.

“You never went trick-or-treating?” He stared across at me, a vein twitching in his forehead.

Why was he acting like this was weird? “Did you?”

“I'm nearly two hundred and fifty years old. Of course not, but—”

“It's not a big deal,” I cut him off, wishing I'd never admitted any of it to him. “I just never did it, and the last few years I took a shift at the hospital, since I don't have kids. Halloween was always a busy night.”

He rubbed his lower lip, drawing my attention to his mouth. “So you've never even been to the Garden District on Halloween?”

“Nope.” I sighed, turning my head before I gave in to that base need building inside me. “But forget it. The ring is more important.”

He shook his head. “No, you're right. The spirits won't cross the veil until midnight. That leaves plenty of time.”

“Spirits?” I blinked. “You make that sound so normal.”

“I grew up with wraiths,” he reminded me.

I shivered. Good point.

“Okay, so we're going trick-or-treating,” he decided.

I snorted as I took another drink from the bottle. Why had I even bothered

with a glass? “I think I’m too old to trick-or-treat. I just assumed Ciara would force me into a sexy costume and drag me to a bar.”

“We’re going trick-or-treating. My city. My rules,” he said firmly. “And after, we’ll go to the séance.”

“Everything sounded so ordinary and fun until the last bit.”

“Welcome to my life.” He hesitated. “About Samhain. It might be dangerous.”

“Why?” I wasn’t even sure I believed it was possible.

“Not only will the veil between the living and the dead be thin, but you’ll be in a space between worlds.”

Like we were the last time we nipped. The wine in my stomach started to churn.

“Do you think it’s worth the risk?” I asked him.

A tattoo twisted down his arm. “That’s up for you to decide, but I should be there in case...”

...things went south.

“Willow already suggested that you come. She said the dead wish to speak with you,” I added in a quiet voice.

“They can get in line.” His lips flattened. That would be a very long line. But he didn’t ask what else she’d said about him. Instead, he reached for my foot and began to massage it. “Now tell me about this sexy costume.”

“Suggestions?” I moaned as he worked on a tender spot.

He zeroed in on my lips, and I preened when his throat slid. “This is a nice look.”

I rolled my eyes as I took a drink. “Children will be present.”

“Not our children.”

“What a low bar.” A giggle slipped from my lips—the conversation and the ambrosia were finally lightening my mood.

“You have no idea how low I can go, princess.”

Even the nickname didn’t bother me as much as it had since I’d found out about the ring. I held the bottle out to him. Maybe we both needed to let loose and just live.

While we still could.

I shook the last bit from my mind. I wasn’t spiraling into that line of thinking.

Lach took the ambrosia, checking to find the bottle still half full. “Are you trying to have your way with me?”

“Maybe.” I tried to move my other foot to his groin to determine his level of interest in cutting this conversation short.

He batted it away, taking a drink before returning the bottle to the floor. “Because you don’t have to try so hard.”

We’d been naked for far too long for that to be true. Crawling forward, I straddled his lap, *accidentally* dragging my seam down his hardening cock in one long, far-from-subtle stroke.

“But don’t let me stop you from your seduction attempts,” he grunted, his eyes hooding as I did it again.

I rocked against him, biting my lip as the crown of his erection nudged against me. I wriggled, trying to sink over him in the slippery water, but Lach’s fingers kneaded my hips, sliding his cock up and down until my clit throbbed. His patience was maddening. The friction built until I found myself gasping. I fisted a hand in his ink-black hair, drawing his mouth a breath from my own.

“Tell me what you need, princess.” The command whispered over my lips, hoarse and demanding.

“You.” I moved to kiss him, but Lach craned his neck, shifting out of reach.

“Be. More. Specific.”

“Do you need a diagram?” I snapped. His answering laugh made me whimper.

“I love when you’re a needy little brat,” he murmured, urging my hips rougher. Faster. Until I was close to spilling over the edge like the bathwater. “Now be a good girl and tell me what you *need*.”

“Your cock.” I flushed, but his eyes held mine, refusing to let go. A silent order staring back at me that I found I couldn’t question. “I need your cock.”

He slid a hand under my ass, rising from the water so swiftly that I shrieked. My arms hooked around his neck to steady my spinning head. “What—”

“We aren’t fucking in a bathtub.” He kissed me as he stepped smoothly onto the tile floor. “It’s the fucking worst.”

But I needed him now. “The bed’s *too* far.”

I kissed along his jaw, desperate for his taste in my mouth.

“Not a problem.” Hunger coarsened every word. My legs coiled around his waist as he spun me. Glass shattered at our feet. I drew back at the

sound, but he muttered, “Don’t worry about it.”

Good enough for me.

Lach pinned me against the wall, gaze trained on me as he spit into his palm, then reached between us and slicked my core. I moaned, unable to look away from his eyes as he pushed a finger inside me and began to pump, teasing out my arousal until I was trembling, until my entire world centered on that singular touch.

“*Please*,” I begged. He leaned forward, swallowing my pleading with a kiss like he needed that as much as I needed his touch.

I couldn’t stand it anymore. I needed him inside me. My hips ground against him, urging him deeper, but it wasn’t enough. Another desperate plea fell from my mouth.

A laugh rumbled in his chest as I squirmed.

“Not yet.” His teeth nipped my lower lip just hard enough to make it sting before he pulled back, dark agony clouding his eyes. “I need to make sure you’re ready before I fuck you, because I’m not sure I can be gentle.”

That explained the shadows haunting him. He was still afraid he would break me, even when I practically begged him to. “I don’t want you to be gentle. I want you—all of you.”

“Cate.” Warning laced his voice.

His concern would be endearing if he wasn’t holding me on a cliff’s edge. I gripped the sides of his face and glared at him. “Nothing can break me. Not even you, Gage.”

The shadows fled his eyes, a smirk lifting his lips. “That’s my girl.”

“*Prove. It.*” A challenge he wouldn’t be able to resist. Not with that bond stretched taut between us.

He ran his tongue over his lower lip, studying my face with an awe that bordered on reverence. “You’re in control,” he reminded me, grunting as he hoisted my body higher against the wall to position himself, “but I suggest you *hold on*.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, and his mouth crashed into mine. Lach slid in a single inch, and the mating bond roared in my veins, crying out for more. A growl tore from his throat like he felt it, too, and he slammed inside me, driving deeper with each thrust. I clawed at his back, tearing at his skin as that shared magic stripped us into something baser, something animalistic and primal, something *ancient*.

There was no question of accepting or rejecting what we were. He was

burned in my blood, scorched into my fucking soul. Our lives were no longer linked by a bargain or a bond. They were forged into one. There was no part of me that didn't include him.

Lach reared back, eyes wild and searching as pleasure tightened my limbs. "You're mine, princess."

And nothing and no one would ever come between us again. That knowledge undid me as much as his words. I went over the edge, unspooling as he released inside me, again and again until I collapsed against him, panting and trembling.

Lach rested his forehead against mine. "That was..."

I understood why he couldn't finish the sentence. The word didn't exist.

My head lolled on his shoulder, a lazy smile taking up what I suspected might be a permanent residence. But when I opened my eyes, the sight of bloody footprints and glass shards swept it away.

"Lach," I said slowly, "are you...injured?"

He glanced at me, his sheepish grin giving way to a grimace. "Possibly."

"Why—" I cut off my own question with a frustrated screech. "Put me down."

"Not in here," he said, ignoring the request as he carried me out of the room. The bottle's glass crunched with each step, and as soon as we hit the carpeted threshold of the bedroom, I wiggled free of his arms.

"Sit down," I commanded before he could do any more damage.

He rolled his eyes and continued to the bed, tracking more blood and glass across the carpet.

"Lachlan Gage!"

He flourished his hand, bowing slightly at the waist before he took a seat on the edge of the mattress. "Wait a second." He waved, and the blood and glass vanished.

"Why didn't you do that before?" I asked as I hurried over to inspect his feet.

"I had better things to do." The smirk was back. "A little glass wasn't going to stop me."

"It took you two seconds to clean it up." I sank to my knees, cringing as I began picking the embedded glass out of his lacerated feet.

"Would have been a waste of time."

I shot him an incredulous look.

He held up his hands. "In my defense, you were naked."

I fell silent, continuing my work. After washing his feet and asking Lach to dispose of the remaining shards, I ordered him into bed.

"It will heal," he promised, but he obeyed.

I crossed my arms, words failing me. I knew that. Most of the cuts were already fading into pinkish scars. In a few hours, there would be no trace of them. But it wasn't the injuries that bothered me. I wanted to let it go, wanted to pretend it wouldn't gnaw at me. But I couldn't. "I don't want you hurting yourself to be with me."

He'd already sacrificed so much.

"It wasn't—"

"There is a memento mori burned onto your neck. Enough!" A sob escaped me. It had to be enough. He couldn't keep destroying himself.

"Better mine than yours." His voice was quiet, but sincerity blazed in his eyes.

I choked back another sob. "But it is mine. *You* are mine. I wear that mark as much as you do, because if they find you, if they..." Words failed me again. There was nothing that could describe the despair that thought carved into me.

Sadness softened his face. "I'm not dying today, my love."

He didn't promise me tomorrow.

He couldn't. No one could.

Every decision led us down a new path. There was no future. Only choices.

And I could let that break me or I could keep fighting to live each moment. *We* could keep fighting.

After a minute, he cleared his throat. "Do you yell at all of your patients?"

"Only the ones who deserve it." I wiped the tears from my cheeks. "It won't take long to heal, will it?"

"No." Lach beckoned me with his finger. "Still, you could kiss it and make it better."

I gave in to his smile, gave in to that instinct that bound us, gave in to the love I couldn't deny. But it would take more than a kiss to make it better.

We needed a miracle.

Chapter Twenty

Lach

Duty called me from bed in the form of a text message. Cate stirred next to me, the sheets slipping to her waist. I glanced from the phone to her, afraid its light would wake her, but she just sighed and snuggled down into the covers, blissfully unaware of the bad news Roark had just delivered. I studied her—the parted lips, the slight flutter of her lashes, the rise and fall of her perfect breasts—and wished I’d turned the fucking phone off. We had so little time left that leaving her in my bed to deal with business felt like a waste, but this simply couldn’t wait.

I moved through the room as quietly as possible, grabbing random clothing from the open armoire. But as I reached for my holster, the bedsheets rustled. I glanced over my shoulder as Cate pushed onto her elbow.

“Why are you putting clothes on?” She rubbed her bleary eyes.

“Keep sleeping, princess.” I slipped the holster on before pulling out the 9-millimeter to check the magazine.

She sat up straighter. “What’s going on?”

There was nothing she could do but worry if I told her, so I pasted a grin on my face as I slid the gun back into the holster and reached for a jacket. “Nothing to worry about.”

A frown dragged any lingering sleepy peace from her face. “I’ve never been great at math, but I’m pretty sure that you plus guns plus the middle of the night equals trouble.”

I don’t know why I bothered. Unlike most of the women who’d shared my bed over the centuries, Cate wasn’t going to roll over and go back to sleep. It was one of the reasons I loved her. It was also what made it difficult to keep her from getting involved with the bloodier side of my life. “Just a little issue in the French Quarter. Roark needs a hand.”

“I’m going with you.” She threw the sheets off entirely, swinging her legs

out of the bed. "Let me get dressed."

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said before she made it to the wardrobe. I didn't want her anywhere near a murder scene.

"Why?" She crossed her arms, brows lifting as if she was waiting for my excuse.

I stared at the ceiling for a moment, like help might come from above. "Because they found another body." I stole across the room and hooked an arm around her waist. "And because I prefer that you remain naked whenever possible."

She rolled her eyes at me. "I know you're basically immortal, so maybe you don't know what nurses do for a living, but I've seen dead bodies before."

"Then you aren't missing anything." I gave her a swift kiss.

But she didn't soften. "Is it related to the witch who was killed?"

"I don't know," I admitted. Roark's message hadn't said much. *Another body. Meet me in five.*

"But *you're* going out in the middle of the night, so it's serious." Cate might not have been born to this life, but she had an uncanny sense for how things worked in our world. She tugged free of my hold, tilting her chin, a defiant glimmer in her eyes. "And I'm going with you."

I had to force myself to nod. She smiled like she'd won, but she had no idea what battle was raging in my head.

Maybe it was the newness of the mating bond fucking with my common sense, just some primitive reflex to shield her. But trying to protect her from this was pointless. Cate didn't need my protection. Not from this. But knowing that rationally and accepting it emotionally were two different things.

"I don't suppose I can convince you to take your gun." I leaned against the wall, watching as she dressed.

"They're already dead." She snorted as she dragged a sweater over her head, emerging with a bemused smile. "Yours aren't enough?"

I frowned. She'd refused to carry a weapon since she returned, and I wasn't certain how to make her understand it was a necessary evil. "You forget that someone killed them."

"Good thing I'll be with a big, bad fae prince, then." She disappeared into the bathroom before I could remind her that things might have turned out differently if she'd had one the night Oberon kidnapped her.

The tap turned on as another text arrived from Roark.

Don't make me come in there.

Followed shortly by a perfunctory *Please*.

"Roark is getting impatient," I called in after her. "Maybe I should—"

"Ready!" she cut me off as she reappeared and headed straight for the bedroom door. Cate threw it open, skidding to a stop when she came face-to-face with Roark, who was planted across the hall.

His scowl—meant for me—slipped from his face and was replaced by wide-eyed amusement when he saw her. "Joining us?"

"Someone has to keep him in line," she said with a slight shrug, continuing past him like this was business as usual.

Roark shot me a questioning look as we fell into step behind her. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"It's not up to me." A centuries-old sense of self-preservation kept me from adding *apparently* at the end. At least *some* of my instincts were intact. And maybe it would take a murder scene to get Cate to see why I wanted her armed when she went out.

"This could be interesting," he muttered under his breath.

Tell me something I didn't know.

I clamped down on my concern, but it gnawed at me. All I could see were the ways it might go wrong. How her presence in a crisis might be used against me. How the killer might—even now—just be waiting for us to appear. How she wasn't ready for a fight between creatures.

It's how *I'd* get to us. And it's exactly what Roark meant when he said *interesting*.

I pushed away the feeling, although my eyes remained glued to Cate's back. "Is it another witch?"

"No." His answer surprised me. Cate glanced over her shoulder, clearly listening. "It's a human."

Cate stumbled, and I shot toward her, but she righted herself. "I'm okay," she said, even as the color drained from her face. She shook off my steadying hands. "*Really*."

"Maybe..." Roark started, trailing off as he, like me, failed to find the right combination of tact and forcefulness.

"I wouldn't finish that thought," I warned him.

"If you're both finished protecting me from you-know-not-what," Cate said, lifting her chin but not quite hiding the tremble in her voice, "I think

we should get moving.”

“Come on, princess.” I offered her my hand. “Let’s get this over with.”

St. Roch Campo Santo was young by New Orleans cemetery standards. Built by a priest who supposedly bargained with God himself, it was outside the heart of the city. That meant that unlike Lafayette, Metairie, and New Orleans’s other more famous cemeteries, it wasn’t choked with tourists as soon as the sun set. St. Roch was quiet and a bit out of the way—and ringed by a tall wall covering two whole blocks.

I could feel its eerie, still quiet descend on us as we pulled up in Roark’s G-Wagon. We had ridden in silence the whole way. But as soon as the engine cut off, Cate popped the door open and stepped out in front of the cemetery’s ornate wrought iron gate before Roark or I knew what was happening.

Some of my people were already on site, standing along both sides of Music Street, which bisected the cemetery’s two plots, and trying to look casual as they followed Roark’s earlier orders to keep prying eyes away. They shifted uncomfortably at this strange woman’s sudden appearance, exchanging furtive glances, and the two closest began to walk toward Cate.

Their gaze swiveled to Roark and me as we climbed out of the Mercedes, relaxing when they realized it was us—only to tense up when they realized Cate was with us. One took a step toward her, and she squared her shoulders, waiting for him to make the mistake of speaking. The guard decided it was better to leave well enough alone and shuffled back over to his prior spot, studiously avoiding eye contact.

Cate stood in front of the open cemetery gate, hands on her hips, elbows out, back to us. As I approached, I tried to work out—again—how to convince her to return to the car. But, as with the decision to come at all, I found myself simply overmatched.

She must have sensed another attempt was coming, because she strode confidently through the gates as soon as I drew near.

Gods dammit, she was fearless.

And hot.

And this was happening. Apparently.

The muggy New Orleans air, now shielded from blowing away by the walls, settled over the three of us like a pall as we walked down what passed for the cemetery’s main path. Anyone watching us would assume Cate was in charge, as she walked a few paces ahead and never bothered to

look back.

I supposed they'd be right. I glanced at Roark walking beside me, but if he was thinking the same thing, it only made him grin.

The moon hung low in the sky, almost obscured by the high wall, and threw long, oblique shadows both onto and from everything. A macabre chessboard of ornate, moss-eaten burial vaults, coping tombs, and their larger society cousins spilled before us in a mostly ordered grid. A breeze whispered through the graveyard, rustling the dried remains of floral arrangements left by strangers on the graves of those long dead.

I could see through the dark, yet I knew Cate could not. But if she was unnerved—like when Roark mentioned that it was a human who'd been killed—she didn't show it. She did, however, finally spin toward us when it was clear she had no further instinct about where we were heading.

Her pale skin and slightly unkempt beauty tugged at my soul and took my breath away for a moment. The myrtle-draped bough of a cypress tree swayed in front of the light of the moon over her shoulder, filling my nostrils with a sweet, floral scent that completely defied the cemetery's normal stink of rich earth and slow decay.

For a moment, anyway.

It was a familiar feeling. Like me, the cemetery was caught between two worlds, both of us bonded by death.

Too bad it wasn't always clear which was which.

My hand flew to the back of my neck, and it took me a second to realize it wasn't an itch that had brought it there but the memento mori. How the fuck could it know I was in a cemetery? It burned slightly, a feeling both foreign and familiar, and I began to wonder if it wanted rid of me as much as I wanted rid of it.

Cate cleared her throat pointedly.

"It's this way," I said, shaking my dismal thoughts and trying to hide my own fear of what a grisly murder scene might do to my mate.

Cate wasted no time, just pivoted on her heel and strode confidently into the darkness of the far corner of St. Rochs.

This time, I reacted quickly. If there was someone lying in wait, it would be best if I was first in line. If Cate objected, she didn't show it, and I reached down to hold her hand, trying to walk a half step ahead of her. I pulled out my phone, using its flashlight to guide us safely. It really wouldn't be long until a statue poked her eye out if I didn't.

She squeezed my hand slightly—just enough to tell me she was glad I was there.

A moment later, we heard voices up ahead, and I pulled up short with Cate. I didn't have to tell Roark what to do, even without our link. He slid silently sideways into the utter darkness offered by the eaves of a particularly close-knit group of burial vaults and dashed forward to scout.

It was only a few seconds before I heard his voice cut through the gloom. "You sure you want to be here?" And then, a moment later, "Cate and Lach are right behind me."

I knew it was safe. Roark was actually warning me, in a way. I pulled Cate forward through the near-total darkness, almost dreading whatever complication had already arrived. And then I saw them.

"You didn't tell me they found the body," I muttered to Roark.

He held up his hands in surrender. "Didn't know. I just got a call to get down here."

Shaw.

Fucking Shaw.

Dante was with him, and a couple more of our guards, one of whom had turned on his phone's flashlight and laid it on the top of a headstone, making the five appear, even to me, as a collection of floating heads.

"Get rid of them," I muttered, nodding at the guards.

"Done." Roark strode forward, directing the other men toward a nearby mausoleum. One of them spared a glance back at his precious cell phone but thought better of bringing it up.

My grip tightened on Cate's hand as we came to a stop in front of my brother. Shaw stuffed his hands into his pockets, failing to look casual as he glanced nervously at Dante.

"Don't lose your shit," she whispered to me.

But my shit was already lost.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"We found the body," Shaw began, but I didn't let him get far.

"That doesn't explain what you're doing in a fucking cemetery at three in the morning." I took a single step in his direction, but Cate held me back.

"I think he's asking you how you found the body," she cut in diplomatically.

Shaw huffed, casting his gaze at the crumbling remains of a marble angel.

"I was on patrol."

“With a vampire?” She sounded more confused than accusatory.

But Shaw rolled his eyes. “He’s my friend, and patrol is boring. Maybe you could do it sometime.” His head hung as soon as it was out of his mouth. He was no doubt already filled with regret for directing his irritation with me at her.

But it was too late.

A snarl rattled from my chest. “Watch how you speak to her.”

Cate turned toward me, planting her palm over my heart as if she could leash whatever beast Shaw had summoned from within me. The small act soothed me but didn’t quite defang me. I focused my attention on Dante. My brother was in this city by virtue of shared blood, but the vampire—every vampire in New Orleans—was here because my court allowed it. Normally, that would have been leverage enough, but, for the first time in centuries, I needed the other creatures as much as they needed me.

Still, old habits died hard.

“And what brought you out this far?” Roark asked. “You were supposed to be in Third Parish.”

Shaw’s eyes darted to me. “It’s not like you would believe us.”

I raised my phone, shining its flashlight into his eyes, and found them glassy. I directed its light on Dante next. His were as pitch-black as the space between stars overhead. “Opium or venom?” I ground out. “Or both?”

Dante scrambled for an excuse. “We were just—”

“Bored.” I used Shaw’s own words against him. “Now answer the question.”

Shaw swallowed slightly. “Venom.”

“What the fuck were you thinking?” I was going to kill him. Possibly both of them. I turned to Dante. “Why don’t you take a stab at telling me why you were out in a cemetery, feeding my kid brother your venom? Before I take a guess of my own.”

He winced at my choice of words. Most of what was written about vampires was wrong. But stakes? Stakes were *very* real.

“We saw a light,” Shaw said, cutting in front of Dante just as he began to speak.

“A light?” I stared at him.

“It was like an orb.” Dante finally spoke up. “Everything was dark, and there was this orb.”

We listened as he described a glowing ball of light floating in the sky, but I couldn't quite bite my tongue. "And you both thought, 'Hey, let's see if it leads us to a pot of gold'?"

"And you wouldn't?" Shaw asked, glaring at me.

I refrained from groaning. "It never occurred to you that it might be a trap?"

Shaw blinked a few times—the thought now clearly occurring to him—before he frowned. "I guess I'm just as naive as you think I am."

"So you followed the orb?" Cate jumped in, as if sensing a fight. "That's how you found the body?"

This had to be one of the dumbest conversations I'd ever been forced to participate in.

"You were supposed to be in Marigny. Do you ever follow orders?" I asked through gritted teeth.

"I'm the screwup, remember?" Shaw spat back. "That's why you don't trust me to help with family business."

"No one thinks that," Cate said.

If she didn't, she was a saint.

I was about to tell her just that when she shifted and put two arms around me, almost willing her calm into me. Miraculously, it worked.

"Wait over there and stay out of trouble." I glared at Dante. "And we're going to talk later."

Shaw sulked toward the graveyard's iron gates, Dante following close behind.

It was the same as last time. Another woman, hands bound behind her back, a crater where the back of her skull should have been, and a memento mori carved into her neck. Her body had fallen like a rag doll in front of a marble mausoleum. I turned away, but Cate took a step toward her, eyes narrowing.

"Have they identified her?" I asked Roark.

"We're guessing a tourist," he said.

St. Roch Cemetery was too young to be on many ghost tours, so it wasn't closed to the public. It was entirely possible that this was a simple case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. "We need to find out if any missing persons reports have been filed."

"I'll talk to our guy at the precinct," Roark said.

Cate's brows rose. "You actually work with the police?"

“The ones willing to accept a supplementary paycheck.”

She shook her head as she crouched to get a better look at the body, and I wasn't sure if she was more disappointed in them or me.

“What's she doing?” Roark muttered.

“No clue.” One of the reasons I loved her was that I never knew quite what to expect. But she'd been telling the truth at the Avalon: the dead body didn't appear to faze her. She was made of stronger stuff than most of the fae I'd known for centuries. I'd suspected as much when she tried to shoot me within the first forty-eight hours she'd known me.

Cate stood, dusting her hands on her jeans. “She wasn't killed here.”

“How can you tell?” Roark asked.

But I answered for her. “Not enough blood.”

She nodded. “Do you have pictures of the first scene?”

Roark looked truly impressed as I passed her my phone. She scrolled through, pausing to zoom in on one.

“What?” I asked when she squinted at the screen.

“What's that written in Theban on the ground?” She pointed at the photo.

I took a step closer. “What are you talking about?”

Cate turned the phone around to both Roark and me. She had zoomed in on the gore surrounding the body, and there, woven into the blood spatter, were symbols written in the witch's blood.

Roark tugged at his lip ring, shooting an uncomfortable look at me.

“We missed it,” I admitted, the confession coated in frustration.

“Can you read it?” she pressed.

““Blood spilled. Blood owed,”” he said quietly.

It was both a warning and a promise. If we had caught it the first time, we might have known to expect more violence.

“That's uplifting,” Cate muttered. She turned the phone back around, and her brow furrowed as she studied some detail.

“What are you onto now?” I asked gently.

“It's probably nothing,” she murmured. Glancing up, she held out the phone to show us a photo of the memento mori carved on the witch's neck. “See how the skin around the mark is red and a little swollen?”

“Yeah.” Roark moved closer.

“And the blood is starting to clot, not just pool?” She looked at each of us in turn. “Thalia was alive when the mark was carved.”

Roark cursed under his breath.

Cate tipped her head to the body on the ground. “Her wound is cleaner, no sign of tissue reaction. The blood didn’t clot. The murderer did this *after* she was dead.” She leaned against me—the only sign that the murder scene had affected her. “Like I said, it’s probably nothing.”

But it felt like something.

“Why drag her out here?” Roark scanned the graveyard like the answer was hidden somewhere among the tombs.

“Convenience?” Cate suggested without a hint of humor. “Maybe they planned to bury the body and got interrupted.”

“It is a public cemetery.” Roark nodded.

“But Holt Cemetery would have been a better choice,” I said. No one would have blinked at a fresh grave in the former potter’s field, not even the resident gravedigger.

“We need to find out who she is. Maybe that will tell us something,” Roark said.

I doubted it. “Or it’s just another message.”

“Wasn’t killing Thalia message enough?” he asked.

“No one’s safe,” Cate whispered, lifting troubled eyes to find mine as she voiced what I was thinking. “Whoever did this chose a human on purpose. Are we sure it isn’t Oberon?”

I hadn’t thought so before, but two bodies warranted some reconsideration on my end. “Anything’s possible, but if he had a spy in my city, why risk them for something like this?”

“Because he’s mentally unstable,” Roark muttered.

He had a point. I stared at the victim. When word got out, people would panic. “We need to keep this quiet.”

Two deaths in New Orleans—even murders—were hardly noteworthy, but the memento mori changed things. I might not have killed the women myself, but I was responsible for their deaths.

“Ask around, but make sure no one else finds out.” I hesitated, glancing to where my brother loitered with his old friend. “And have Dante compel our guys.”

Roark blinked. “Are you sure that’s necessary?”

Cate’s fingers wove through mine, and she squeezed my hand. A silent question. I bobbed my head. “He knows,” I said under my breath, but while Roark knew I suspected a rat, he didn’t seem convinced it was true. “The fewer people who know about this, the easier it will be to contain. If we

have to use magic, so be it.”

“Our men can be trusted,” Roark said, and I wished I had his confidence. He glanced to where Dante stood in the distance. “But how will you keep him from blabbing to Baptiste?”

That was easy. “Do you know what Baptiste will do to him if she finds out he’s feeding a fae his venom recreationally? Or that that fae is my brother? It won’t be good.”

“Wonderful. We’re blackmailing people now,” Cate said flatly.

I pinned her with a stare. “It’s better than killing him to keep him quiet.”

She paled in the moonlight. “He’s your brother’s friend.”

“And that’s keeping him alive.” For now. “You wanted to be part of this. Those are the kind of choices I have to make.”

But something moved on the edge of my mind—a darkness even I couldn’t see through. I’d blackmailed people before. Manipulated before. Chosen war. Chosen to kill the few to save the many. Hell, I’d chosen not to save at all.

I didn’t have to look inside myself to know what length I might go to in order to save my court, my family—and especially my mate. It was *any* length. It had been that way for so long that I could no longer remember when it *wasn’t* the case. Nothing would change that, not even the memento mori burning on my neck.

At that conviction, the mark quenched itself like a red-hot brand dipped in cool water.

But for how long?

Chapter Twenty-One

Cate

Like everything else in New Orleans, Madame Voiler's Costume Shop was not—and maybe never had been—quite what it pretended to be. The racks on the main sales floor were full of modern, cheap costumes shoved in plastic bags. Tourist-targeted crap was piled on every available inch of the checkout counter, save for the space occupied by an ancient brass register and the tablet-based credit card readers that everyone actually used.

It wasn't exactly what I expected of a costume shop that touted itself as older than the city around it. It was, however, a desperately needed break from murders and politics and what was rapidly becoming business as usual, even to me. If I were being honest, Ciara might have needed the fun even more than I did.

Ciara hustled us toward the back of the large, low-ceilinged space as a voice drawled from somewhere out of sight, "Welcome. I'm over here if you have questions."

We couldn't see its owner. Not with the never-ending bunch of long, wooden, floor-to-ceiling sales racks that divided the shop almost completely into separate narrow corridors. If we had actually wanted to talk to the woman face-to-face, whoever she was, we would have had to go to the narrow gap between shelves and wait for her to do the same.

"The problem is, I have no idea what I'm looking for," I admitted.

"I keep forgetting that you're a Halloween virgin." Ciara waved an orange costume constructed from a questionable amount of fabric at me. "What about a sexy pumpkin?"

Clearly, we'd reached a section devoted to the scantily clad.

"I'll pass." I pointed to a short white dress emblazoned with a red cross. "It's funny. I don't remember dressing like that for work."

"Sometimes I think the costume industry was taken over by the porn industry," she admitted with a laugh. "That's why I try to shop from the

back of the store. At least the costumes there are handmade. What do you want to be?"

Normal. I bit back my answer. "I don't really care."

"But not sexy." She riffled through a rack of ready-made options.

"It can be sexy as long as it's not weird like a pumpkin, or perverse." I frowned at one labeled *scandalous squirrel*. Who would wear that?

"Let's try a different strategy," she suggested. "What is Lach dressing up as?"

I shrugged. "Nothing, I assume."

"Nothing?" she repeated.

"I don't really see him taking the time to go buy a costume. Do you?"

"Nuh-uh." She shook her head. "He's not getting out of participating. You can do a couple's costume!" She clapped her hands, channeling an enthusiasm I doubted her brother would share.

"Let me clear it with him." I whipped out my phone.

"You're wasting your chance to decide for him," she said in a singsong voice as she moved to flip through a catalog of rentable options. "Ohhh, I could be Juliet."

"And maybe Roark could be Romeo," I murmured as I shot Lach a text that simply read: *game for a costume?*

Ciara pretended to throw the binder at me. "I thought you were my friend. It's bad enough that we're connected twenty-four hours a day. We are not wearing matching costumes. People will think we're together, and no one will flirt with me."

Judging from the way Roark looked at her behind her back, I suspected he might be on board with that plan.

"Maybe you two should be Romeo and Juliet," she suggested. "It would be romantic."

I raised a brow. "Two idiots doomed to die because they're impatient? Sounds like a great choice."

And maybe a little closer to reality than I was comfortable admitting to her.

My phone buzzed with the sound of an incoming text.

I don't know... Can I trust you to pick something out?

Well, they've got everything from pumpkins to squirrels here.

Squirrels? There has to be something better than that.

I smiled. *What about a garden gnome?*

Clearly, I can't trust you.

Oh, c'mon.

I'll dress up. And then, after a short pause: *Nothing with tights.*

Deal.

"You are grinning like a fool," Ciara informed me when I slid the phone back into my pocket. "Not regretting the mating bond as much these days?"

"It helps that I'm in love with him." A hot surge of nerves shot up my throat, and I swallowed. "But the whole fated-mate thing is..."

"A lot." She nodded sympathetically.

I couldn't tell her why. I didn't want to remind her that it largely came down to how scared I was that the Wild Hunt would catch him—not while she was dealing with her own anxiety over the future.

"Look on the bright side." She flashed me a dazzling smile. "You got a sister out of it."

"More than one," I said, "and a brother." I'd gone from being nearly alone in the world to instant family.

But Ciara's face dimmed. "Speaking of Fiona..." She grimaced like she'd prefer not to. "Has Lach heard anything from her? Have they found anything at the Astral Court?"

"Not that I know of," I said. Her face fell further, and I quickly added, "But Lach doesn't tell me everything."

She sighed. "I wish he would just take back this stupid ring."

And the penumbra wearing its twin. "I'm surprised he hasn't," I admitted. "Roark is always with him."

"No, he isn't," she said glumly. "When you two are off getting busy, Roark finds me."

"Is he that bad?" I'd spent plenty of time with Roark back when his primary occupation was cock-blocking Lach and me.

She plucked a feather boa off a hanger and wrapped it around her shoulders. "I'm just used to a little more autonomy."

"Tell me about it."

"But at least you're getting laid," she pointed out.

Something told me that Roark would be happy to add that to his list of duties with Ciara, but since the mention of his name seemed to inspire homicidal urges in her, I kept the thought to myself.

The cheap, overly colorful costumes at the front of the shop gave way quickly, as did good lighting, to a selection of slightly older and more interesting costumes—and a musty smell that suggested a decades-old couch. One rack had feather boas in a rainbow of colors, and another had just one item—a pirate’s fancy coat, flipped outward on a swivel-hooked hanger to help display its grandeur. Gold buttons and brocade, once rich but now faded velveteen, and a silk sash. Apart from the moth holes, it looked like it had never been worn.

Ciara snorted when she saw its tag: *authentic eighteenth century, owned by a real pirate!* “I bet you a million dollars this was never owned by a real pirate. Please, please, please make my brother wear this.” She giggled, grabbing it from the hanger and attempting to thrust it into my arms. “He can plunder your booty.”

“I’m going to have to ask you to never repeat that sentence,” I said with as much seriousness as I could muster.

But I couldn’t help but burst out laughing, which brought the sound of clacking hangers and footsteps closer to us. “Did you need something, dears?” the voice from earlier called.

“No,” said Ciara, her eyes round with barely contained laughter. “We’re fine, thanks.”

The clacking sound of hangers toddled away from us, and I could have sworn I heard the shopkeeper grumble “know-nothing kids” under her breath.

“What are we doing after trick-or-treating?” Ciara asked when we were safely alone again.

I respected her intentional change of subject for what it was. “Going home and gorging on candy?”

She grunted her disapproval. “Wrong answer. Try again.”

Of course she felt that way. She had no idea there was a killer in the city. We had managed to keep the murders a secret, even from her. Lach planned to increase security throughout New Orleans for the holiday, but why tempt fate? “I’m not sure Lach will want to party if—”

Another grunt cut me off. “There will be parties all over the Quartier Enchanté. We have to go. No one throws parties like vampires.”

“No one?” I asked faintly, recalling dizzying memories of the Midnight Feast.

“No one.” She picked up the catalog and thrust it in my direction. “And

their costumes..." She feigned a swoon. "Everyone will be there."

I took the catalog and began flipping through it. Ciara might have been exaggerating, but I'd bet money that the murderer was not only a member of one of the city's covens, but that they also wouldn't be able to resist a large gathering of New Orleans's magical creatures. It was another reason to stay away...but an even better reason to go.

I returned to the Avalon with two garment bags, each holding half of the perfect couple's costume—if Lach cooperated. I only hoped he was in a decent mood when I sprang my idea on him. I finally found him in his living room, drink in hand, locked in a staring contest with his brother—and mine.

"You're out!" I squealed, half relieved and half elated. I dropped my bags onto the sofa next to Lach and rushed across the room as Channing rose from his chair. Despite the vampire blood they had used to heal him, his skin was wan and dark circles rimmed his eyes. "Why didn't you tell me?" I bleated, throwing myself into his arms.

I suspected I already knew the answer. The lack of communication from my brother was the direct result of his guilt over what had happened with Oberon. But if we were going to avoid making dumbass mistakes like that again, we had to learn to talk to each other.

"Just found out this morning." He grinned down at me, squeezing me tightly. Lach cleared his throat, and Channing released me, backing up a step.

"Ignore him," I ordered loudly, lunging for another hug. "I usually do."

Even with my back turned to him, I could feel Lach's annoyance.

"We're going out to celebrate if you want to join," Shaw said.

"We?" I looked between the two of them. "The two of you?"

"And Dante," Channing added.

My smile faltered. "Is that a good idea?"

Channing blinked like the question confused him. "He saved my life."

"But..." Anxiety jammed the words in my throat. I forced myself to swallow. "He's a vampire."

Channing only shrugged. "So?"

I stole a glance at Lach, who nodded once as if to say he'd already been down this road with them. No wonder he was annoyed.

"I'm just not sure..." I trailed off. Channing never took my advice. He was practically allergic to it. That was how we'd wound up in this exact

place. “Where are you staying?”

“I’ve got some couches I can crash on,” he said. “Don’t worry about me.”

But worrying about Channing was one of my primary skills. “Channing, I —”

Lach stood, putting down a large rocks glass. “Shaw, Cate. Can I have a word with you both?”

“Sure,” Shaw said slowly, rising to follow as Lach opened the door that led to the floor’s lobby area.

“We’ll be right back,” I said to Channing, but he only nodded and went to pour himself another drink.

I bit back a reminder that he was nineteen. *Underage*. Something told me I was going to have to start picking my battles where my brother was concerned. And if I had to choose between putting my foot down over a whiskey or over a vampire, I already knew where I would land.

As soon as the door closed behind me, Lach dropped an arm around Shaw’s shoulder in a way that was anything but friendly. “He’s going to stay right here where we can keep an eye on him.”

“Here?” Shaw repeated with a blink. “What do you mean by here?”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” I asked, but Lach continued to glare at his brother.

“Your wing has plenty of rooms.” Lach delivered a meaningful look.

Shaw shook his head. “I don’t know—”

“Channing almost got himself killed, and now you’re introducing him to vampires.”

I coughed, and Lach’s gaze flashed to mine. “Yes?”

He was definitely a little testy. I raised one brow—my own reminder that I wasn’t the person he wanted to challenge at the moment. “I believe you brought vampires into the equation when you woke him up from the coma.”

His face softened slightly. Being reminded of what led us to this moment was enough to temper his annoyance with his brother. “And now, thanks to Shaw, he’s socializing with vampires,” he corrected himself before he turned to his brother. “Are you trying to get him killed for good? And why are you spending so much time with vampires anyway?”

Or maybe Lach’s annoyance just couldn’t be tempered right now. Something he was going to need to work on.

“They accept me. I don’t feel like an outsider.”

Lach’s forehead creased, and I braced for another fight. But he remained

silent.

Maybe he was tired of this argument, too.

Shaw shrugged out of his brother's embrace and took a smooth step toward the elevator. "And if you want Channing to stay here, that's fine." He looked from his brother to me and back. "I'm sure he'd like to keep an eye on things as well."

Like me. Because every time Channing got worried about me, he did something thoughtless bordering on suicidal. Any minute, innuendos would give way to action, claws would come out, and then things would get really ugly.

"Enough." I took a step forward, pointing a finger at each of them. "Channing is going to stay here, because it's the safest choice given the circumstances. But that's not going to be a problem, because we're all adults, right?"

Lach pressed his lips into a tight line, but he cast doubtful eyes at Shaw.

I groaned. "You're both ancient, but you're still behaving like macho teenagers out to prove something. You're brothers. Act like it."

"We're ancient?" A smile twitched on Shaw's face. "Honestly, I don't care if he stays with me. It will be nice to have someone cool around."

If looks could kill, Lach's eyes might have bored right through his brother's skull. "I'm entrusting Channing's safety to you. Keep him out of trouble."

"Always." But the grin on Shaw's face made me cringe. He turned back to me. "I guess that's a no on joining us this evening."

"Probably." I wrinkled my nose. "You'll have more fun without us."

Because I had no doubt if I accepted their invitation, my glowering, irritated mate would come along, too.

He tilted his head. "If you change your mind..."

Shaw headed toward his rooms.

"I don't like this," I muttered, staring after him.

Lach hooked an arm around my waist and dragged me back into his own quarters. "I could find somewhere safer for Channing."

"Where? We already tried jail." But the lightness of my words didn't match my mood.

"Send him to hang with Fiona and Romy. He can't get in much trouble with them," he suggested, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

"You underestimate him." I tipped my face back and searched his eyes.

“You were right. It’s best if we keep him close. I’d rather know where he is than have him out there now that he knows the truth. If we don’t, he’s going to fall in with someone worse than vampires.”

“What if he didn’t know?” Lach asked softly.

I frowned. “It’s not like we can just erase his memory.”

He crooked his head meaningfully.

We could do exactly that. I’d seen it happen. All it would take was one more favor from a vampire, and Channing could be compelled to forget everything he knew about the Gages, the Otherworld, and magical New Orleans.

“Think about it,” Lach continued. “He forgets, and we get him out of town, away from all of this.”

I stared at him, uncertainty digging a pit in my stomach. “Could you do that to your family?”

“I would if I could.” Sadness tainted the resolution in his voice. “If I could have them compelled and get them away from all of this, I would do it in a heartbeat.”

I could tell he meant it. And maybe he was right. Maybe it was selfish to keep Channing around, but wanting him in my life wasn’t the only reason I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

“You’re forgetting something.” I pulled out of his arms, shaking my head. “Oberon knows who Channing is. If we send him away, what’s to stop Oberon from going after him to...?”

I couldn’t bring myself to finish the sentence.

To get to me.

I had something Oberon wanted, and I’d fucked up his plans by escaping. If Channing left New Orleans, I had no doubt that Oberon would go after him.

“Then we keep them close,” he said, and I knew he was talking about everyone we loved—all the people who would be dragged into Oberon’s war—if it came to it.

Lach reached for me, and I returned gratefully to his arms. We were both responsible for the mess we’d made, and whether we cleaned it up or waded through it, we’d be doing it together. He held me closely as we let the weight of our choices settle over us until finally, he broke the silence. “So, what’s in the bag?”

I bit back a grin. “Our costumes.”

“The way you said that makes me nervous,” he admitted, and my mouth split into a wider smile.

I grabbed his collar and hauled him in for a kiss. “Don’t you trust me?”

“In theory.” He reached for the bag, but I shooed his hand away. “You really aren’t going to tell me?”

And risk him backing out? “Hell no.”

“I bet I can get it out of you.”

“And how are you going to do that, Gage?”

His hands crept up my rib cage. “You forget I’m fluent in torture.”

I shrieked as he tickled me. “Stop!”

He did instantly, his teasing expression now strained as he backed away, putting distance between our bodies. I’d triggered his protective instinct, but I wasn’t ready to win. Part of me didn’t want to win at all.

I planted a hand on my hip and leveled a challenge. “Is that all you’ve got?”

He must have understood the assignment, because I was off my feet and over his shoulder a second later. I batted playfully at his back as he carried me toward our bedroom, the costumes forgotten.

For now.

“Oh, princess,” he said, “you have no idea how persuasive I can be.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cate

Not only had Lach's methods failed to extort what was in the costume bag, he'd been too busy the last few days with the secret business of running the city to continue his so-called torture. In fact, he barely had time to come to bed at all. By the time Halloween morning finally showed her face, I was ready to murder someone to get his attention.

By the evening, he still hadn't shown despite a dozen texts promising he was on his way, and I was losing patience with him.

"Ignore it," I told Ciara as my phone buzzed on the bathroom counter.

She plucked up the phone anyway, her lips pursing in disapproval at whatever the latest text read. "I say you withhold sex to teach him a lesson."

"But that would be a punishment for me." I took the phone from her, turning the alerts off. Any guilt I felt over the costume I'd chosen for him was long gone.

It's not like there had been much of a choice. Something told me the creatures of New Orleans brought their A game to the holiday, so that had ruled out anything cheap and tacky, and Lach's request to avoid tights further narrowed my options. In the end, I'd actually found something perfect, and if he didn't like it, he could kiss my ass—preferably repeatedly...while naked.

"Are you ready for this?" Ciara unzipped the bag from the costume shop, and a cascade of tulle and lace and silk spilled out.

"As long as you're helping." Between the petticoats and the corset, I didn't know where to start.

She grinned mischievously at me. "That's why I'm here."

I suspected she had also volunteered her services because it was a sure way to get some distance from her *newly assigned bestie*, as she kept angrily calling Roark.

Ciara helped me into the gown, fussing along the way as she adjusted corset strings and fastened hooks and hoops. The dress was straight out of a fairy tale, which was kind of the point. The soft pink fabric of its ample skirt shimmered like rose petals in full bloom, but it was the strict boning of the corseted bodice I suspected Lach would appreciate. Mostly because it pushed my breasts to swell over the scandalous lace-trimmed neckline. The effect was almost worth how tightly Ciara had drawn the corset strings.

"I feel like I woke up in a storybook," I said, admiring my reflection in the mirror. She'd already worked her magic on my hair and makeup. I spun around, smiling at the way the fabric swished across the marble tile. "Why don't we still dress like this?"

"Ask me that again after you try to use a toilet," she said dryly as she picked up the final piece of the costume: a golden tiara set with glittering crystals.

I held up my hand as she moved to put it on my head. "I think that's a bit much."

"Whatever." She planted it there anyway, tucking it into my carefully glamourised hair. "You're Lach's mate now, and he's still prince of the Nether Court, you know. That pretty much means you have to wear a tiara. You're a real princess."

I swallowed at the thought. It's not like I didn't know that; I'd just become really freaking good at pretending it wasn't true. Trust Ciara to deliver the tough love.

And tonight was supposed to be fun. I didn't want to worry about court politics. Not when I got to live with the reality of them so frequently.

I picked up my phone to check the time, frowning to see a half dozen new texts that I promptly ignored. If he was going to cancel, I would go without him. I'd already spotted my first problem, though. "Where do I put this?" It wasn't like the dress had pockets.

"Reason number two that we don't dress like this still," Ciara teased. She studied the skirt for a minute before she circled her finger. "There. How's that?"

My hand slipped down to discover a perfect phone-size pocket. "I don't know why you don't use magic all the time. It's so damn useful."

"Magic has a cost." A shadow passed over her face, but it was gone in an instant, like a cloud passing over the sun. "Unfortunately, there's no magical solution to trying to pee in a hoop skirt. Consider that fair

warning.”

“I’ll skip the ambrosia,” I promised. I wouldn’t need it if Lach showed. Not when my body was practically vibrating with hunger for him, his absence turning our new mating bond into an itch I couldn’t scratch. I hoped this particular symptom wore off quickly.

“You better get ready. Lach is supposed to be here soon,” I said, checking the time before I slid my phone into my new pocket. “Do you want help?”

“I’m easy.” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. “Don’t wait for me. I’ll find you both.”

My dress took up half the elevator compartment, and I lifted the skirts nervously, afraid I might get caught in the sliding doors. Heads turned as I entered the lobby, a few people murmuring compliments on my costume as I passed them, but I was only interested in the prince waiting for me in front of the revolving door. Relief washed over me that he hadn’t changed his mind, quickly replaced by awe. He’d always looked like something out of a fairy tale to me, but tonight he’d traded his villainous black attire for something that suited him better.

He looked like he had stepped out of a different time. The tailored golden coat hugged his body, opening to reveal a crisp, white shirt with its ruffled neck buttoned high. His fitted black pants showcased his muscled thighs as suggestively as a pair of tights might have—but I wasn’t about to tell him that. As far as I was concerned, he could wear these pants every day.

I nearly tripped on my skirt, dumbfounded by how impossibly beautiful he was, even wearing his human glamour. Later, I’d have to figure out a way to officially thank the French.

Or was it the English? My brain wasn’t working right.

“Milady.” His hand swept out as he bowed deeply, giving me a glimpse of the rake he might have been a few centuries ago.

“I bet the girls didn’t stand a chance with you back in the day.” I suddenly wished I’d opted to add the fan the saleswoman had suggested. It had seemed silly at the time. Now? In his presence? Not...so...much.

“They did not.” He grinned as he rose up, revealing a bright-orange bucket painted like a pumpkin. “For milady’s candy.”

I tried not to laugh. “I don’t think I can handle you calling me that all night.”

“Princess it is.” He held out a hand. “Shall we?”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” I asked.

He paused as if considering the question, ticking off a list on his fingers. “Bucket. Costume. Beautiful woman. Nope, I’ve got everything.”

“Your mask.” I looked around for the one that should have been in the garment bag.

But he pulled me toward the door. It began to revolve as we stepped inside, and I found myself gathering my skirts carefully to keep them from getting caught.

Reason number three we didn’t dress like this anymore.

“I can do better than a mask,” he said when we were safely on the street without a human in sight.

With another flourish, Lach waved his hand, and his face contorted, rippling and shifting. Curved horns sprouted from his head. His fingernails lengthened into razor-sharp talons. And his teeth...

“What do you think?” he asked. Even his voice sounded deeper, each word coming out as nearly a growl.

“Is it wrong that I find you hot?” I couldn’t stop staring at him. Maybe I would love him in any incarnation, but this...

“You better,” he said with a smile that revealed elongated canines.

Yeah, it was so wrong that it had to be right.

We strolled into the twilight, Beauty with her Beast, guaranteed a happily ever after if only for one night.

“Walk or drive?” he asked when we reached the end of the sidewalk. “At least you don’t have to nip on date night.”

My stomach turned over just thinking about it. I didn’t miss being whisked between worlds. I picked up my skirts, swaying them slightly. “I’m guessing I can’t get this thing in the Mercedes without magic.”

“Probably not.” He eyed it for a moment. “If you want to take it off...”

My eyes rolled up at his self-serving suggestion and found the pastel sky streaked with lavender and rose. Around us, the sweet citrus scent of olive bushes wafted in the air. I suddenly felt like I hadn’t enjoyed the city for far too long. That was natural with a murderer on the loose, but tonight, there was no safer place than by Lachlan Gage’s side. “Walk.”

He nodded, tucking my hand into the crook of his elbow. Laughter and music spilled from every doorway that we passed. Children began to crowd the sidewalks, heading to the city’s neighborhoods in droves, their harried parents tailing them with their phones, snapping pictures of every step. Their enthusiasm felt contagious.

We followed a particularly rowdy group toward the Garden District.

“Are you sure you’ve never been trick-or-treating before?” I asked. Judging from the number of people heading in the same direction, Lach had actually picked the best trick-or-treating in New Orleans.

“I know things.”

A toddler careened toward us, her mother chasing behind her. He dropped my arm and scooped the little girl off the ground. She took one look at his beastly mask and burst into tears.

“Sophie! You have to hold hands!” Sophie’s mom gave Lach a grateful smile as he passed her off. “Thank you, and I *love* your costume.”

Maybe it was the glamour, but I swore his chest puffed out. “Don’t let her flirting go to your head,” I joked.

He turned bewildered eyes on me. “Flirting? She just said she liked the costume.”

“I think she *likes* it like *I* like it.”

“Take it as a compliment. You picked it out,” he said with a shrug. Either he was oblivious, or he just didn’t care.

We continued along St. Charles. Every time I looked over at Lach, he was grinning, clearly enjoying the wealth of attention we were being paid from not just the many mothers out tonight but all ages and sexes.

“It’s strange. I never thought you were the type to enjoy the attention of the masses,” I teased.

“Oh, you’ve got it all wrong,” Lach said, patting my hand on his arm. “I’m enjoying how they’re looking at you.”

“Me?” The word came out on a choked laugh. “Pretty sure they’re trying to decide if you might rip them to shreds.” In fairness, he exuded that energy most days.

But he shook his head. “You have no idea how beautiful you look, my love.”

“Oh?” I said, totally unprepared for the compliment.

“I look scary—and *still* they can’t help but come closer,” he said with a glance of deep satisfaction. When it was clear I hadn’t taken his meaning, he clarified further. “It’s you they want to see.”

“That’s...not true,” I spluttered.

“How do I look right now?” Lach said, helping me step off a high curb—something made surprisingly difficult when I couldn’t see anything within two feet of my shoes.

“I thought we’d already established that you are disconcertingly hot for someone rocking a snout.”

He lifted my hand to his lips, his glamoured fur tickling my skin as he kissed it. “It’s not just tonight. It’s not just how beautiful you are. You command every room you enter.”

Something raw crept up my throat. I didn’t know what to say to *that*.

He seemed to know what I was thinking—something that had been happening more and more. “You don’t have to say anything. Just accept that I’m telling the truth.”

We walked the rest of the way in silence, jogging a few blocks to head into the heart of the neighborhood. The deepening twilight cast long, angular shadows over the roofs of the mansions and down their wrought iron balconies. But it was the ancient oaks that stole my breath, even though I’d seen them a hundred times before. On either side of the street, their branches stretched like long arms, joining together like the gnarled hands of old friends.

Tonight, the houses themselves seemed equally alive and somehow restless, as though if I looked away and then back, each one would be in a slightly different place. The children spilling past the open gates onto the sidewalk didn’t seem to notice.

The grand old dames of the Garden District loomed like sentinels, their facades adorned with enchantments that made me gasp. Floating jack-o’-lanterns bobbed on invisible currents, glowing with an ethereal fire, at the Italianate mansion on the corner. Across from it, ghostly apparitions danced across the porch of a Greek Revival, disappearing through its tall, mullioned windows. And tucked behind an iron fence on the large lawn of a gabled cottage, a group of skeletons stirred a bubbling cauldron with their own bones.

On a nearby porch, a willow witch sent a swarm of chittering bats swooping over a group of awestruck children. The tiny creatures veered and dove in a complex aerial dance, their echoing sonar guiding them unerringly.

I found myself staring. “How...how can they get away with so much blatant magic use?”

He chuckled. “Clever spell-work and the candy-induced blindness of Halloween. The enchantments are layered with glamours that make everything look just slightly less implausible to mortal eyes. They see wires

and speakers and animatronics—things they can rationalize.”

“I must be getting better at seeing past glammers, then, because none of that looks fake to me,” I murmured.

Lach was curiously silent at that, but the slight tightening of his hand over mine made me wonder. Shaking off my unease, I let him lead me up one of the long paths toward a towering gothic revival mansion, which was currently crawling with zombie butlers so realistic, a pit opened in my stomach.

“Do you want to get some candy or just keep walking?” he asked.

“Definitely candy.” I grabbed the bucket from him and started toward the house. That was what tonight was all about, after all.

The porch of the grand mansion was alive with jack-o’-lanterns, their sharp-toothed grins flickering with red light. A male witch towered between them, passing out treats, but his smile faded as I marched up to him. His eyes strayed toward Lach, and his lip curled. So much for his costume. It was clear the witch recognized him.

“I can’t believe you have the gall to show your face here, Gage,” he said, once the pitter-patter of little feet had faded away. In the twilight, his eyes looked like small black beads buried at the base of his large nose.

“New Orleans is my city, Ambrose. I show my face wherever I please,” Lach replied, his tone cool but not unkind.

“For now,” Ambrose shot back, words laden with something more than warning. It tripped something in my brain, and I found myself slowing before I reached him.

“Careful,” Lach said, his voice lethally soft, as he moved to my side on the walkway. “That sounded perilously close to a threat.”

Unease coiled in my stomach like a sleeping serpent. I touched Lach’s arm. “Maybe we should call it a night. Trick-or-treating seemed like a fun idea, but...”

He shook his head, his eyes never leaving the witch. “Get your candy, Cate.”

I held back a sigh as they glared at each other. At least masculine posturing wasn’t reserved purely for fae males. Witches could be dicks, too.

Ambrose didn’t bother to look at me as I took the final few steps and held out my bucket with a weak “trick or treat.” He dumped a handful of candy into it. He’d probably poisoned it on the spot just for me. I turned so quickly to leave that I nearly tripped over my skirts. Grabbing Lach’s hand,

I yanked him toward the property's gate. "Let's get out of here."

But he didn't rush away. He took his time—no, he freaking *swaggered* all the way to the street.

"Make sure you really shake your ass for him," I muttered.

"I'm not hiding in my own city. Not anymore," he added. "I don't care if assholes like that have a problem with it."

"What changed?" I asked as we moved away from Ambrose's frosty aura. "You used to avoid being seen in the city."

"You." Vulnerability twined his voice, and he glanced over at me. "Meeting *you* showed me that I need to know my city better—to be part of it."

"And that's it?"

"Isn't that enough?" But his smile didn't reach his eyes.

Or was it that he'd given up on returning to the Otherworld? A cold wave of fear doused my mood at the thought. I forced my eyes ahead but only far enough to see the next house. We'd worry about the future tomorrow.

A change of subject was in order.

"Look at that one." I pointed to a house where spectral vines crept up the walls, moving and writhing like a living thing. Lach chuckled, his beastly guise momentarily softening. But a cloaked figure, the hand on his hip resting on what I worried was an actual fucking sword, stepped into our path. I took a step closer to Lach as the man's midnight-dark eyes landed on me. The stranger drew his hand off the sword and bowed deeply at the waist.

"You've always had a flair for grandeur," Lach said to him, an undercurrent of guarded warmth in his tone. His glamoured talons caught the moonlight as he gestured toward me. "Étienne, allow me to introduce my...Cate."

Étienne rose and lowered his hood. His black hair brushed his shoulders, slightly tousled from the cloak but not unkempt. The sharpness of his jaw and the hard-hewn lines of his face mesmerized me as he extended a hand covered in a leather glove that fastened neatly at his wrist.

Lach's hesitation to call out our relatively new relationship status was adorable. I pried myself away from him, my initial wariness evaporating as I accepted the vampire's hand, the leather glove buttery soft as I shook it. "I'm Lach's...lover."

For an uncomfortable moment, Étienne seemed to be calculating

something. His nostrils flared, and he looked back and forth between Lach and me—almost pointedly. “Charmed,” Étienne said, lifting my hand to kiss it. Lach’s hand tightened ever so slightly around mine, a claim against the flirtation. The vampire withdrew and looked at him. “I thought there was something different about you. Apart from the horns.”

“What are you doing in Second Parish?” Lach asked casually. “Or are you lost?”

I tensed, sensing what he was hinting at, but Étienne didn’t even blink.

“Who could resist such a night?” He glanced at me for confirmation, and I nodded awkwardly, put on the spot. He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “To tell the truth, I like the decorations, and I’m on my way to visit a friend.”

I’d thought the various covens hated each other. There was another reason he might have come, though. Maybe he thought it bad manners to admit that it was the sheer amount of human blood available that brought him here. An icy tendril of dread traced my neck at the idea that other vampires might be out for the same reason. Not that I knew much about their...*eating* habits. I made a mental note to ask roughly a million questions about vampires later.

Lach didn’t hide his incredulity. “A friend in Second Parish?”

“Indeed.” Étienne dipped his chin, giving Lach a rather wise look for someone who appeared only a few years older than me. “I’ve walked this earth too long to worry about political boundaries and what others think. True friendship transcends such petty differences.”

“Or maybe you’re getting soft,” Lach said with a slight smile.

Étienne’s own widened, proof that he meant what he said.

How old was he? Lach had been around for a couple of centuries, and he was still stuck maneuvering the delicate relationships with the covens.

Étienne turned to me. “And how did you talk him into actually going out and doing something?”

“He responds well to threats,” I said without missing a beat.

For a minute, the vampire only stared, but then he burst into laughter. “Fate chose well for you, Lachlan.” His attention returned to me. “Have you talked him into attending the Danse Macabre in the Quartier Enchanté tonight?”

Only about half those words meant something to me. I shot Lach a puzzled look.

But the question seemed to pierce through Lach's beastly exterior, tension tightening his jaw despite the glamour. "I'm not sure *that's* a good idea."

"I don't need to remind you that you are always welcome in my parish," Étienne said softly. "It would also send an important message."

Lach remained silent as if he was considering what that message might be. "We'll think about it."

It was enough to appease Étienne. He inclined his head in my direction. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Cate. Keep him in line."

I bit back a smile. "Will do."

"And I hope to see both of you later," he added meaningfully.

Lach jerked his head in farewell, not bothering to pretend he was even considering the invitation.

Night had fallen around us as we spoke, stars twinkling into existence overhead. Only a sliver of the moon was visible, but despite that, the night was clear and bright. When Étienne's form blended into it, I dared to touch the subject Lach clearly wished to avoid. "What's the Danse Macabre? And why don't you want to go?"

"Last time I took you to an event like that one, you ended up drinking yourself under the table," he said, a note of concern buried beneath the memory.

A flush of embarrassment warmed my cheeks. I didn't have to ask which event he was referring to. The Midnight Feast was scorched into my memory for about a dozen reasons, nearly all of which I'd rather forget. But things had been different then, and part of me wondered what it might have been like if we had attended hand in hand instead of at each other's throats. "I think I can handle it."

"Can you now?" Skepticism lined his voice, and when he looked at me, all I saw was apprehension.

But I was determined to make the most of tonight, and according to Ciara, a party thrown by vampires was the height of living.

"Let's go," I urged, determined to show him I could handle anything.

"Okay." But he didn't seem overly enthusiastic about the change in plans.

I couldn't help but wonder what awaited us at the Danse Macabre and why it seemed like a shadow looming over Lach's heart.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lach

I knew better than to try to convince Cate the party was a bad idea. Even though that was exactly what it was: a very fucking bad idea. Mostly because I was with her. Half the city's covens were afraid of me; the other half hated me—and were afraid of me, which was even worse.

The moon crept higher in the sky as we drove into First Parish's territory, new doubts occurring to me with each star that winked into existence overhead.

"You're quiet," Cate accused as the Mercedes wove through the streets of the French Quarter. She stared out the window as we passed Jackson Square. "We don't have to go."

When she said things like that, what choice did I have? I shook my head, allowing my beastly glamour to fade as we pulled in front of the valet stand at La Porte. "Just thinking."

"That's proven dangerous in the past." Her eyes studied my face, narrowing to track some fleeting ink, my tattoos once again visible. "Change your mind about the costume?"

"It's better not to hide," I said gruffly. On Halloween, when creatures of every sort let their proverbial freak flags fly, even my human glamour would be seen as an attempt to disguise myself. As tempted as I was to blend in, I couldn't risk undermining my own authority in a place like the Quartier Enchanté. Every eye would be on us from the moment we walked through the doors. "Sorry about the costume."

"You're beast enough without it." There was something low and promising in her voice, as if she knew a reward might be in order for pushing me to attend tonight's festivities.

She wasn't wrong. The Danse Macabre could be counted on to get the blood stirring.

I paused before the fairly derelict entrance to La Porte and turned to her.

“We can leave if anything makes you uncomfortable.”

Her brows shot up as she blinked rapidly. “Ciara told me that no one throws a party like a vampire.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “Is this going to be like the Midnight Feast?”

“Not *exactly*.” I strained for the right way to explain what the evening held. “It’s a bit more theatrical than that, but...”

“Great. It’s an orgy.” She scowled. “Is everything this group does an orgy?”

I considered for a moment, tilting my head as I sorted through centuries of parties. “I mean, if we can help it.”

Maybe I’d discovered my free pass for getting out of walking through La Porte’s door, but Cate only rolled her eyes. “At least I’m prepared this time.”

“So...you still want to go?”

“Why not?” She winked at me. “It could be fun.”

I didn’t miss the suggestive note in her voice. “Fun?”

“Last time, we weren’t together.” She picked at her sleeve, a slight flush rising on her cheeks.

Well, it was clear what that implied.

“We can leave anytime,” I promised her. Cate might have thought she was up for this, but she’d been known to get in over her head before.

Her eyes lit up like she’d won some argument I didn’t realize we were having. But triumph faded as I started toward the beat-up old building.

“Wait! This is it?” She scanned the collection of official notices taped and stapled to the battered door, a frown deepening at the condition of the ancient theater’s crumbling brick facade. “This place looks like it should be condemned. There’s going to be an orgy here. Is that even sanitary?”

I bit back a laugh and extended my hand. “Appearances can be deceiving, princess.”

She took it, eyes still wide and uncertain. “I’m trusting you on this.”

Unlike most of the other magical enclaves in the world, the Quartier’s avenues were open for any magical creature to stroll along—no formal entrance or esoteric handshakes necessary. The magic in one’s blood served as a ticket, barring hapless humans from stumbling into our private spaces. La Porte was different. The street entrance to the theater had been built outside the Quartier’s bespelled boundary line. “The notices keep most of the humans away,” I explained to her as I reached for the door. The knob

warmed in my hand, the threshold's magic recognizing my own. "During the day, this door is locked to keep away the more curious ones."

I pushed open the door with an ominous creak, a few thin cobwebs stirring across the top of its worn frame.

Cate didn't budge from the cobbled sidewalk. "And at night?"

"Come inside and see." I flourished a hand toward the dim entryway. She stared into the void, her eyes flickering over to me before she finally sighed and took a tentative step into the darkness.

"La Porte and this neighborhood have always been largely...self-governing," I told her, choosing my words with care. "I've tended to keep my distance over the years out of respect. At least, that's one of the reasons."

A visit to the theater meant she was likely to meet the other reason, whether I liked it or not. I forced a thin smile. Even the Quartier's cherished autonomy only existed because I allowed it—a fact they might need to be reminded of right about now. Gripping her more tightly, I led us out of the shadows and into the lion's den.

Uncertainty prickled my skin and set my pulse thrumming as the false frontage melted into an opulent lobby. A series of gilded plaster arms lined the rich burgundy walls, outstretched to hold flaming torches, their flickering light dancing on the polished marble floors. Cate's mouth fell open as she took it all in. "This was not what I expected." Her gaze snagged on a large archway, draped on either side by puddling yards of thick velvet curtains fringed with gold tassels. She craned her neck toward the sounds spilling from beyond. Piano and violins drifted toward us, their swelling notes punctuated by the clatter of roulette wheels and dice and subsequent cheers and groans. She glanced up at me. "Is it a casino?"

"Theaters used to be an excuse to gamble in the crescent city," I explained as I led her slowly toward the bustling activity in the adjoining room. "Back when the local authorities were stricter about such things."

"And it's still like that here today?"

The wonder filling her voice made me smile. "Vampires cling to vices like they're life rafts on a sinking ship. Technically, this is the oldest running casino in New Orleans."

"*Technically?*"

"You won't find it listed on any historic registers," I murmured as we worked our way into the crowd.

She clutched my hand, her eyes widening as she drank in the gamblers, most of whom were costumed in a strange mix of the glamorous and the grotesque. A man dressed in a Victorian tailcoat turned as we passed, revealing a porcelain mask with a long, curved beak and hollow black eyes. His head tilted ever so slightly in acknowledgment before he returned to his hand of blackjack. At the next table, a woman in a flowing blue gown, a crown of silver stars twinkling atop her pinned curls, blew on a pair of dice before scattering them across the felt tabletop. Her companion, dressed in a tattered lace wedding gown smeared with something that looked suspiciously like dried blood, cheered.

Cate halted so suddenly that I accidentally yanked her arm. Alarm sounded in my veins, and I took a protective step to her side. But she was staring at a group of drunken men wearing normal clothes. “Are they... human?”

Leaning close to her ear, I murmured, “Humans are only allowed in the parts of La Porte where they can lose money.” I hesitated before adding softly, “Or blood.”

She shivered, her gaze darting around the room. “I guess that’s why vampires never give up their vices.”

“Well, we try not to,” a lilting voice cut in, “but sometimes our hands are forced.” I tensed as Baptiste greeted Cate with a smile. Like most, she wore something from the past, the brocade gown with its ruffles and layers likely from an old stage performance, her powdered wig drawing out the tawny of her flawless complexion. Among so many humans, her pupils had dilated into black orbs that zeroed in on the woman at my side. Baptiste’s nostrils flared slightly as her smile widened. “The rumors must be true.”

Cate stared at her, her own face composing itself into a careful mask in the presence of a vampire. “Oh?”

“They say the Prince of New Orleans is under a spell.” Her eyes flicked up to mine, mischief glinting in their bottomless black. “It must be true if Lachlan Gage deigned to show his face here, and you must be the witch who cast it.”

I stiffened. I hadn’t expected a welcoming party, but this felt like a test.

“I’m not a witch.” But Cate smiled. “I’m just better in bed than his past girlfriends.”

I barely smothered a laugh as Baptiste took a step away, surveying Cate

like she was seeing her for the first time. Her face tilted to mine with a silent question.

“Cate, allow me to introduce Baptiste Du Roschiers.” I gestured toward her, already wondering how Baptiste would try to inflict retribution for Cate’s glib remark.

She extended her hand, a velvet glove stretched to her elbow. “The proprietor of La Porte,” she said as Cate shook it gently, adding, “and Lach’s ex-girlfriend.”

Cate fumbled, her composure slipping slightly as Baptiste’s words sank in. “N-nice to meet you,” she stammered, drawing her hand back quickly.

I cleared my throat, stepping closer to my mate. “That was over a long time ago,” I said dismissively. “*Ancient history.*”

“Watch who you call ancient, Gage,” Baptiste warned me with a smirk that told me she was more amused by this encounter than irritated. She leaned closer to Cate. “Although, I could tell you some stories about this one...”

Cate—damn her—looked more intrigued than upset by this offer. A slow smile spread across her face as she regarded Baptiste with new interest. “Now that is tempting.”

Baptiste smirked at her. “He had a rather misspent youth.”

“I don’t remember that.” I searched the room for the nearest exit.

But Baptiste snorted, shaking her head and nearly sending her wig toppling. “You might not, but fortunately for Cate, I do.” She tapped a finger against her chin as she assessed Cate. “We should have lunch.”

Cate bit her lip as if even the promise of embarrassing stories wasn’t worth the danger of eating with a vampire. At least some of her self-preservation instinct was intact. “I’ll bring Ciara.”

“Perfect.” Baptiste’s grin turned feline.

I groaned inwardly, envisioning the three of them gossiping and giggling at my expense. But old stories were the least of the damage that Baptiste could inflict. I needed to put an end to this unholy alliance before it began.

“I think that’s enough trips down memory lane for one evening.” I hooked an arm around Cate’s waist to keep her from slipping off with the vampire. “Étienne invited us. Have you seen him?”

“He’s around,” Baptiste purred, eyes still gleaming with triumph. “The show is about to start. He’s probably making his way to the stage.” She nodded to Cate. “I’ll see you very soon. Enjoy the Danse.” She blew us a

kiss before disappearing into the crowd.

I tugged Cate in the opposite direction, away from the casino floor and toward the deeper recesses of La Porte—the spaces reserved for magical beings.

Cate nudged me as we approached a dimly lit corridor. “You could have warned me,” she said. “Baptiste seems...interesting.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” I muttered. “Look, she might seem charming, but Baptiste is dangerous.”

“Because she’s a vampire?” She arched an eyebrow.

“Because she’s Baptiste.” It was hard to explain what I’d learned the hard way over the centuries. “And hey, if you want my humiliating stories, just ask.”

She pressed her lips into a bemused line. “So you’re going to tell me?”

“In 1838, I mistook a woman for a werewolf on Bourbon Street and tackled her.” Not the worst of the tales, but I still grimaced at the memory.

“How did you do that?” Cate asked, laughing.

“In my defense, her fur coat looked like it was trying to swallow her,” I said, smiling a bit despite myself, “and I was also very drunk.”

“That can’t be the worst story she has on you,” Cate pushed.

It wasn’t. Not by a long shot. “I’ve got more. Just stay away from her.”

I didn’t care about what Baptiste could tell her about my past. Cate and I were mated. Nothing could undo that. But I doubted that Baptiste wanted to be friends with Cate for selfless reasons; more likely, she hadn’t given up on her opium proposal. Not that she would find an ally in Cate for that cause. But despite what I’d told Cate earlier this evening, there was a reason I’d learned to keep some distance from the city’s covens. Friendliness was easily mistaken as weakness.

Cate huffed. “Oh, please. I’m a big girl—I can handle myself. Or are you just uncomfortable with the idea of me being friends with your ex?”

I sighed heavily, running a hand through my hair. “It’s not that. I just... I need you to be careful, all right? Promise me you’ll keep your guard up around her.”

She studied me for a moment before nodding slowly. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to lunch with a vampire alone. I said I’d bring Ciara, remember?”

She had. Because she was clever. I needed to remember that. Pulling her against me, I kissed her forehead. “I’m a little on edge.” I paused, something thick muddying my voice. “I know you can take care of

yourself.”

But even as I spoke, unease wormed through me. Baptiste’s interest in Cate was far from coincidental. I’d have to watch the vampire closely.

Very closely.

Cate inhaled sharply as we stepped into the dim hallway. The world shimmered around us, magic allowing us passage. The darkness melted into a light-soaked private room, neon and candlelight clashing in an unholy combination. A few heads turned in our direction, eyes studying Cate. I stepped closer to her, my unease deepening as they roamed over her human features.

“They’re staring at me,” she muttered, flushing as a particularly curious vampire tossed his cards on the table and blatantly ogled her as he lifted a champagne flute, the red liquid inside morphing into electric blue when it met his lips.

“Can you blame them?” I asked, doing my best to sound smug instead of concerned.

She glanced up at me. “Am I allowed here?”

I pinned my gaze on the vampire until he looked away. Wrapping a protective arm around her waist, I guided her into the bustling chaos. But more than a few pairs of eyes followed us.

“Oh my God.” She kept her voice low. Not that it mattered. Every creature in the place could hear us if they wanted. “It’s like stepping into another century.”

Her gaze flitted from one elaborately costumed creature to another. Fae adorned in shimmering gossamer gowns from the Otherworld. Vampires in velvet tailcoats and regency ball gowns.

“I feel like I just walked into a very weird Jane Austen novel,” she admitted. “It’s all very...historical.”

I chuckled, but my mood remained dark. “They’re probably just wearing old shit from the backs of their closets.”

We wandered past the tables where the magical beings of New Orleans played very different games of chance.

“Are those...?” Cate paused to study an ivory-inlaid roulette wheel.

“Runes.”

The assortment of items placed on squares across the table was mesmerizing. There were the standard poker chips but also precious, glittering gemstones. She frowned as a man laid a single strand of light

across one. “What is he doing?”

“It’s a bet only the desperate make,” I whispered in her ear. “He’s offering what he has left.”

Her eyes remained glued to the strand as the wheel spun. “And what is that?”

“It’s hard to know. A bit of his soul, a memory, a moment of joy?” I shrugged.

“Those have value?”

“Don’t they?” I tried to hurry her along, but her breath caught as the ball fell.

No winner. There rarely was.

The man’s shoulders slumped as the dealer raked away the piece of him along with the rest of the offerings on the table. “Come on.”

Cate glanced behind us, worry knitting her brows as the man produced another glowing thread. “What is he—”

“Some people never learn,” I reminded her, ushering her through the crowd. We only made it a few more steps before she stopped again.

“Why are they playing with tarot cards?” she asked. “What game is that?”

“One you should never play.” I urged her forward as a werewolf sniffed the air and looked over at us with a frown. Cate noticed and froze, but I squeezed her hand reassuringly, even as I scanned the crowd for other potential threats. “Just stay close.”

But the crowd nearest us parted, Étienne striding through. The room fell silent as he approached us, everyone aware that the city’s most powerful vampire was walking toward the crown prince of the Nether Court.

“You came!” he called out. “And you’re just in time for the show!”

The spell of silence broke, conversation and music resuming as if nothing had happened. But as Étienne led us away from the gambling, more attention focused on us—most of which was disapproving. A vampire muttered something under his breath as we passed, too low for Cate to hear. The insult was meant for my ears.

I whirled on him, lips curling back in a snarl. The vampire paled as he backed away a step, seeking shelter among the others. But the people around him scattered, no other souls stupid enough to dare being lumped in with him.

“Hey,” Cate whispered, tugging gently on my arm. “You’re only *dressed* as a beast, remember?”

I stared at him until he turned and fled the room. “Not to them, Cate. Not to them.”

“I’ll make sure he’s placed on the blacklist,” Étienne promised. He wagged a finger at a nearby security guard, who dashed toward us. “See that that man is escorted out and his access is revoked.” The guard nodded before rushing to perform his duties. Étienne turned an apologetic smile on us. “Perhaps we can find you a more private place to watch the Danse.”

“That would be great,” I said through gritted teeth.

Étienne gestured for us to follow, leading us to a paneled wall. He waved a hand, and a hidden door slid open. “Backstage, perhaps?”

I ducked to avoid hitting my head on the low frame. Cate moved closer to me as Étienne led us through the dark passage, the scents of greasepaint and old wood growing as we stepped into the backstage area.

“Wait, there’s actually a theater?” she whispered, her gaze roaming over the rigging and velvet curtains.

Étienne’s laughter echoed in the space. “Indeed, my dear. Vampires like spectacle as much as gambling.” He turned to me. “You may watch from the wings or find a place amongst the audience. Your choice.”

“I think we’ll stay here.” It was a relief to be away from the prying eyes.

“As you wish. If you stick to the rear wing, no one should *bother* you.” Étienne tilted his head to Cate. “It was a pleasure to meet you. It’s been too long since Lachlan seemed happy.”

“Have I ever?” Only half of me was joking.

His eyes sparkled. “Not like this,” he murmured, looking again at Cate. “*Enjoy the show.*”

He winked at me before he strode away.

Cate swallowed as she watched him go. “What kind of show is the Danse Macabre, exactly?”

I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. “It’s the story of life and death told by various creatures.”

Before she could ask more questions, a few stagehands rushed past. I grabbed Cate’s hand and dragged us behind the partition shielding the rearmost wing from the stage. Tucked in its shadows, we had a clear view of the actors as they took their places. We turned our attention to the stage as the curtains parted, and Cate gasped when music swelled from the orchestra pit. She clapped a hand over her mouth.

I moved behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist and drawing her

body against mine. Leaning down, I brought my lips to her ear. "No one can hear us."

Her hands covered mine, gripping them tightly as the lights rose to reveal a collection of creatures in a circle, their nude bodies a mosaic of colors. They knelt around a single woman tucked into a tight ball on the floor.

The haunting music rose, and the one in the middle began to stir, stretching her arms and legs as she extended her body. She raised her face to the sky, opening her mouth in a silent scream.

Cate craned her neck to the side, her eyes flickering to me. "Birth?" she guessed, and I nodded.

She fell quiet as the actress continued to move, pushing onto her palms and knees before slowly rising on unsteady feet to take her first steps. She continued uncertainly before gaining speed and running into the wing opposite us.

The others continued to dance until she reemerged before them. They surrounded her, raising their arms above her as they began to chant.

"The witches' blessing," I explained in a low voice to her. "Witches are born like humans, but they are reborn before their coven when they come of age."

I had barely finished my thought when two pale figures emerged from the wings to begin another scene. I tightened my grip on Cate's hips, drawing her closer as I murmured in her ear.

"And now a different kind of birth," I breathed.

The man strode toward the woman, who paused under a painted streetlamp, and beckoned her with his index finger. She hesitated before taking a single step, and he grabbed her. Cate gripped me tightly as he plunged his fangs into the woman's neck. "Let me guess. Vampire," she said faintly. "They're made, right?"

"Some of them," I said, but Cate was too wrapped up in the stage to ask more, the finer points of vampire procreation forgotten. The man stopped feeding and offered his own wrist to the woman. She drank from him before going limp in his arms.

"First death, then the thirst for blood," I whispered as the actress arched to life, opening her mouth to reveal her own fangs. She sank them into his neck, their hips rolling in a single, shared motion.

The man yanked away, and the actors circled each other, lunging and baring their teeth. "Then the bloodlust," I continued, my voice dropping

lower. “The need to feed...and fuck.”

Cate shivered in my arms as the man lifted the woman off her feet. The other actors onstage rose again, ignoring the vampires.

“I guess this is happening,” Cate said in a strained voice as the creatures onstage paired off, licking and kissing and tasting one another as they danced to the strange, hypnotic symphony.

“I tried to warn you,” I said with a soft laugh. She elbowed me in the ribs, and I chuckled again before growing serious. “Life begets life, Cate. The Danse is a celebration of our purest and most basic instincts.”

But she frowned. “There are no fae...”

“Our world is apart from theirs.” The flesh on the back of my neck burned as if questioning my answer for her. “Most of the creatures in New Orleans think we’re nothing alike, but they’re wrong.”

Despite our long lives, we were flesh and bone, too.

“Even immortals bleed,” she whispered, a lingering note of pain in her voice.

The music changed, building in intensity as lovers untangled, shouting and crying out before flying from one another into the arms of someone new, partners changing and shifting over and over, claiming and reclaiming each other in a dizzying variety of positions.

Cate squirmed, her breathing growing shallow as their movements became more intimate and primal.

“This is the dance of life and death.” I dragged my teeth along the shell of her ear, one hand roaming upward to her breasts. “Blood and sex. Desire and lack. Control, temptation, and sin—all mixed together in one fucked-up symphony.”

I snaked a hand beneath the gown’s bodice to her corset strings.

She inhaled sharply, trying to cover the slip with a snorted “Good luck.”

“I’ve had centuries of practice, princess.” I loosened them deftly, staring down at her. Cate continued to watch the show, her chest rising in punctuated heaves as my fingers dipped to her freed breasts.

Her back bowed as I circled the pad of my thumb over a nipple.

“Tease,” she muttered. “You’ll never get through all these layers.”

Challenge delivered.

She whimpered as I abandoned her breasts, but I only grinned down at her.

“Oh, the trick isn’t getting through the layers,” I purred, hiking up her

skirt and petticoats. My hand slipped between her thighs, finding the thin fabric covering her already soaked. “It’s knowing what you’re doing.” A moan escaped her lips as I slid a finger past her panties. “My, my,” I taunted. “Is watching them fuck exciting you?”

“Don’t be dense,” Cate snapped, her voice breathy.

I pulled my hand away from her slick heat and traced her thigh. “If it isn’t, my apologies...”

But she grabbed my wrist, her nails digging into my skin. “Don’t you dare stop,” she hissed.

Laughing, I nipped her ear, sliding two fingers inside her. Her body clamped around them. “Keep watching.”

I matched the pace of the scene, plunging into her with each thrust of a witch’s hips, each bite from a vampire, with every moment of witnessed pleasure. Cate rolled her hips, urging me deeper as the scene onstage reached its crescendo, until she erupted.

She sagged against me as the theater went dark, her body trembling, but I couldn’t wait any longer. The need to possess her—to claim her—consumed me like wildfire. We stumbled together behind the backdrop, deeper into the shadows. I spun her around, bracing her against a truss in the stage rigging, and crushed my mouth to hers.

Her fingers tangled in my hair as my tongue swept over hers, giving in to our own dance of life and death.

“Lach,” Cate gasped between kisses. “I need you.”

“Gods, I know,” I growled, pushing her skirt up higher. With a swift motion, I tore off her panties. Her arms hooked over my shoulders as I cupped her ass and lifted her from her feet.

Cate wrapped her legs around my waist as the sounds of a new scene began behind us.

“Hurry. We don’t know when it will be over,” Cate whispered, her eyes locked on mine.

The cruel irony of her words struck me. I’d walked our worlds for centuries before I met her, and now we had so little time left.

“We don’t,” I admitted in a hollow whisper.

Her eyes widened. “I didn’t mean—”

But I kissed her, sinking inside her in one smooth motion. “All that matters is this.”

We moved together in a frantic rhythm, our bodies speaking a language

older than time. My memento mori stung with each thrust of my hips, pain edging my pleasure. How much longer could I escape my fate?

Cate reached up, her fingers brushing the mark before she clasped the back of my neck. Her eyes searched mine.

“I’m yours,” she breathed, as if answering my unspoken question. “For whatever time we have left.”

“Whatever time we have left,” I vowed as I drove us harder and faster toward the inevitable. The music rose, building toward the show’s unescapable conclusion, death chasing every note as it hunted. It would find us. It would find me. And when the score spiked on one final frantic note, we went over the edge together—clinging to each other like we would never let go.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Lach

The haunting final notes of the Danse Macabre lingered as we threaded our way through the throng of partygoers spilling out of the auditorium into the lobby and sprawling game rooms surrounding the theater. Laughter mixed with the sounds of rustling costumes as the celebration burst into full swing. A protective instinct surged inside my chest, the primal force drawing my body closer to Cate's with every step we took amidst the city's creatures.

"Easy there," Cate chided, mild but obvious annoyance lacing her voice. "Your mating bond is showing."

But my grip tightened on her hand. I forced a rueful smile as the weight I felt grew heavier. "It's not something I can just...override." Even if it pissed her off. "Since the bond, the need to protect you feels like it's written into my DNA."

She studied me for a moment, something unreadable sparking in her eyes. The crowd pressed in around us as livelier music started, igniting an almost feral urge to shield her from their proximity. Her eyes widened as if she sensed a shift. "You're going to have to try."

"Believe me, I am trying," I confessed, the admission rough and foreign. Self-control wasn't something I generally struggled with. At least, it hadn't been before I met her. I leaned down, brushing my lips across the shell of her ear. Her answering shiver seized my heart. "Because what I really want right now is to show every damned soul in New Orleans that you belong to me."

"I dare you." Warmth crept onto her cheeks that had nothing to do with the crowded room, the delicate pink betraying her feigned annoyance.

Well, I did like a challenge.

"I believe you like to dance."

"I thought you—"

But I was already pulling her toward the music, toward the center of the

room, where people had begun to do just that. She looked nervous as I hooked an arm around her waist and drew her to me. We moved together, our bodies syncing to the rhythm. Her hips moved sinuously, a siren song calling to the bond we shared.

“Seeing you like this”—my hands dipped to explore her curves—“makes it damn near impossible not to take you right here, right now.”

She spun away from me, glancing over her shoulder as the corners of her lips curled upward. “I think that you’re all talk, Gage.”

She punctuated the barb by grinding her ass against me. Another challenge—one that stirred my gods-damned instincts into a near frenzy.

My fingers grazed the fabric of her skirt, bunching it ever so slightly as I pulled her flush against me. I snaked an arm around her, resting my palm gently over her collarbone. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you wanted that.”

Her heartbeat sped up, but before she could respond, the crowd parted down the middle, splitting like the Red Sea. Ciara sauntered toward us, the stones on her Cleopatra costume glittering under the chandeliers. Roark trailed behind.

Cate disentangled from our embrace and straightened her own costume. She frowned at his usual black attire—a choice that only made him stand out more tonight. “What are you supposed to be?”

My sister cast a haughty glance at her companion. “He’s my lapdog,” she declared with a regal tilt of her head. “But he refuses to wear his leash.”

The image that conjured—someone as fierce as Roark collared and leashed—coaxed a chuckle into my throat, but I caught it just in time, turning it into a cough. But my efforts were futile.

Roark’s eyes narrowed on me, his frown deepening into a scowl. “We need to talk.”

Cate looked between us, her gaze landing on Ciara as she grabbed her hand. “Let’s go to the restroom.”

She hauled my sister away before she could protest. It was hard to tell if she was giving us privacy or saving everyone from the sheer awkwardness that oozed from my sister and my penumbra at all times. I watched her go, my focus lingering until she disappeared from sight. My chest tightened, and I forced myself to nod toward the nearest exit. “Outside.”

Something told me that this was a conversation that needed discretion. Or maybe Ciara really just had him that bent out of shape.

Cool air brushed my flushed skin as we stepped through the side door. It swung closed, dampening the festive noise slightly. Roark scanned the back alley, dim save for the moon hanging overhead.

“We identified the human.”

I squared my shoulders, bracing for whatever information he was about to dump on me, and nodded for him to continue.

“Tourist,” he said, his voice low and grave. “She was reported missing by her friends a few days ago.”

“Any leads?”

“Nothing. The scene was clean.” He grimaced as if realizing how wrong that sounded. “We made sure the police found her in less unusual circumstances.”

Anger coiled in my gut. Tourists had gotten caught up in our business before, but this felt personal. “Someone’s playing games with us.” My words came out as a barely controlled growl.

“They’re trying to get under your skin.” His warning was well-meaning but unnecessary.

“It’s working.” Whoever was behind this wanted me out of New Orleans, and I doubted there was any line they wouldn’t cross to see that happen.

“We’ve doubled patrols.” But I could tell by the grim set of his jaw that he had little confidence in the measure.

We wandered toward the street as if we might just prowl the night ourselves in search of the bastard. A couple spilled from La Porte, the man, stumbling drunk, held up by a petite woman. Her black eyes darted to mine, her lips smashing together to hide her fangs, obviously afraid I might intercede on behalf of her midnight snack. But I had bigger problems to worry about, and vampires knew better than to kill their prey in my city. She tugged him into the night, glancing over her shoulder, but another group had caught my attention.

Shaw was leading Dante and Channing *toward* La Porte, the trio chattering boisterously like this was just any bar in town. Each had a cheap Mardi Gras mask in hand, likely picked up from some souvenir shop. A flash of rage as sudden and violent as lightning struck me at my brother’s audacity in bringing Channing here tonight.

“Shaw!” I barked, stepping into their path.

He cursed under his breath when he saw me.

“Where are you heading?” I cracked my knuckles as Roark moved next

to me.

“Just out to have a good time.” He spread his hands, motioning to my penumbra. “Like you two.”

Roark didn’t budge. He only crossed his arms and fixed them with a warning glare. “Maybe you should stick to Bourbon Street.”

“It will only be humans there. The party is here tonight.” Shaw shook his head, sharing a look with Dante. “You two need to relax.”

“Relax?” My brother knew what we were up against, what was lurking in the shadows, but that had always been Shaw’s problem—he didn’t think before he acted. Roark clamped a steadying hand on my shoulder before I completely lost my temper. “Just...stay out of trouble.”

Channing folded his arms, tapping the mask against his biceps. “Is that a threat?”

There was still no love lost between us, and not even an ounce of gratitude for saving his life. But brothers are supposed to care more about protecting their family from outside threats, and that was how he would always see me—as a threat.

“No,” I snapped, my patience wearing thin despite Roark’s attempts. “It’s a warning, because if you step out of line, it won’t be me you’ll answer to; it’ll be Cate. And she will kick your ass.”

He had the decency to look a little scared at the thought.

Dante slung an arm over Channing’s shoulder, guiding him around us. He tipped his head to me as they passed. “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“How comforting,” I said flatly.

A muscle twitched in his jaw, but they continued, followed by Shaw. He paused, opening his mouth to say something before shutting it again without speaking.

“Come on. Let it out,” I encouraged him. Part of me was tired of this dance. It was always the same. Shaw would press my buttons, but he always backed down. When was he going to stand up and fight?

“Not worth it,” he spit back, but he jostled my shoulder as he pushed open the door.

We followed them to the threshold, the murders momentarily forgotten, but we didn’t go inside. Shaw pulled his mask over his face, the others following suit as they entered the fray. The misfit trio worked their way into the crowd, the gyrating bodies and flickering lights swallowing them up. Roark edged closer to me, shaking his head at the bouncer waiting for us to

enter. “You’re too hard on him.”

This wasn’t the first time we’d had this conversation. Something told me it wouldn’t be the last.

“Shaw needs to grow up,” I murmured back, my gaze pinned to the now-closed door. “He’s still acting like a fucking kid.”

“He *is* a kid.”

“Exactly. But he keeps trying to get involved in shit. He’s not prepared.”

“He can’t prepare if you don’t let him near the business.” His steadiness felt like a dressing down.

I clenched my jaw, my simmering frustration threatening to boil over. “He isn’t ready.”

“Nobody ever is,” Roark countered softly, the words striking a chord deep within me.

Memories of the night my parents’ reign ended flashed through my mind—the chaos, the confusion, my own staggering unpreparedness. I’d made a lot of stupid mistakes in the immediate aftermath, some of which I was still paying for.

“Why do you think I’m so hard on him?” It came out more sharply than I intended. “When Ciara takes the throne, I want him ready, not a fucking mess like I was.”

“Then stop pushing him away. You—” The sound of splintering wood cut him off. We both whipped around as the door to La Porte burst open, revealing a large crack on the other side. Creatures of all kinds—vampires with night-dark eyes, witches muttering what were likely spells under their breath, snarling fae—tumbled into the street.

I turned to Roark, cocking a brow. “You were saying?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Cate

La Porte's bathroom felt like a sanctuary after the Danse Macabre, especially given the fact that Ciara had unceremoniously ordered every other soul out and locked the door behind them. Ciara smoothed her glamoured bob as I adjusted the bodice of my gown with the help of the gilded, full-length mirror that leaned against the emerald-and-gold-papered walls. I frowned as I noticed a jagged tear along the skirt's hem.

Ciara caught sight of the damage, and her lips twitched. "Looks like you're not getting that deposit back."

"I guess not." At least it was worth it.

"Maybe you should be more careful." Mischief glinted in her green eyes. "Did you catch it on something or someone or *someone's something*?"

I rolled my eyes even as my heart pounded, recalling exactly how the dress had been torn. "I think you need to get laid."

She snorted as she stared at her reflection. "Who has the time?" Waving a hand, she turned her lips a deeper shade of red, nearly crimson. "I mean, except you."

I circled a finger in her direction. "This isn't meant to catch *someone's* attention?"

Two could play the innuendo game, and since she'd been bombarding me with them since I bargained my way into her life, it was her turn to lose it.

"Maybe." She pursed her lips like she was practicing said seduction. "There are a lot of vampires here tonight."

"I thought the eighties were your vampire decade." She'd told me that once in a fit of melancholy.

But this time she laughed. "Honey, every decade is a vampire decade."

"We're really going to pretend that nothing's going on with you and—"

"Don't finish that thought."

I crossed my arms and waited for her defense. As far as I was concerned,

it was more than a thought—for all interested parties. “Was I this obstinate over Lach?”

“Worse.”

“Speaking of acting like a brat,” I said, watching her flinch in the mirror. I softened my voice, hoping I still sounded firm. “You’ve been kind of harsh with Roark lately.”

Her bubbly facade faltered, her smile waning like the crescent moon outside. She released a long sigh that seemed to carry the weight of unspoken thoughts. “I know,” she admitted, leaning against the sink, her eyes meeting mine in the mirror. “It’s just...easier than admitting how awkward this new arrangement is. I’ll be glad when we break this curse and everything goes back to normal.”

“What if it doesn’t? What if Lach needs you to take the throne? You’re going to need Roark.” Something twisted in my gut. It was a possibility I rarely acknowledged because of the implications. But Ciara was my friend, and as much as I wanted a return to normal—or whatever this new life of mine was—I owed it to her to be truthful. She needed to face this. Maybe we both did.

She fiddled with a ring on her finger. “I can’t explain what it is that annoys me so much about him.”

The corners of my mouth lifted involuntarily. “That’s a feeling I understand.”

“It’s not like that.” She glared back at me.

“Of course not.” I didn’t try to hide my sarcasm. There was a thin line between irritation and attraction. She knew it, too.

“If you’re implying that—” The click of a lock interrupted her, the bathroom door swinging open with urgency. A cacophony of shouts and curses spilled in along with a trio of flustered women, one of whom I assumed must be a witch.

“Sorry,” the one dressed in a flapper costume said when they spotted us. “Shit is going down out there.”

My heart stopped. “What’s happening?”

“Some human guy just picked a fight with a witch, and now his vampire and fae friends are getting involved. It’s going to get ugly fast,” another said between pants, her eyes round and wild as she slammed the door. “How did you not hear it?”

“I had a privacy ward on the door,” Ciara said, pushing past her. “You

said he's with a vampire and a fae?"

The flapper nodded, holding out an arm to slow Ciara. "You should stay here. Let someone else break it up. Lachlan Gage is out there."

But Ciara was already giving me a sympathetic look. A vampire, a fae, and a human walked into a bar... What were the chances? I pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling the onset of a headache. "If only..."

Ciara grabbed my hand, yanking me into the chaos outside the bathroom, the energy in La Porte spiraling like the beginning of a storm. We forced our way through the crowd of people, half of whom were trying to escape and the others egging on the fight.

Channing stood defiantly amidst overturned chairs and spilled drinks, his fists clenched and blood leaking from a split lip, his questionable new friends beside him. Shaw snarled like he wanted another round, but Dante had his palms raised, trying to talk down a group of male witches stalking toward him.

"Channing!" I yelled over the din, but it was like trying to be heard in a hurricane. I scanned the room, looking for Lach and Roark, but they were nowhere to be found.

Maybe Lach wasn't going to do anything. Maybe he wasn't even here. And if Lach couldn't or, worse, wouldn't do anything, *I would*.

"Let Lach handle it," Ciara said, but I shook my head and kept working my way through the crowd of onlookers until I could hear everything.

Channing barreled toward him, but Dante caught him around the middle. "Let it go."

"Fuck that," Channing shouted, rage mottling his fair skin. "She said no. Respect it or I'll make you respect it."

Dante didn't budge. "They aren't worth it."

"We didn't ask your opinion, *switch*." One of the witches spat at Dante's feet. The vampire's nostrils flared at the slur, but the witch kept talking. "And since you all seem to be confused, let me point out the obvious. Humans need to remember their place."

Another witch moved closer, murmuring something in a strange language, and Channing grabbed his own throat, choking like he was struggling to breathe. It was a spell of some sort. I elbowed a woman out of the way, the rushing sound in my ears muffling her cry of protest. A fight was bad enough, but Channing was no match for their magic.

"Don't you get it?" the witch called as my brother fought for air. "We're

higher in the food chain now. It's about time everyone in town learns that."

I shoved toward them, my heart hammering against my ribs. "Stop it! Let him go."

But my path was blocked by one of the witches, his eyes narrowing on me. "This is none of your business. We can take care of that asshole."

"That asshole is my brother." I shoved him in the chest, wishing I had even an ounce of the magic Ciara had. She could use it. Any of them could use their magic, and this would be over in seconds. Why weren't they?

"Whoa! A live one." He caught me around the waist and spun me, pretending to dance with me. I struggled against his hold, but he pinned my arms tightly at my side.

"Put me down now," I ordered in a low voice. "You have no idea who you are fucking with."

He dipped me. "Who's that, darling? Another fragile human? But you sure are pretty."

His friend moved to his side, hatred gleaming in his eyes as they focused on me.

"You should take off that costume," he snarled. "I can see what you truly are." A chill shot down my spine as he continued, "Change—"

Darkness swept through the room, cutting him short. Panicked cries filled the space; the people who were reckless enough to have stayed were now trying to escape. The grip on me loosened, and I slipped to the floor. When the shadows lifted, the witches had clustered together, my brother, his friends, and me forgotten.

"Tried to warn you," I told the flirtatious one as Lach appeared at my side. I stared up at him, relief mixing instantly with annoyance. "Took you long enough."

"I thought you liked to fight your own battles, princess." But strained fury blazed in his eyes.

"S-s-sir." The witch who had grabbed me took a step forward.

Lach's hand swept through the air, the gesture deceptively light, but its effect was immediate *and* forceful. The witch crumpled to his knees as if invisible weights had been fastened upon him.

Who was top of the food chain now?

"Enough," Lach seethed, power rolling off him in palpable waves. "Do you know who I am?"

The witch nodded, his face pinched with pain or fear or some welcome

combination of both.

“And do you know who she is?” Lach gestured toward me with a tilt of his head.

The witch’s eyes darted to me, widening as it hit him. Another nod, this one laced with reluctance. “I’m sorry.”

“If you know who I am, you know what I do to men like you.” Lach’s voice was low, but each word cracked like thunder. “Normally, I would take your hands for it. But since you knew who she was, I assume you *want* to die. There are less painful ways to meet your end, but none come swifter than touching what is mine.”

I stood there, the heat of anger replaced by a cold shock, but I found myself unable to move, locked in place by some terrifying desire to let him do just that. This was about more than the mating bond, although that probably wasn’t helping. It had always been about more with him. I’d seen enough of all the fae courts to know that respect was often a currency traded flippantly, rules not applying as often as they did. Oberon had abducted me. Bain had hit on me. They might hold others accountable for whatever law this was, but Lach...

It took everything in me to find a single word to stop him. “Don’t.”

Lach’s chest rose and fell, his eyes never leaving the man on his knees. “You’re lucky she’s merciful.” But before the witch could stumble back to his feet, he cried out. The bones in his hands shattered in a series of sickening cracks. I looked away as his fingers snapped. Scrambling forward, I reached for Lach’s arm to tell him enough.

“It is the law,” he said roughly, but he didn’t meet my eyes. Instead, he looked around the room. “Does anyone have a problem with that?”

The whispers surrounding us raised in heated disputes, the energy of the room shifting dangerously. Words clashed, threatening to become something more physical. The covens were already on edge, this brawl a live wire sparking dangerously close to kindling.

“Is someone picking a fight in my bar?” a lofty voice called over the ruckus. Baptiste stepped from the crowd, another vampire with unkempt hair and pitch-black eyes following her closely, and a hush descended on the room. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Lach. “I should have known you would be in the middle of it.”

“Just keeping *my* people in line.” He smirked at her, but there was no hint of amusement in his eyes. “Security seems a touch lacking.”

Baptiste bristled, her mouth turning down. “We’ll see about that.” She lifted a hand and beckoned to one of her men. “Caleb, see that these assholes find their own side of town.”

The shaggy vampire bobbed his head, grabbing the collars of the two closest to him. “Let’s get you where you belong.”

A shiver raced through me at his carefully chosen words.

Baptiste’s frown lifted into a wide grin. “Wasn’t that easy?” She took a step toward Lach and tapped her index finger on his chest. “I’ve got everything under control.” They glared at each other for a moment before she whirled toward the watching crowd. “If you’re here to dance, the night isn’t getting any younger. If you’re here for trouble, get the fuck out.”

All around her, people shared looks before turning back to their own friends.

“Channing.” I rushed to my brother as the music picked up again. “What were you thinking?”

He shook his head, his expression a mix of stubborn pride and recklessness. “It wasn’t me. He started it.”

“It doesn’t matter who started it—” I began, but Lach cut across our exchange, his attention now divided between us and the simmering crowd.

“And you know better,” he growled at Shaw.

His brother’s jaw tensed, an increasingly familiar look of frustration gleaming in his eyes. “That’s right. I should. But I don’t know better because I’m just a fuckup.”

“Shaw—” Channing reached for his friend’s shoulder, but Shaw shook him off.

“It’s okay. I know where I stand.” He glanced away, not quite hiding his pained expression. “Lach is the powerful one. The strong one. He does everything right.”

“Maybe we should get out of here,” Dante suggested in a gentle tone.

“Listen to your friend,” Lach advised. “Party’s over.”

Shaw drew a sharp breath and released it with a forced grin aimed at me. “But the night is young.”

Lach looked as charmed as I felt.

“Then live it elsewhere—preferably far away from witches.” His tone left no room for discussion.

Lach turned his gaze once more to the party.

“Come on. We can find ambrosia,” Dante suggested, hustling his friends

toward the door. He gave Lach a quick nod.

I stared after them, wondering if I should follow. Channing needed someone to talk some sense into him—not that I’d ever been very good at that. “Should we send them home?”

“Do you think they’ll go?”

He had a point. Still, letting the three of them loose into the night seemed like a bad idea.

Channing’s shoulders remained rigid with unspent energy all the way to the door until Dante slipped a casual arm around them. My brother leaned into him slightly, finally relaxing.

We definitely needed to have a conversation about boundaries when it came to vampires.

But the clock was inching closer to midnight, so it would have to wait.

Turning, I found Lach, his eyes still smoldering with savage anger that only time would subdue. I touched his arm gently. “I need to go. Willow’s expecting me for the séance.”

A muscle strained in his neck as he looked around us. There was no way he could leave, even with the risk of the Wild Hunt.

“They won’t know I’m coming,” I whispered. “I have no magic to track.”

His eyes softened, and he managed a nod. “I might join you later...if this mess gets sorted.”

Translation: he was struggling to let me out of his sight.

“Thank you,” I murmured, sensing how hard he was fighting to do so now. “Your spirit will be with me either way.” I stood on tiptoes, pressing my lips briefly to his in a kiss that both soothed and stoked my own muddled feelings.

Ciara approached us, arms crossed, her glamour now lacking its earlier luster. “They couldn’t behave for one freaking night. Now we have to deal with this shit,” she huffed, eyeing the crowd. Lach’s scowl deepened, but before he could voice his disapproval, Ciara rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. This is worse than an unpaid internship—except, you know, with the added danger element.”

“I have to go.” I jumped in before the next fight that broke out was between them. Looking down, I remembered I was still in my costume. “And there’s no time to change.”

Lach lifted a hand, and I found myself in a T-shirt and jeans from our wardrobe. His own costume had traded with his usual armor—a black suit

and tie. He passed me a purse that felt suspiciously heavy. “Stay safe.” He nodded toward the bag. “Just in case.”

I knew better than to argue with him about this point.

“Where are you going?” Ciara asked, but Roark was already guiding her toward a vicious argument happening across the room. Lach closed his eyes and turned to join them, as if he needed extra help letting me go himself.

The temperature had dropped to somewhere between pleasant and cool. After the events of the last few hours, the balmy air felt good on my skin. Willow’s shop was only a few streets away, and I cooled off more with each step, but even distance from La Porte wasn’t enough to stop my thoughts from churning. Channing’s knack for trouble was as reliable as it was alarming, and tonight I hoped to face the one person who would be as worried about him as I was.

“Have I let you down?” The whispered question lingered unanswered in the quiet street.

The thought gnawed at me with every step, any anticipation I’d felt earlier shifting to dread. As Willow’s familiar storefront came into view, the fluttering anxiety in my gut coalesced into a single, sharp point of determination. The veil between worlds was thinning. I would find out soon enough.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Cate

The jingle of the shop's bell startled me from my thoughts as I pushed open the weathered door to La Belle Dame. The street outside had been deserted, eerily silent as though all life had been siphoned away by the hour. Willow appeared from the back as if summoned by the break in the silence, too.

"A little quiet out there, isn't it?" I murmured, my stomach clenching as reality began to set in. I was actually going to do this. I still wasn't sure if I wanted the séance to work or not.

Willow, clad in a fuchsia crop top that clashed with the high-waisted denim shorts and orange leggings layered underneath, waved in welcome. She looked like she'd fallen into her closet and come out wearing whatever had tripped her. "Everyone's at the party at La Porte," she said, the sequins on her shirt catching the dim light and casting a kaleidoscope of colors on the walls.

"Guess so." The unease in my gut deepened at the reminder of the chaos I'd left Lach to deal with at said party.

"Come on. Let's do this." She pumped a fist before beckoning me farther into the shop. Behind me, the door swung shut with a *thud* that vibrated through the room. The lights were out, but several candles had been lit in sconces that lined the walls. Shadows clung to the corners like cobwebs, barely disturbed by their feeble glow. Incense choked the air, charging it with a sense of anticipation that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"I'm all ready." Willow gestured toward a table at the heart of the gloom, where a cluster of unlit candles waited like dormant specters. "Have a seat."

I bumped into a few chairs on my way, stubbing my toes on one, but I was too distracted to even notice if it hurt. When I reached the table, I sank into the chair with relief. At least it would be over soon—one way or another.

“I was almost worried you wouldn’t come,” she admitted as we settled across from each other.

“Me too.” I’d nearly turned in the opposite direction twice during the short trip over.

She nodded, darkness glinting in her eyes, as if whatever knowledge she possessed of the place that lay on the other side of death allowed her to sympathize—the very place I was about to plunge headfirst into under her guidance.

My fingers twisted in a dance of anxiety as I stared at the candles’ unlit wicks, starkly black against the pale wax. Willow flourished a hand with a flamboyance that matched her outfit, passing her palm above them, and one by one, the tips caught fire, casting an orange glow that made the shadows around us lengthen and stretch ominously.

“Are you wearing the ring?” She peered at my clenched hands.

I swallowed and uncurled my fingers to reveal the band that seemed fused to my skin. “I still can’t take it off, remember?”

“Good,” she said, her playful voice assuming a tone of gravity. “It will serve as our beacon through the veil.”

That made about as much sense to me as geometry, but I nodded anyway.

“Is where Gran is...like the Otherworld?” My voice quavered as I spoke, betraying how weirded out I was.

She shook her head. “Not exactly. None of the living can truly know what or even where it is. The veil is simply a divide between us, the living and them—the departed.”

A chill skittered down my spine, and goose bumps popped along my arms. “Then why are the wraiths in the Otherworld?” I thought of what Shaw had told me. “Are they trapped there?”

“Trapped?” She gave a soft chuckle that held no hint of humor, unusually serious as if the night demanded it. “No, they choose to remain. Wraiths can move between worlds if they wish.”

“Even this one?” I whispered, feeling the weight of darkness around us. I’d never encountered a wraith in New Orleans. Not like I had in the fae courts.

“Even this one,” she confirmed, and my heart stuttered at the implication. “And I think that’s enough questions. You’re looking a little peaky. Let’s start before you chicken out.

“Belle Mère, guide us. Allow us passage,” she called and closed her eyes.

Her cool fingers latched on to mine, and she began to chant, her words weaving through the air in an ancient rhythm that felt...ridiculous. Despite everything I'd seen, part of me rebelled against the nonsense of conjuring spirits, of reaching into realms beyond comprehension. But underneath my skepticism, a current of fear ran deep. I'd seen the truth.

Magic was real, and so were its consequences.

Willow continued the spell while I sat, waiting. Minutes passed, and when nothing happened, relief cascaded through me, smoothing out the goose bumps and settling my stomach.

I opened my mouth, eager to throw in the towel, and the candles sputtered, a breeze sweeping through the room where there should have been none. A tug from within my core pulled me forward, the world blurring at the edges as reality smeared into a shroud of gray mist. Panic clawed at my throat, and I choked back a scream. "Willow?"

There was no answer.

I peered into the dense fog surrounding me, stumbling back a step and nearly falling as a figure emerged from the haze. My breath hitched as the space filled with a presence I hadn't felt since those final, horrible days in the hospital.

"Gran?" Disbelief mingled with a surge of something else—hope, perhaps.

She stepped from the mist, and for a moment all my fears were forgotten. Wisdom was still etched into her brown skin, the silver strands in her black hair sparkling like she wore a crown of knowledge. There wasn't a trace of frailty in the body I'd last seen ravaged by cancer. Her eyes were no longer dulled by pain and the medications that never seemed to temper it—they were sharp and warm.

"Are you really here?" My voice cracked as I stepped forward, my heart pounding against my chest as if to prove this wasn't a dream. Reaching for her, my fingers met only air.

She offered a tender but sorrowful smile, her form flickering like the candles had in the shop. "We're in limbo," she said, her voice steady but strained from whatever effort it had taken for her to come to me. "A place between the many worlds."

I nodded, ignoring the *many worlds* tidbit. This one encounter was overwhelming enough.

"I'm happy to see you." Warmth flowed through her words.

But doubt clouded mine. “Are you?”

How could she be after everything I had done?

“Of course.” Her soft chuckle was familiar, carrying the same amusement she’d always shown when I was younger and she seemed to know something I hadn’t told her yet. “You’ve chosen quite the companion for yourself, Cate. I knew you wouldn’t settle for some average guy.”

The admission sent a jolt through me. “How...?”

Maybe I didn’t want to know. I’d spent a lot of time worried that she was watching over me, disappointed in how I handled things with Channing. I hadn’t considered what else she might have glimpsed.

“I know everything.” Secrets and understanding twinkled in her eyes, and my stomach twisted into knots. Did she know about the ring, too?

Before I could ask, Gran’s expression shadowed. “I can’t say that I approve of the company Channing is keeping, though.”

Shame washed over me, and I hung my head. “I’m keeping a lot of the same company. It’s my fault.”

She shook her head. “No. Channing makes his own choices, just as you make yours. Most of the time, you keep your head, but he can’t seem to avoid trouble.”

“I should have gotten him out of New Orleans.”

“When?” she asked.

“I could have sent him away earlier.” Instead, I’d let him sit in jail, recklessly thinking I could outsmart Lach.

“Your deal with Lach—it was bound to happen. Mates find each other across time and space.” Gran’s voice was firm, leaving no space for argument.

“But now Channing is caught up in my destiny,” I whispered. The responsibility of that pressed down on me, heavier after what had happened tonight.

“That can’t be helped now, but it is why I fear for him. He does not possess your strength.” Her gaze pierced mine, a note of pride lacing her words.

A lump formed in my throat. “I’m sorry, Gran. I’ll protect him. I promise.”

“I know.” She sighed. Her assurance was both a balm and a burden, but I clung to it, determined to live up to her faith in me. “Sacrifice runs in your very blood, I’m afraid.”

Unease prickled the back of my neck. “What do you mean?”

“You didn’t come to me by chance, Cate.” Gran lifted a hand to my shoulder. I couldn’t feel it on my skin, but I felt it somewhere more important. “Have you ever looked at your foster care file?”

Somehow, I had never considered doing this. Even now, the suggestion refused to take root. What good would it do? I shook my head, which felt as cloudy as the foggy world around me. “What’s in it?”

“There are things I’m still not allowed to tell you,” Gran said.

“But you’re dead,” I replied without thinking.

She laughed. “I’m aware, but I am bound by ancient rules. There is more to your story.”

“To my past?” I asked.

“Past, present, future. Truth does not care about time. It exists outside its rule.”

“Does it have something to do with the ring? Why did you give it to me?” The question burst out of me.

Gran’s face softened, and she reached out, her hand passing through mine like a breath of wind. “It was always yours, Cate.”

Her lips parted, and I braced for a revelation I still couldn’t fathom, when suddenly her gaze darted over my shoulder. Her eyes widened, and she vanished, leaving a void before me—and inside me.

“Gran!” I needed to know more. I needed to know what to do. I needed her. I whirled around. “Gran!” The cry died on my lips as another figure emerged from the swirling mist, but this one wasn’t a ghost.

I’d only met him once, but I remembered him. “Goemon.”

He tilted his head, his sleek black hair falling like a curtain across his face. He didn’t bother to say hello. There was only one reason he was here. Lach had been right to be concerned.

My muscles tensed, ready to spring, but there was nowhere to run in this void.

“You aren’t taking me with you,” I informed him, burying my fear beneath layers of bravado.

“I’m not here for you.” His voice echoed like he was calling from somewhere farther than limbo, and he gestured around us. “But I had hoped you might walk when the veil was thin.”

Relief mixed with annoyance. I’d come here for concrete information. Not riddles. “You interrupted something important.”

“This is important. I have a message for Lach.” He waited for me to nod. “His time is nearly up.”

“Is that a threat?” My voice cracked despite my best efforts.

“A warning. Nothing more.” I might not have believed him, except for the intensity shining in his eyes.

“Has the Wild Hunt found a way around the ward?”

He ignored my question. “The Cabal moves against him. It would be wise for Lach to seek alliances with other courts.”

“What cabal?”

But, with his message delivered, he started to fade. I lunged for him, ready to force more answers, but my fingers closed on empty air as he vanished entirely. I was alone with more questions now than before I’d come.

Shadows twisted and writhed around me, coalescing into shapes that were neither here nor there. I stiffened, my pulse racing as more phantoms began to emerge from the murky boundaries of this place. But before another spirit could manifest, a force gripped me—a sensation like being caught in a powerful undertow. A scream ripped from my throat as I was thrown off-balance and swallowed by the haze. Shadows tightened around me, and I fought, dragging me deeper until I couldn’t breathe even as more screams clawed out of me.

And then everything went still.

I blinked against the abrupt shift in reality, my lungs burning as I registered the snuffed candles before me. Then a table. Finally, the rest of La Belle Dame seemed to settle into place, along with Willow sitting across from me. Only now, her hands were pressed firmly over her ears, and I realized I was still screaming. I clamped my mouth shut, gripping the chair like a life preserver.

“Looks like you’ve just seen a ghost,” Willow teased. She spun a finger in a circle, and the overhead lights came on. “Did you get what you were looking for?”

I stared at her, the echoes of Gran’s information and Goemon’s warning bouncing in my still-dizzy brain. For a minute, words failed me, but I finally managed to shake my head slowly. “Information, yes...answers, no.” My voice sounded distant, hollow, as if part of me was still adrift in limbo.

“And the ring? What did your Gran tell you?” she pressed, chatting like I’d just gotten back from a nice, normal luncheon.

“She said the ring has always been mine,” I murmured, twisting the band with a frustration that had become all too familiar. “But if that’s true, why can’t *I* take it off?”

Her face fell as the ring refused to slip from my finger.

“Maybe it’s time to talk to an alchemist,” she suggested, leaning back in her chair and offering me a sympathetic smile. “Someone who can see how the spell works.”

“Maybe...” I trailed off, the idea stirring a flicker of hope within me. “I might know someone who can help.”

“Good.” Willow eyed me curiously, her brows knitting together. “Did you encounter anyone else while you were...wherever you were?”

I hesitated. Parts of it were already slipping away like a dream, but Goemon’s warning remained bleak and stark in my mind. “No one of consequence.”

Willow nodded, although her eyes told me she sensed there was more I wasn’t sharing. But she didn’t push me. Maybe she also knew that truth, like enemies, always lurked in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to emerge.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Lach

It was colder than it had been a few hours ago—colder than normal for New Orleans even in November—as I made my way through the Quartier in the early hours before dawn. Ghosts walked the streets tonight, unseen but felt in the unnatural chill. Even though the click of my boots on the cobbles was my only companion on the deserted street, I felt the spirits watching me.

I wondered how many of them I knew.

Or how many of them were on the other side because of me.

And tonight, Cate had faced the world of the dead alone, because—as usual—I was playing ringmaster to a shit circus someone else had started. I didn't even want to consider what could have gone wrong with the séance.

Brothers were proof that the gods had a sense of humor—a twisted fucking sense of humor. Shaw seemed hell-bent on causing trouble, running around with a vampire as if he were invincible and dragging Channing with him. Not that he couldn't make messes of his own, but maybe I was more forgiving because one of them had brought Cate into my life. And now they were picking fights they couldn't win with witches, for fuck's sake.

If Dante—a damn vampire—was the most levelheaded of the trio, I couldn't help but worry. Part of me was tempted to ship Shaw back to the academy, where I wouldn't have to deal with it every time he did something senseless. Because if he didn't start using his brain, he was going to wind up like one of the ghosts haunting the city tonight.

Rounding the street corner that led to La Belle Dame, I stopped short as Cate closed the door to the teashop. The séance was over; I'd missed the entire thing. But she was still in New Orleans. Still safe behind the ward.

Something in my chest lurched at the sight of her. It took me a moment to realize it was my heart, the organ having gone unused or ignored for so long that it caught me off guard every time it made its presence known now. Something it had taken to doing since the day she showed up at the Avalon.

Slinging her purse over her shoulder with a frown, she shoved her hands in her pockets, her downcast eyes on the street as she started home—completely oblivious to the world around her. She didn't even see *me*. Fear coiled in my gut, urging me to spring in her direction and protect her. I tamped down on the instinct, knowing she would kick my ass if I suggested she couldn't handle herself, but it took more effort than I'd ever admit, even to her.

I leaned against a streetlamp on the corner. Despite the orb of enchanted firelight flickering in its wrought iron lantern, I remained half hidden by shadows. Most of them poured out of me, conjured by the frustration I couldn't quite stem. She was only a few steps away when her head whipped up in surprise, a fleeting smile curving her lips. It was gone in an instant.

"Anyone tell you it's bad manners to lurk in the shadows?" She hoisted her bag a little higher as she closed the distance between us.

"That might be a problem, since I *am* the shadows." My hand twined with hers, and some of the weight I felt lifted. "The car isn't too far."

Her eyes drifted to the star-flecked sky overhead. "I don't mind walking awhile."

We both needed a break from the constant chaos and drama that seemed to plague our every waking moment. "I assume that *awhile* means you don't mind taking the long way."

"Not at all." But her smile seemed haunted.

I waited for her to tell me about the séance, but she remained silent as we worked our way farther riverside, where the scent of the water hung in the air. We'd reached the Moon Walk, a winding promenade that traced the dark ribbon of the Mississippi, before she finally began to tell me what had happened. The story came out in fits and spurts.

"There was more." She shook her head after a long pause. "Gran said something else. I think she asked me a question."

I frowned, releasing her hand so I could wrap my arm around her shoulders. Tugging her closer, I kissed the top of her head. "It's late. You're tired. I bet you'll remember in the morning."

"I guess." But she sounded uncertain. She tilted her face, meeting my eye. "Someone else was there."

Her words stopped me. I willed my voice to remain even. "Who?"

Cate tugged her bottom lip between her teeth like she was reconsidering mentioning anything.

“Cate?”

“Goemon,” she whispered, and my already wary mood darkened.

But that didn’t make any sense. “He can’t be dead. Members of the Hunt don’t die.”

“He wasn’t,” she said, continuing quickly at my confusion. “He projected himself or something.” I listened as she told me about his cryptic warning. “Does it mean anything to you?”

“Other than I’m a dead man walking?” I regretted the joke the instant she cringed.

“The Cabal,” she said. “Do you know who they are?”

I searched my brain but came up empty-handed. “No,” I admitted with a shake of my head. “But I have a very long list of enemies, princess. It wouldn’t be a Friday if someone didn’t want me dead.”

She pulled free from me. “And how bad must these enemies be if someone who’s magically bound to kill you is warning you about them?”

“You might have a point.” I held out my hand. She stared at it for a minute before she took it with a huff. Better than nothing.

“Do you believe him?” Cate asked as we continued along the path. “That the Cabal is real and they’re after you?”

I blew out a long breath. “Yeah, I do,” I said a bit begrudgingly. Goemon had saved my life twice. Now he was delivering warnings. “For whatever reason, Goemon seems to want me to live. I don’t think he’d lie about this.”

“Then why can’t he help more? Maybe convince the rest of the Wild Hunt to ignore the memento mori?”

The pain in her voice sliced through me. “It doesn’t work that way,” I said gently. “For either of us. He’s as duty bound to the Hunt as I am to my court.”

Cate buried her face in my shoulder. “He joined it, right? So, if he really wanted to, he could leave. You’re giving up your throne.”

“You don’t understand. He *can’t* leave. Whatever magic binds them to the Hunt is like the memento mori, which as far as we know...” I swallowed past the sudden tightness in my throat. “There’s no way to remove it once it’s been given.”

She stopped walking and turned to face me, reaching up to cradle my face between her warm palms. “I don’t accept that. Fiona and Romy are working on it,” she said. “We’ll find a way. Somehow, someday, we’ll free you from this. I promise.”

I had no idea what I'd done to deserve her, how magic had deemed me worthy of her ferocious loyalty. I stared into her eyes, the bond between us exerting a sudden gravity that pulled my mouth to hers. She melted into the kiss, her fingers sliding up to grip my hair as if she would keep me here through her strength alone if necessary.

And when we finally broke apart, my shadows were wrapped around us protectively, shielding her as she would shield me.

"Marry me." It slipped out of my mouth without thought. Words I hadn't even considered but which somehow felt right.

But Cate was looking past me. I followed her gaze to find the streetlights along the walking path blinking ominously. Then they went out entirely.

Her eyes went wide with alarm. "Lach, look..."

We watched as the stars winked out one by one like candles being snuffed by an unseen hand. The night pitched deeper into darkness until even the moon vanished and the sky became an endless black void.

"What's happening?" Cate whispered, her nails digging into my arms.

"It's a nocturnal eclipse," I said grimly. An omen.

As I spoke, I noticed a single point of light remaining—too bright and too low on the horizon to be a star. Cate saw it, too, and frowned. "What is that?"

Dread settled like a stone in my gut. It couldn't be...

"Nothing good," I said out loud. Taking her hand, I began walking briskly, pulled in the direction of the strange beacon.

"If that's the case, shouldn't we be going in the opposite direction?" Cate muttered.

I slowed but didn't stop. "We can turn around..."

She grumbled something under her breath, speeding up her pace to match mine as we continued toward that singular light.

Unease crept under my skin as it became larger and brighter, a sure sign that we were getting closer.

"It's an orb," Cate whispered, her clammy hand tightening around mine as she saw what I'd hoped I was imagining. "Like in the graveyard."

We slowed slightly as we approached the wrought iron gates of Jackson Square. Both of us were already dreading what lay ahead, even before the tang of iron filled the air.

A body was strung up from the bars, its arms hanging limply at its sides, the head lolling like a puppet with its strings cut. The corpse's chest gaped

open, revealing a hole where a heart should be. Blood dripped down the bars, pooling into a puddle on the ground.

Cate's cry of shock echoed through the square. Her hand flew to cover her mouth, strangling the sound in her throat. "Oh my God..."

My feet dragged with each step I took closer to the victim, somehow already knowing that this murder was different. Cate stayed by my side, her clammy hand clenched in mine. I prodded at my shadows, trying to summon whatever light I could, but my magic didn't respond.

"Here." Cate fished her phone out of her pocket and swiped on the flashlight. She lifted it and gasped as it revealed a familiar face—one we'd seen only hours ago, now ashen with death. I took a stumbling step as she whispered his name. "*Étienne?*"

I was still staring as people began pouring toward the square, drawn to the shining beacon like moths to the flame—some creatures and some humans heading home after their revelries or looking for their next party. My blood ran cold as a group of vampires stopped. One pointed. There was no way to stop the truth from leaking now. It would spread like wildfire through the supernatural community, and once it did, all hell would break loose.

But it would be even worse if the humans found out about it.

I acted on instinct, magic unfurling from my fingers like spider silk as I wove a glamour, making Étienne's defiled corpse appear as nothing more than a particularly graphic Halloween decoration to their eyes. But I could do nothing to conceal it from the preternaturally keen senses of the creatures now flooding the street. That was a whole different problem.

"Lach! Cate!" I closed my eyes at the sound of my brother's voice, guessing who would be with him when I turned around and what state his friends would be in.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I snapped. "I thought I made myself clear—"

Shaw cut me off, crossing his arms. "Seems like you're the one neck-deep in trouble. As usual."

He'd discarded his mask, and judging from the glassy appearance of his eyes, they had found plenty to do since we parted ways a couple of hours ago.

"Be useful for once and get him out of here." I jerked my chin in Channing's direction.

“I’m fine exactly where I am.” Channing looked worriedly at Cate. “Are *you* all right?”

She managed a stiff nod, her face pale but composed. “Nothing I haven’t seen before.”

Except it was. The other murders had been strangers. So had the patients she had encountered at the hospital. This was different. She’d met the vampire leader.

Behind her, Dante had gone stock-still, his gaze fixed on Étienne’s body. Without a word, he turned and vanished into the darkness. A leaden certainty settled over me: It was going to be a long night.

Humans clustered around us, excited whispers and murmurs rising from the gathering crowd as people pointed and stared at the *decoration*. Several raised their phones to snap pictures. Cate shifted beside me, her disgust palpable. “We have to do something.”

I gripped Shaw’s arm. “Find Roark. Now.”

To his credit, he obeyed without argument for once, slipping away into the mass of bodies.

A few of my people, still in costumes that told me they’d either been celebrating or undercover, milled nearby. I lifted a hand, summoning them with a single gesture. The soldiers approached, the wary energy pouring from them messing with their glammers. “Get these people out of here.” I scanned the closest one. His ears sloped upward before rounding out again. “And if you can’t keep your glamour, lose it.”

“Sir?” he said with surprise.

“Halloween.” We could get away with it tonight.

He nodded once. “Clear the humans?”

“Everyone,” I commanded.

The guard next to him shifted nervously. “That might be difficult.”

Dozens of creatures had flocked to the scene. My gaze landed on the witch Channing had picked a fight with at La Porte. “Do what you can. Focus on the humans first.”

If this turned into a bloodbath, they would die first—and stay dead.

They nodded, moving to obey, and began gently but firmly directing people away from the grisly scene.

Cate remained quiet, staring at the body, her expression hollow. We both knew it was already far too late. Too many eyes, vampires and otherwise, had recognized Étienne’s desecrated corpse. The fallout from this night

would be swift and brutal. The covens had clashed before, but this could spell disaster.

“What now?” Cate finally whispered, her gaze still glued ahead.

“Try to prevent war.”

“But we did that last week,” she said, her flat voice devoid of any real amusement. “Don’t you ever get tired of it?”

Yes. I refused to say it out loud, refused to surrender to the feeling.

Channing moved closer, his phone held aloft. “There’s something carved into the back of his neck.”

“Get away from him,” I snarled before he repeated it loudly enough for someone else to hear. I didn’t need to look at the back of Étienne’s neck to know it was a memento mori.

“Don’t you want to—”

“Time for you to go home.” I snapped my fingers, sending Channing back to Shaw’s quarters at the Avalon. Cate raised her brows. “I need to clear out the humans, remember?”

But she didn’t argue with me. There was no way she wanted her brother anywhere near this. She was probably already considering how to reject my spontaneous proposal. Who could blame her for not wanting to live this life?

It was too much. The witch’s death, the innocent human, and now Étienne...

Shadows moved at the edge of my vision, and I spun to see Ciara and Roark materialize out of the darkness, Shaw on their heels. Ciara took one look at Étienne’s mutilated body, spun around, and vomited in the street.

“Seriously?” Shaw jumped back as she narrowly missed his shoes. He hitched his thumb at her. “And you think she’s the one who should take over?”

Surprise punched me in the gut. “Who else can do it? You? When will you find the time to smoke opium with your vampire friends?”

Cate moved between us, her arms stretched wide, index fingers pointed in warning. “Not the time.”

Ciara wiped her mouth on the back of her arm, her other clutching her stomach. Roark placed a steadying hand on her back. It was a testament to how fucked up this situation was that she didn’t object. I couldn’t shield her from the ugly truth stalking our city any longer. She deserved to know the danger we all faced if I remained within the boundaries of the bona fides

spell.

I turned to Shaw, keeping my voice low. "Take Cate to the Otherworld."

Her head whipped toward me, eyes flashing with indignation. "I'm not going to the Otherworld without you."

"You would be safe there. No one could touch you."

"I'm safe here!"

I didn't have the energy to fight her on this, even though I needed her *there*. Where she would be safest. "Just take her to the Avalon, then. I already sent Channing."

But Cate shook her head. "I'm not going anywhere."

Desperation sharpened my tone. "For once in your life, Cate, will you please just listen to me!"

She flinched as if I'd struck her, hurt and anger flickering in her eyes. Turning, she strode away.

Shaw shook his head. "You won't stop until we all hate you, will you?"

"I'm doing what has to be done." I didn't expect him to understand. I didn't expect any of them to understand. My time was nearly up. Ugly goodbyes would make it less painful for them.

"Keep telling yourself that."

I tipped my head in the direction of my mate. "Get her out of here."

He stalked after her, muttering more curses.

"Was that necessary?" Roark asked quietly once Shaw had faded into the distance.

"Let him hate me." I scrubbed a hand over my face, already regretting my harshness. But I couldn't take the risk. Not with her. Not with any of them.

"What is this, Lachlan?" Ciara interjected before Roark could lecture me. Her normally lilting voice trembled with barely suppressed fear as she gestured at Étienne's body. "Who would do something so vile?"

Roark stepped forward, not bothering to look at me. "Ciara, there's something you need to know. This isn't the first—"

"Isn't the first what?" An icy voice cut through the night like a whip crack.

I turned as Baptiste emerged from the shadows. Her eyes flickered to the gates and froze there. Her mouth fell open, horror and grief and shock warring for residence on her face.

For a moment, no one moved. The weight of her anguish hit me like a blow to the chest. Étienne had been like a father to her. I'd never asked, but

he might have been the one who turned her. We had a history of our own, which meant that we hated and respected each other. I stepped toward her. “Baptiste, we should—”

Her gaze cut to mine, eyes burning with unshed tears and a rage that sent a chill down my spine. “Did you do this?” she demanded, her voice rising to a near shout. “Did you murder him, Nether Prince?”

I winced at the accusation, the venom in her voice unmistakable. Grabbing her arm, I pulled her away from the few stragglers who had yet to be cleared. “Baptiste, listen to me—”

She wrenched her arm free. “I will not listen to more lies. I can smell the deceit on you.” Her voice dropped to a hiss, fangs glinting in the moonlight. “Tell me the truth. Now.”

Failure pressed down on me. “It’s not just Étienne,” I admitted, the words tasting like ash in my mouth. “A witch is dead. And a human. I didn’t—”

“And you didn’t think to warn us?” A new emotion cleared the others from her face: betrayal. “There’s a killer in New Orleans, and you kept it hidden?” She paced toward the body, her eyes narrowing as she spotted the memento mori carved into his neck. “And how do you explain this? His blood is on your hands, Lachlan.”

The truth of her words was undeniable.

She retreated, shaking her head. “If you can’t find this killer, then I will.” Her eyes met mine: a promise and a threat. “And if I discover you had anything to do with this, not even your crown will save you.”

With that, she turned on her heel, disappearing into the night before I could utter another word. I stared after her as the magnitude of my newest problem sank in. Now I had a vampire with a vendetta.

As if I didn’t have enough to deal with.

Roark’s heavy hand landed on my shoulder, his voice low and troubled. “What are you going to do, Lach?”

I set my jaw, the answer crystal clear in my mind. There was only one path forward. Only one way to end this nightmare before more blood was spilled.

“It’s time to face the executioner,” I said grimly, stepping free from Roark’s touch.

He didn’t try to stop me as I nipped away. I let the world blur around me, no longer caring if the Hunt snatched me.

In fact, I was counting on it.

Cool night air caressed my skin as I stared at the invisible boundary that separated my life from my death. The weight of what I had to do pressed down on me, but there was no turning back. The Maestri Bridge before me stretched to eternity—unlike my life—and I stared back at the endless night. Taking a deep breath, I stepped over the unseen line and onto the bridge itself.

For a moment, I waited, my fists clenched at my sides, but no one came. With a sinking feeling in my gut, I turned and crossed back over the threshold of New Orleans.

“I take it you got my message,” a voice called behind me.

I turned as Goemon climbed off the bike on the other side of the boundary, his dark eyes glinting in the moonlight.

A spark of anger flared to fury at his words. “Which one?” I asked through gritted teeth.

Goemon blinked, a flicker of confusion crossing his features. “I’m not sure what you mean, Lachlan.”

I strode forward, closing the distance between us until we were face to face, separated only by the thin veil of magic currently protecting the city’s edge. “The bodies,” I growled, my voice low and dangerous. “The ones with a memento mori carved into their necks. Tell me which coven is working with you.”

Goemon’s eyes widened for only a moment before narrowing in offense. “We don’t operate that way. The Wild Hunt has nothing to do with those deaths.” He paused, studying me intently. “You have enemies within New Orleans as well—or didn’t Cate give you my message?”

I let out a humorless laugh, the sound harsh and bitter in the stillness of the night. “So what else is new?” I threw my hands up. “She told me what you said. If you want to help me, help me. I don’t need more puzzles to solve. Who is this Cabal?”

“I don’t know.” His shrewd gaze assessed me. “And I couldn’t tell you if I did. But they’re the ones who feed your rage. Not me.”

“Great.” I raked a hand through my hair. “*Thanks* for the help.”

“Magic binds me to a greater cause.”

“I wouldn’t call hunting creatures down like rabid beasts a greater cause.”

“You were happy to let us do it when it served your purposes.” He touched the coin suspended from a leather strap around his neck. “But that is not our cause.”

We stood in silence for a moment before I finally asked the simplest question of all. “Why are you here, then?”

“You crossed the line.” He shrugged.

And he had taken a damn long time getting here. Too long. “I guess you need to be quicker.” I eyed him. “Because by my count this is the third time you’ve had a chance to kill me and haven’t done it.”

“Are you so ready to die? So ready to leave your lovely woman?” he asked.

“Leave Cate out of this,” I ordered. “Just tell me why you haven’t killed me.”

“Your death serves less purpose than your life.”

It was like talking to a gods-damned sphinx.

My fingers twitched, instinct telling me to nip away before it was too late. I’d almost turned myself over to him for execution, but if the Hunt wasn’t behind the murders, the solution wasn’t as simple as my death. The Cabal might stop carving the mark into people’s necks, but New Orleans wouldn’t be safe until they were eliminated. My people wouldn’t be safe.

And neither would my family.

I lifted my eyes to his, my resolve hardening like steel. “I won’t let my people suffer for my sins, Goemon. I need enough time to put an end to this madness, one way or another.”

He nodded slowly, a glimmer of respect shining through his stoic facade. “You already have what you need, and I think you know that.”

I had a sinking feeling I understood this riddle for once.

Goemon drew a deep breath. “I kept the others away tonight, but I can’t hold them off forever. Don’t cross the line.”

“Which one?”

“I’d recommend any of them.” He shook his head. “But I know you. Don’t make it too easy on us. Consider this your final warning.”

Before I could respond, he turned and melted back into the shadows, leaving me alone with my thoughts and the crushing weight of my responsibilities.

I stood there for a long moment, staring out into the darkness as the distant sounds of the city drifted on the breeze. Baptiste’s words echoed in my mind, a chilling reminder of the stakes at play. If I couldn’t find this killer, if I couldn’t protect my people, if I couldn’t protect her...there would be no peace in death.

With a heavy sigh, I turned away from the bridge, pausing to drink in the lights of New Orleans, which glittered especially brightly in the eclipsed sky. We had built too much here to let it fall.

I would save my city, my people, my mate. No matter the cost.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Cate

By dawn, I'd paced the length of Lach's and my shared quarters more times than I could count. The plush carpet softened my steps, but each felt deafening in my head. Lach had sent me away. Shaw had dropped me at the Avalon and returned straight to his side. It wasn't the first time, and it wasn't what really bothered me. The memory of his words gnawed at me like an itch that wouldn't go away no matter how many times I scratched it, and every time his phone went straight to voicemail, it got worse.

Unable to stand the silence of the room any longer, I stormed out into the shared foyer, nearly colliding with Shaw and Ciara. Dark circles rimmed their eyes, and Ciara's normally shiny black hair was in complete disarray. They looked like they'd just crawled back from a wild night out, but I knew they'd been dealing with family business.

And I had been sent to my room.

"Where the hell is Lach?" I demanded, cringing at the sharpness of my own voice. But part of me—the part that had been waiting up for hours—didn't care if I sounded like a bitch. I'd earned the right to be pissed.

Shaw rubbed the back of his neck, exhaustion slackening his face. "He spent a few hours tearing through everyone on guard tonight, and then he laid into the rest of us for shits and giggles," he admitted, the weight of whatever tirade Lach had unleashed still pressing down on him.

Of course he had. Because he blamed himself for what had happened. Étienne had been alive yesterday, and when Lach's back was turned, he was murdered. I understood why he was angry—Étienne was as close to a friend and ally as Lach had among the vampires—but that didn't excuse his behavior. "Where is he?" I asked, my hand already moving toward the elevator button as I imagined the satisfaction I'd feel telling him just that.

"He went back to the French Quarter," Ciara said. Weariness drenched each word. She popped off her heels one at a time and tossed them down

the hall that led to her room. “He’s meeting with Baptiste at her restaurant. Trying to keep the vampires from renouncing their oaths.”

My stomach pitched at the thought of what would happen if they did. But before I could ask more questions, Ciara stumbled toward the hall.

“Where are you going?” I called, sucking back a wince as she almost walked into the wall. She gripped the threshold that separated her quarters from the others and looked back at me.

“Bed.” The single word came out as a yawn, but she managed a feeble smile. “The drama will wait for the morning.”

I frowned. “It is morning, Ciara.”

With a shrug that held more resignation than indifference, she limped a few steps toward her room. “Then it will wait for another morning,” she called back, disappearing down the corridor, toward the promise of sleep.

“It’ll be fine, Cate.” Shaw patted my shoulder, but there was doubt in his voice.

“Do you really believe that?” I asked, calling his bluff.

“I think I’m just used to saying it.” He paused, his jaw clenching. “About earlier—at the bar, I mean—I’m sorry Channing got dragged into that.”

My brother hadn’t shown his face all night, and I didn’t have the energy to hunt him down. Not when I knew there would be an argument. Not when he might demand answers I didn’t have. Not when it could have been him strung up on those gates.

“Just don’t let anything happen to him,” I whispered.

“I’ll try.” The promise was too full of regret to be entirely believable. “But then again, I’m always trying to do the right thing and still screwing it up.”

I hugged him without thinking. Shaw froze like this was an entirely new experience for him before finally patting me awkwardly on the back.

“Get some sleep,” I said as I pulled away. Not so much an order as a request. He nodded gratefully, heading toward his bed with a mumbled goodbye.

I had no idea where Baptiste’s restaurant was, but it couldn’t be that hard to find. My pulse ticked up with each floor the elevator descended. This had to be about Lach’s inability to control the mating bond’s protective instinct. It was the only rational explanation for why he’d sent me away while everyone else got to help. I had no clue why it had triggered so strongly last night, or why he’d given in to it, but I wasn’t going to be sidelined by some

ancient magical paranoia. I was more determined than ever to remind him that if this thing between us was going to actually work, we had to be equals.

The moment the doors slid open to reveal the lobby, I stormed out and ran directly into someone. I'd begun to mumble "sorry" when I recognized the platinum-streaked black bob.

"Willow, what...?" I started, my brows knitting together as she dumped a sad bouquet into my arms without any of the usual pleasantries. I looked down at the wilted tulips, their petals browning and edges curling like old parchment, some already completely dried out, in confusion.

"I brought these for you." She shoved a flustered hand through her hair, already turning in a circle, her eyes widening as she took in the Avalon. "You actually live here?"

"Um, yes." Although I wasn't sure for how much longer if Lach didn't get his shit together. I shifted through the brittle flowers in my arms awkwardly, trying not to let the dead ones crumble. Their once vibrant colors had leached away, leaving behind only the ghost of their beauty. "You shouldn't have."

"Oh! Sorry!" She spun back to me. "They aren't a gift. You just mentioned you had an alchemist friend, and I wanted you to ask him what might be up with my eternal bloom spell. It's never failed before." There was something like pride in her voice.

"Failed?" I repeated, the single word tasting bitter on my tongue. More magic was failing, there had been another murder, and I'd been sent to my room to let the grown-ups solve all the problems. My frustration lingered for a heartbeat before giving way to resolve. "Not yet, but come upstairs. We can call my friend from there."

Lach could keep trying to solve everything with intimidation and threats of violence, but I had other resources at my disposal—resources that had proven more effective than his ideas before. If magic was at the heart of our problems, it was time to ask an expert.

Willow hesitated, her eyes darting from the elevator to me, a silent battle waging in her eyes. She was in Gage territory. I'd seen enough of the tension between the city's magical creatures to understand that, for a witch, walking through the Nether Prince's door took a leap of faith. Finally, she gave a resigned nod that spoke volumes of the trust we had built. "Might as well see the rest of your place."

“It’s not my place,” I said through gritted teeth as I called the elevator back. At least it didn’t feel that way right now.

She frowned all the way up to her forehead, which knit together in doubt. Leaning forward, she whispered as if the security camera might be able to hear her, “Do you keep your underwear here?”

“Um...yes,” I said slowly.

She leaned back, crossing her arms with a smirk. “Then it’s your place. Once the panties are in the drawer, the place is yours.”

“I’ll be sure to throw a housewarming party,” I said dryly, but I couldn’t help smiling.

The elevator dinged its arrival on the family’s private floor, and as the doors slid open, Willow let out a low whistle. “Now I get what you see in him.”

I almost laughed, her awe briefly lifting the weight from my shoulders. I hadn’t bothered to lock the place up when I left. I hadn’t even grabbed my purse, I realized when I saw it sitting on the table next to the door. The living room was dark, the curtains still closed and the morning light fighting to penetrate the heavy drapery. I crossed over and opened them, letting the sun wash over the space.

Willow hadn’t moved more than a step from the door, and I waved her inside. “Do you want something to drink?”

“It’s like seven in the morning,” she said, finally moving past the threshold.

“I never went to bed, so it’s still just late to me.” I walked over to the bar cart and poured myself a single finger of Scotch.

She seemed to consider my logic sound. “I’ll take one, too.” She wandered around a bit as I poured, pausing to pick up my Birkin bag. “I swear your entire vibe is *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Gods, this is heavy.” She peeked inside and blinked rapidly before putting the purse quickly back on the table. “Now I see why. I take it back. You’re living that mafia-wife life. I just keep lipstick in my purse.”

“He insists,” I said with a grim shrug, carrying the drinks to her.

“I heard about what happened to Étienne,” she said, accepting hers. “Is that why you didn’t sleep?”

“Yes.” I nodded, feeling suddenly cold. I downed the whisky, chasing the chill away. “Did you hear anything else?”

She tapped the glass like she wasn’t sure if she should answer. “Rumor is

that there were other murders and that your boyfriend was hiding them.”

No wonder Lach hadn't come home yet. Dealing with the public spectacle of Étienne's death was one thing. If news had spread about the other two murders...

“I almost didn't come,” she continued. “I figured you might have your hands full, but I also thought maybe you could use a distraction.”

I sighed, wondering how I was so easy to read. “I just want to do something. I'm tired of sitting around and waiting for answers.” I fumbled for my phone in my pocket, its screen slick under my fingertips. “Any idea what time it is in Prague?”

She shook her head. “Shit. You weren't kidding when you said you knew an alchemist.”

I raised a brow.

“It's basically the birthplace of magical science,” she explained, “and one of the only places where anyone is still studying how and why spells work. Sorry, I'm a bit of an alchemy geek. I wish we had a lab in New Orleans.”

I thought of the makeshift one we'd concocted a few weeks ago at Gage Memorial and made a mental note to put the issue in front of Lach. We needed to have resources in the city.

“Let's hope he picks up,” I muttered, hitting the video call button next to Sirius's contact. The phone hummed a tense prelude before his image appeared on the screen.

“Hey, Cate.” Sirius's voice was warm, but his eyes betrayed a weariness that tugged at my conscience.

“Did I wake you?” Guilt laced my words. I should have checked the time difference.

He managed a tired grin, shaking his head. “No, it's been a long day. Was just about to call it quits for a bit and grab a bite to eat.”

“Back to the Otherworld?” I never thought I'd miss the fae world, but my stomach growled in jealousy at the idea of a blood apple.

“Yep, you caught me just in time.” His smile slipped some as he looked over my shoulder at my companion. “You okay?”

“Ah, yeah, this is Willow.” I motioned toward her, and she stepped into view.

“Hi,” Willow chimed, offering a small wave before leaning down to whisper, “He's cute.”

I'd thought the same thing when I first met him, the combination of his

rich brown skin and deep, genuine smile somewhat irresistible. But Sirius looked down, scrubbing his neck with the back of his hand. I turned toward her, keeping my voice low, even though I knew it was futile. "He's fae, Willow. He can hear everything."

Unfazed, she straightened up, her grin wide and unrepentant. "Don't care, still cute."

"So, uh, can I help you with something?" he asked, his eyes pleading to be saved before he died from embarrassment.

"We have a few spells that are acting off. Do you have a minute?" I asked. The ring on my finger suddenly felt like more than a weight. It was a shackle I couldn't shake.

"Anything for you."

Willow had moved behind the phone, and she clutched her chest, looking like she might swoon. She mimed writing something. I held up a finger to Sirius. "Just a sec." I obscured the screen and mouthed, *What?*

"Ask if I can have his number."

I did not have time to play matchmaker. Turning my attention back to the Astral Prince, I forced a smile. "Thank you. I feel like we're asking a lot of you. I hope having Romy and Fiona there isn't causing problems."

Sirius waved his hand. "It's been great. I really enjoy having them around," he added, and I pressed my lips together to hold back my surprise. "It's nice to not be alone in the lab or the library all the time."

Willow was on the verge of death. She folded her hands together in silent entreaty.

"Good. That's good," I managed, forcing myself to focus on him. "Look, can you keep a secret?"

"Always," he assured me, his eyes locking on mine through the screen.

"From...everyone?"

The edges of his eyes crinkled before understanding hit him. I wasn't just casually checking in on his guests. "Whatever you say will stay between us," he promised.

Lach was going to be pissed, but what choice did we have? We needed answers. With half the city ready to revolt, we couldn't risk being unprepared if the bona fides spell fell and Oberon struck.

Hesitantly, I lifted my hand, displaying the ring that refused to budge. "It seems to be stuck."

His gaze fixed on the ring for an uncomfortably long moment, and my

pulse thrummed in my ears. Did he recognize it as a signet? Finally, he spoke, his tone lighthearted. “Have you tried loosening it with some butter? Old trick.”

“Actually,” Willow interjected, stepping into view, “it’s a spell. One I’ve never seen before.”

Sirius raised an eyebrow, a glimmer of surprise crossing his features. “You’re a witch?”

“Is that a problem?” she challenged, hands on her hips.

“No, no.” He held up a palm, and I felt compelled to defend him.

“Sirius isn’t prejudiced,” I said firmly, though my mind churned with worry. “She’s trying to help me with it. A couple of witches have, but they can’t seem to undo the spell,” I continued, turning the conversation back to the ring. “It’s pretty much glued to me.”

“Weird.” He leaned closer to the camera as if proximity would grant him a better look. “Usually, joining spells are linked to another object. But attaching an item to a person? That’s different. I mean, it could be useful,” he mused. “I’d never lose my keys again.”

“Is it like Lach’s memento mori?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper, the mention of that dark mark sending a ripple of unease through me.

“Not exactly. A memento mori is a condemnation—inescapable once branded.” He rushed to add, “From what I know, anyway, but we’re working on it.”

“Right.” Nausea swirled in my stomach. “So, you think someone was worried I would lose the ring?”

If that was the explanation after everything we’d gone through to get answers, that would be...lame.

“Could be,” he said with a nod. “It could also be for protection or occlusion—it’s often a fine line between the two. If you wanted to have someone nip you over, I could take a look.”

There was no way that was going to happen.

“Things are messy here right now.” I wondered how quickly news would spread to the other courts. The bona fides spell didn’t stop anyone from *talking* to people outside of New Orleans. “But I’ll let you know. What was the other spell you mentioned?”

“An occlusion spell,” he repeated. “But I bet it just comes off when it’s ready to.”

He made it sound so easy. If he only knew.

I opened my mouth to ask more, but Willow interjected, gingerly holding up a wilted tulip. It was so lifeless that it seemed an affront to nature itself. “What about this?” She waved the flower, and three petals fell off. “I had a basic eternal blooming spell on it, and bam! The magic is just gone.”

I bit my lip, my anxiety coiling tighter in my belly. Maybe it wasn’t just political tension between the covens. Maybe the city was struggling beneath the weight of the bona fides spell. If that proved to be the case, I knew what Lach would do. Suddenly, I wanted to vomit.

He studied the flower with a frown. “Even basic spells can glitch. It might just need a jump start,” he said simply, yet his eyes betrayed a hint of concern that matched my own. “Or maybe someone tried to borrow your magic and accidentally siphoned it off.”

They might as well have been speaking in code, but Willow nodded thoughtfully. Before I could ask them to explain any of what they were saying, movement flickered behind him on the screen and Romy and Fiona appeared, engrossed in their own conversation. Romy’s gaze floated over Sirius’s shoulder and brightened when she caught sight of us.

“Hey, Cate! Hi, Willow!” she chirped, leaning into view. Her smile was a welcome beam of light. “I’m glad you two connected.”

She attempted to coax Fiona forward, but Lach’s sister stormed off-screen, her departure as sudden as a gust of wind slamming a door shut. Just my existence seemed to piss her off.

“Is something wrong in Prague?” The question spilled from me.

Romy’s smile wavered, her eyes darting away for a brief moment before returning to mine. “Things are...moving slowly,” she admitted, and my heart sank. “But we may be on to something!” She glanced behind her. “I should go check on Fi. It was good to see you.”

“Everything will come together,” Sirius added smoothly. His confidence was meant to buoy us, but the tension in his shoulders told a different story. He’d meant what he said earlier about the memento mori, and if he couldn’t find a way to undo it with alchemy, what chance did we have at saving my mate’s life?

“Thank you.” I wasn’t sure that we’d learned anything groundbreaking, but his willingness to help, to open more of his home if I came knocking on his door, meant a lot to me.

“Let me know if you want to visit.” He swallowed, his Adam’s apple

bobbing quickly. "Your friend could come, too."

"Will do. Catch you soon." I ended the call before Willow could prompt me to propose to him on her behalf.

"I'm going to marry him," she announced as soon as I set the phone down.

"As long as I'm invited," I muttered.

The events of the last six hours sat like lead on my chest as I escorted Willow down to the lobby. She continued to ask questions about Sirius, and I answered absently, more preoccupied than ever with what to do next if neither my ring nor the memento mori could be removed.

The hotel was still fairly quiet this early in the morning, and our steps echoed in the deserted lobby, a stark reminder of the emptiness that enveloped me without Lach by my side. When we passed through the Avalon's revolving door into the brisk morning air, his presence hit me like a sudden drop in temperature. He paused on the lowest step, his gaze frosty as it swept over Willow.

"What's she doing here?" he demanded.

I ignored him and turned to her. "Thanks for stopping by. Don't mind him. He forgets his manners."

I could have sworn I felt Lach tense behind me.

Willow looked between the two of us nervously.

"Thanks for trying to help, Cate," she said, giving me a quick hug. "I'll keep digging for answers."

"Let me know if you find any," I muttered. "But be careful."

"Don't worry. Something's always happening in New Orleans." She lowered her voice to add, "This will blow over."

As she stepped back, her eyes skipped to Lach, and with a mischievous grin, she stuck her tongue out at him while his attention was diverted. It was a playful act, so typical of Willow, but it made the contrast between the two of them even starker. She'd called him my dark one for a reason. A chill skittered down my spine as Willow waved and vanished into the waking streets.

Lach glared after her. I turned on my heel, striding back toward the Avalon. He caught up with me with a speed that betrayed his true nature, despite the human glamour he still wore. We kept our distance as we stormed toward the elevator in step with each other.

"Was that really necessary?" I demanded the moment the doors slid

closed behind us. “She was just trying to help.”

Lach’s face might as well have been carved from stone. “I know. We agreed on that,” he said curtly, each word clipped. “But why did you call Sirius? What did you tell him?”

His question caught me off guard, and I faltered. “How do you even know about that?”

He pulled out his phone, waving it in the air. “My sister called me. Now answer the question. Did you tell him about the ring?”

Silence hung heavily between us. I could feel the answer sticking in my throat, the truth too dangerous to voice. But before I could muster a response, Lach exploded, his anger filling the space around us.

“What were you thinking, Cate?” he thundered.

“Sirius is my friend,” I shot back, my own temper flaring. “I trust him. He’s helped us before, Lach.”

“That was then. We can’t trust anyone now.”

“Anyone, huh?” My tone was bitter from the hurt festering inside me. “You mean *you* can’t trust anyone. Not even me, apparently.”

His jaw tightened, and I knew he was holding back. Tension thickened the air between us as if we both knew that every word spoken might create another fracture in our relationship.

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep myself from crying, but unshed tears stung my eyes as the silence stretched into a wide chasm that seemed to separate us further with each passing second. But beneath his mask of fury, I could see the fracture lines of a fear that I shared.

My hands trembled at my sides, clenched into fists so tightly that my nails dug into my palms. His words echoed in my head in a relentless rhythm: *We can’t trust anyone now*. Each one felt like a slap.

Something within me shifted, my determination slipping out of place like a tectonic plate. Somehow, I knew that nothing would ever be the same. That our foundation had fundamentally altered. My gaze locked with his, and the world narrowed to the restrictive confines of the compartment.

The elevator reached our floor, and we stepped out of it. I waited for him to speak, to offer some defense, some plea that would bridge the gap between us. But he remained silent, and so did I, each of us lost to hurt and frustration.

And I’d had enough. “The worst part is that I shouldn’t have to defend my actions to you.”

Turning, I jammed the down button. The doors reopened, and I stepped through without a backward glance.

“Where are you going?” he asked, a note of panic cracking through his anger.

I didn’t answer, *wouldn’t* answer. Instead, I pushed the button for the lobby. I half expected him to follow me inside, to try to stop me from leaving, to say *something*.

He didn’t.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Lach

No lights were on inside The Fontaine when I pulled up to the unattended valet stand, hours before the start of dinner service. I already knew why Baptiste had summoned me to the French Quarter—the covens’ furor over the murders hadn’t cooled in the least. Despite half a dozen meetings over the last week, I was no closer to calming them down. Ciara blamed me. Cate had gone back to sleeping in her own bedroom. Shaw was keeping his distance. The only person still speaking to me was Roark, but even he had given up reassuring me.

I’d fucked up. I expected mutiny any day. Baptiste either planned to warn me or strike the first blow—given our history, it was impossible to know where she stood. I slid my sunglasses off, jaw clenching, as I climbed out of the Mercedes and made my way to the door.

Unfortunately, it was unlocked.

The dining room was empty and as silent as a graveyard, but the rich scents of butter and garlic wafting through the air told me she was here. I bypassed the antique sideboard that served as a hostess stand, a half-empty cup of coffee abandoned next to the reservations book. I hadn’t stepped foot inside the restaurant in years, but it looked the same as ever. Antique chandeliers twinkled in the shadows, looming over a collection of high-backed red booths, the tables covered in starched linens and already set with polished silverware, wineglasses, and crystal vases overflowing with fresh flowers.

Baptiste Du Roschiers owned a dozen successful businesses sprinkled throughout New Orleans, but she only cared about two of them. While the theater, La Porte, accounted for the majority of her livelihood, this restaurant was her home. That was the only reason I’d agreed—per her request—to come alone. The Fontaine was sacred to her. If the First Parish Coven intended to betray me, it wouldn’t be here. Baptiste would never

allow it, and with Étienne gone, she was the one calling the shots.

But I scanned the room anyway in case she planned to deliver more than a verbal lashing, the comforting weight of my 9-millimeters a reminder that I'd been wrong before. No threat materialized, and when I pushed open the double doors, I found her alone, stirring a pot on the stove.

She didn't look up as I entered, her attention focused entirely on the simmering sauce. "It's been too long since you crawled into my kitchen, Lach."

Every time I saw her, it was easier to remember why we'd broken up. "I don't crawl for anyone."

She glanced over her shoulder. "Pity. Sometimes a girl wants a man on his knees."

Irritation flared through me, but I bit back a sharp retort. I would win a fight with the vampire, but, given my current situation, it was smarter not to pick one. "You asked to speak with me."

"And you came," she said pointedly, turning away from her dish. Her dark eyes glinted with both victory and reproach. "Although it took you long enough to get here."

"I had more important things to do." If she wanted an apology, she was going to be disappointed. Working with the First Parish would be much harder with Étienne gone. She would make certain of that, starting with this little test or whatever it was. She needed a reminder that there were boundaries—*my* boundaries. "The city doesn't run itself."

She set the spoon aside and crossed her arms, fixing me with a pointed stare. "And you are running it? From where I'm standing, it looks like you're barely keeping a lid on things."

"I don't answer to you," I reminded her.

She snorted, no doubt recalling the past. "Maybe you should. You made a mistake not telling the covens about the murders."

"Creating panic wouldn't have helped."

"We could have, though," she said.

"How?" I couldn't help but laugh. "All the covens do is fight."

She shook her head, grabbing a bunch of carrots and slamming them onto a cutting board. "And you lack imagination," she accused as she reached for a chef's knife. "I thought maybe Ciara could help you see."

"See what?"

"That no one can help you if you don't ask for it." She waved the blade at

me. “You could learn a thing or two from her. You’re standing here because she worked with us instead of against us.”

I clenched my jaw, hating that she was right. Not that I would admit that to her, especially with the fragile control I held over the covens. Asking for help was one thing. Showing weakness was another.

We stared at each other, a tense silence stretching between us. Finally, Baptiste sighed, shaking her head. “You’re never going to pull your head out of your own ass, are you? That’s why I decided to do it for you.”

Unease prickled down my spine. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Her answering smile showed a little fang. Baptiste wiped the knife on her apron, the razor-sharp edge catching the light. My muscles tensed, readying for an attack, but she merely flicked the knife toward the rear entrance reserved for deliveries. “It means that you owe me one. Come on. I have something to show you.”

She moved to the door and opened it, but she didn’t step into the back alley. I hesitated, suspicion warring with curiosity. This was a game to her. It always was, but I had no clue what the prize was. Maybe she just wanted to twist the knife of Étienne’s death. Or, more likely, she just got off on toying with me.

“Do you want this situation resolved or not?” And there it was: the bait—dangled too low to possibly resist.

I strode forward, hesitating for a split second when I reached the threshold.

“You still don’t trust me.” She laughed under her breath. “I hope you’re working on that with your new girlfriend. Humans don’t live long enough to waste time waiting for a man to change.”

I bristled, wondering if more news had leaked than just the murders.

Baptiste noticed and grinned. “Already screwed that up, too, huh? What a surprise.” She pushed the door open wider. “We’ll tackle that after we deal with your other mess.”

“What mess?” I demanded, but she ignored me and continued into the alley.

The odor of rotting food from the dumpsters mingled with the dank scent of yesterday’s rain. A couple dozen empty crates had been tossed next to the restaurant’s dumpster, and tied to it...

I growled, recognizing the crouching vampire in chains. Caleb. He lifted

his head at the sound of my voice, his unwashed hair hanging over his face. He looked like hell. His clothes were filthy and torn. Dried blood was caked on his busted lower lip. But something other than fear filled his eyes when he looked at me.

Defiance.

“He’s one of yours,” I said through gritted teeth. “What the fuck is going on?”

Baptiste stopped beside him and crossed her arms. “I told you,” she said calmly, “I handled it.”

“Handled what?” I demanded, my eyes darting around the alley for more of her men. Nothing moved in the shadows. We seemed to be alone, but I knew better than to let my guard down.

“No one is going to ambush you,” she said, sounding almost offended. “I called you here to help you, remember? Just like when I sent Dante to help with your friend and when my brother helped you in New York.”

The last thing I needed was to be in more debt to her, but I found myself softening. “How does this solve my problem?”

“Because he killed Étienne.” Her smug smile faltered.

I took a single step forward. “How can you know that?”

She shrugged. “I ordered every vampire I’ve ever sired to come forward if they knew anything about the murders.” The satisfaction returned to her eyes as she waited for me to do the math.

My jaw dropped. “And he...confessed?”

“Don’t act so surprised, Lach,” she said, annoyed again. “I made them. I can compel them to tell me the truth—whether they want to or not. Just like Étienne would have done if you’d looped him in on what was happening.”

And he would have. He would be alive now if I’d told him about the murders—if I’d asked for help. Like Ciara and Cate would have done.

Baptiste kicked Caleb hard in the ribs, and he grunted, trying to shield himself from further blows. “This little shithead had no choice but to tell me the truth.”

I stared at Caleb, my mind reeling but only one question important enough to ask. “...Why?”

“He’s always been a bit of a loose cannon, but I never imagined he was capable of something like this,” she admitted, her face dimming. “You’re not stupid.”

“That’s not what you usually say.” I smiled grimly.

But she didn't laugh. "There are plenty of people who want to see you off the throne; you know that. The bona fides only made them hate you more."

I shook my head. "I want him to answer."

She flourished a hand, stepping to the side. "Be my guest." She glared down at Caleb. "Tell him why you murdered those people."

I turned my burning gaze on Caleb. He'd gone still and silent, but I could smell his fear, see it in the tremor of his hands, hear the slight hitch in his breath as the compulsion took hold. He had no choice but to do as she commanded. But he remained quiet.

"Tell me why you did it," I said, my voice low and dangerous. "We both know that you aren't walking out of here, so you have two choices. Quick and painful or slow and painful."

Either way, he would answer for what he had done. Not only because the city needed to remember what happened when they made a move against me but because Étienne had been my friend.

My fists clenched at my sides, nails biting into my palms. It was taking everything in me not to rip him to shreds. Blood roared in my ears as I waited for Caleb to speak, an eternity packed into a few scant seconds.

"You don't own us or this city," he rasped, turning hate-filled eyes on me. "They thought they owed you allegiance. They made New Orleans a prison because they've forgotten their own power. We have our own magic. We could have been free from your—"

"Enough." Baptiste cut him off with a disgusted look. "You swore an oath of allegiance like the rest of us."

"I don't answer to him," he reminded her.

"You're answering to me *now*." I stepped between them, glaring at him.

"And me," Baptiste added. "You killed a vampire elder. The punishment for that treason is death."

His head drooped at her words, and he fell silent again.

Baptiste produced a wooden stake from her apron pocket, and my chest tightened. He deserved worse, but he had confessed. She gripped it tightly and leveled the point at Caleb's heart.

"Tell him everything," she commanded, her voice as sharp as its point.

Caleb's hateful gaze flicked from me to the stake, a flicker of fear in his eyes. Then he began to talk, the confession spilling out of him like poison.

"No one would listen at the meetings. They wanted to help you, bring you back here even when the bona fides spell was clearly draining our magic.

When Thalia suggested it, I nearly killed her in front of everyone. But then others agreed with her and the spell was cast. You came home, and they congratulated themselves. And those of us who disagreed were ordered to shut the fuck up.”

Baptiste hissed, but a twisted smirk pulled at Caleb’s mouth. “Even you,” he added, the words dripping with disdain. He glanced at me. “She’d probably blow you if you asked her to.”

She snarled, shoving the stake forward a fraction of an inch. Blood blossomed on the front of his shirt. “*Give me a reason.*”

But he continued to grin. “I decided to send a message. I wanted everyone to see the true price of their loyalty. We weren’t loyal. We were dogs waiting for our next command. You wouldn’t protect us, help us. I wanted them to see that.” He shook his head. “But you made sure that no one got that message, so I sent another one. I thought the police would find the human first—that you wouldn’t be able to cover it up. But our kind would know when they saw that memento mori.” He chuckled softly despite the blood oozing down his shirt. “I didn’t expect you to care about the humans—you used to treat them like cattle. But you found that one first, too. So I had no choice. Thalia was clever, but she was a nobody. The tourist should have made the papers. But none of you could ignore the murder of a member of the Vampire Council.”

Rage smoldered under my skin with each word, my muscles coiled tight with the effort of holding back.

“You’re weak, Gage. Soft.” Caleb sneered up at me, baring his fangs. “You don’t deserve to lead us. You never did.”

The last threads of my control snapped. I lunged forward, wrapping a hand around Caleb’s throat. Metal crunched as I slammed his body against the dumpster. “And you don’t deserve to live.”

Caleb just laughed, the sound as harsh and ugly as the loathing etched onto his face.

Baptiste stepped up beside me, pressing the stake into my free hand. Her fingers curled around mine, forcing them to grip the worn wood.

She leaned in. “He’s right about one thing. He’s not the only one who feels this way. There are others who think they can defy you, question your authority.” Her smile was sharp and ruthless. “You need to send a message. Show them what happens when they cross you. Show them why they answer to the Nether Court.”

I stared down at him, stared at the bloodstained stake in my hands, stared at the man who had killed my father's oldest friend, and found no mercy in my heart. "Any last words?"

Caleb met my gaze, eyes burning. "Go to hell."

I smiled. "You first."

I plunged the stake into Caleb's chest, ribs splintering and crunching from the impact. His eyes flew wide, filling with shock and agony as it pierced his heart. A choked gargle escaped his lips, followed by a trickle of blood as he turned ashen, cracks spiderwebbing across his face.

And then he was gone.

He deserved worse.

I wrenched the stake free, letting Caleb's lifeless body slump to the ground. Disgust roiled through me, bitter on my tongue, and I turned away, unable to look at him a moment longer. The stake clattered to my feet.

Baptiste stared at the body before swallowing. "At least that's done."

"You liked him," I said through gritted teeth, daring her to lie to me.

"I did," she admitted, tipping her chin. "But he disappointed me, and we can't have that."

Sentimentality had never been one of her weaknesses. Étienne might be gone, but maybe I still had an ally in his coven.

She nodded toward the kitchen door, her expression unreadable. "I'll have someone take care of the body before we open for dinner."

I followed her back inside, each step mechanical. The anger that had consumed me only moments before was fading, leaving behind a hollowness in its wake.

Caleb might have betrayed me, but that didn't mean he was entirely wrong. Baptiste had sided with me because she had no choice. But even she had to see there was some truth to why he had acted. The city had sacrificed to protect me, and I had led those people to slaughter.

As the door swung shut behind us, I felt something in me crack, the numbness giving way to a grief so sharp it stole my breath. Baptiste continued to the cutting board, resuming where she had left off like nothing had happened. But I braced my hands against the counter, my head bowing under the weight of it.

"Baptiste, I..." My voice sounded foreign to my own ears, thick and raw. "I'm sorry about Étienne."

She paused, her knife hovering over a half-chopped carrot, and a wry

smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “I thought you didn’t apologize.”

I shook my head, a mirthless laugh escaping me. “I don’t. But...I’m still sorry.”

The words hung between us, heavy with the weight of centuries of things left unsaid. The full burden of my immortality pressed down on me with its endless march of time and loss and mistakes.

The rhythmic thud of her knife against the cutting board filled the silence between us. I picked up a towel, methodically wiping Caleb’s blood from my hands before tossing it into the trash.

“You should know that the council reached out,” Baptiste said, her gaze fixed on the vegetables before her. “About the murders. I’ll let them know it’s been resolved.”

I nodded, but the tension in my shoulders remained. It was over, but its weight still lingered like a shadow—impossible to shake.

Baptiste glanced up at me, her brow furrowing. “This is the part where you thank me and tell me you’re relieved.”

“Thanks,” I said flatly. “You took care of one of my problems.”

“The bona fides is still in place, which means...” She put the knife down and studied me. “Let me guess. This is about that *human*.”

Suspicion flared in my chest at her sudden concern.

“Relax, Lach,” she said. “I’ve moved on, and I’m glad you have, too, even if she’s human.” She grimaced. “Unless you fucked that up, too.”

We were a chapter long since closed, but she still knew how to read me.

I let out a heavy sigh, running a hand through my hair. “I don’t know, Baptiste. Everything’s just...*complicated* right now.”

She picked up the chopping board, turning to the pot still simmering on the stovetop, and dumped them in with a splash. “Let me give you a bit of advice. I’ve known you for centuries. I knew Étienne even longer. I thought I always would.” Her voice caught, a flicker of pain crossing her features before she schooled them back into a neutral mask. “I think it’s safe to say you thought the same.”

I nodded, a lump forming in my throat.

“We’ve been immortal so long, we forget what’s truly important,” she said softly. “No magic can guarantee forever. Any of us could die tomorrow. Don’t waste time.”

The truth of her words punched me in the gut.

“I don’t know how to make things right with her,” I admitted. “I don’t

even know where to start.”

She dipped a spoon into the pot, tasting it with a critical eye before reaching for the salt. A knowing smile curved her lips as she glanced back at me. “Why do you think I taught you to cook? Food has a way of bringing people together.” She waved her spoon at me. “So, get your ass out of my kitchen and go fix what you broke. And for fuck’s sake, try not to screw it up this time.”

Chapter Thirty

Cate

Six words.

Lach and I hadn't spoken for the better part of a week, and that was all I warranted. Six shitty words. I stared at the crumpled note in my hand.

Meet me for dinner at six.

No apology. No explanation. No *I love you*. He hadn't even bothered to sign his freaking name.

Maybe it was part of his plan. Break things off in a public place with lots of curious humans watching so I wouldn't make a scene. Clearly, he wasn't interested in working through our problems—mating bond or no. I turned away from the door that led to the Avalon's dining room, but I only made it a few steps toward the elevator before I changed my mind. Maybe it was better if he wanted to end things. How much harder could my heart break, anyway?

A deep pang in my chest answered. I rubbed away the ache and pushed open the door.

Inside, chairs were turned over on top of tables, and the overhead lights were off. The entire place was deserted save for an intimate table that had been set for two in the center of the room, adorned with silver candlesticks and a ridiculously large bouquet of red roses whose deep crimson petals seemed to glow in the flickering candlelight.

So maybe I'd read the note wrong. Still, it wasn't going to be as easy as tossing a few flowers and lighting a few candles.

The side door opened, and Lach stepped through, carrying a bottle of wine. Our eyes met and held so long that I forgot how to breathe, my resolve diminishing with each passing second.

"I got your note," I blurted out, the words bouncing in the large, empty space. I crossed my arms over my chest, fixing him with a guarded look. A

million questions piled into my mind, but only one seemed important. “What do you want?”

Now? Tomorrow? For the rest of our lives?

We could start with the first and work our way toward the rest.

“Sit down.” Lach gestured to the table. “I just want you to hear me out.”

I stared at him, my eyes trying hopelessly to adjust in the dark so I could get a better read on him.

“Please,” he added, not budging from his spot across the room.

“Finally, some manners,” I muttered, and a cautious smile tugged at his lips. Releasing a slow breath, I walked over and took a seat at the candlelit table. I tapped the handle of the spoon. “If you think that we can just sit down and pretend like nothing happened...”

I didn’t know where I was going with that threat.

“I know that.” He took a single step before he frowned down at the wine in his hands. Depositing it on the nearest table, he raked a hand through his hair. “I meant to plan a whole speech, but dinner took longer than I expected.”

“You...cooked?” Possibly the biggest surprise of the evening.

He nodded, rubbing his palms together as he looked around the room.

“I’m right here,” I reminded him. “Or are you looking for an exit so you can keep avoiding me?”

I braced myself, expecting him to lash out. To remind me that I had been the one to walk out last week. But he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Reaching to his wrist, he unbuttoned a cufflink and let it scatter to the floor.

“Are you—”

He raised a single finger to silence me.

I slumped into my chair as he rolled up one of his shirtsleeves, revealing the toned muscles of his forearm and a tattoo slowly trailing out of sight. “I was wrong,” he said quietly. “About a lot of things.”

It took me a second to process the words. When I finally did, I tilted my head to acknowledge them, half of me too shocked to speak and the other half not quite ready to let my guard down. Some of my anger ebbed at his admission, but I stayed silent, waiting for him to continue.

He flicked the next cufflink across the room and rolled up his other sleeve. “I’ve been an asshole—a complete and utter asshole—to you.” Regret laced his smile, and I found my own lips tugging at the corners in

spite of myself. I pressed them into a flat line before he stopped.

“Not going to argue with you on that.”

He snorted. “Fair enough.”

And he wasn’t even going to let me pick a fight. Maybe he had learned his lesson. I opened my mouth to let him off the hook, but he held up a hand. “Let me finish. I need to say this.”

But he didn’t speak. He dropped onto one knee.

I was going to need a defibrillator. My breath caught in my throat. “Gage, what the—”

“Go with it.” He grinned. Still holding my gaze, he lowered his other knee to the ground.

Disappointment splashed in my chest, dashed away when he planted his palms on the ground and lowered his head.

“I’m so sorry, Cate.” He started to crawl. “For everything. I was stubborn and pigheaded and completely blind. I fucked up. I don’t deserve your forgiveness...”

I gripped the arms of my chair, afraid I was going to fall out of it. I’d expected an apology, but this...

Lachlan Gage was ruthless. He was powerful. He held New Orleans in the palm of his hands.

And I had him on his knees.

He continued to me and stopped. “But forgive me.” His head finally lifted, allowing me to glimpse the raw vulnerability shimmering in his green eyes before he bowed it once more. “I’ve spent so long with the world at my feet that I forgot...my true place is here. At yours. Please, fucking forgive me.”

My heart stuttered in my chest and then began to race. Reaching down, I threaded my fingers through his dark hair, gently tilting his face up to mine.

“I don’t want you at my feet,” I whispered. “I want you with me. At my side. I want to be your equal. Your partner.”

“I will never be your equal.”

I smiled down at him, unable to resist. “Well, you can try.”

He laughed softly. Cupping his chiseled jaw, I leaned down and pressed my lips to his. Lach shifted upward, and his hand cupped my cheek, the touch almost tentative. I opened for him, and he swept in, restraint abandoned as he deepened the kiss.

When we finally broke apart, both breathless, his hands slid purposefully

under my skirt, warm on my bare thighs. “But what if I want my place to be right here?”

The question stoked an ember to life at my core, but I blinked. “Is the groveling over?”

“I can continue,” he offered, something wicked dancing in his eyes as his fingers hooked the elastic sides of my panties. “Or I can show you why I belong here...”

“Actions speak louder than words,” I said, then swallowed hard.

His smile widened as he dragged my underwear down my legs and brought the delicate lace to his nose.

“Delicious.” He inhaled deeply before shoving them in his pocket.

I licked my lower lip, wiggling in the chair. “I thought we were having dinner.”

“We are, but there’s only one thing I’m craving.”

Shivers sprinted across my skin as he kissed and licked his way up my inner thigh. When he reached the softest point, he gripped my knees and slid me to the edge of the chair. “That’s it,” he crooned, urging my legs wider. “I need to fucking taste you, princess.” His warm breath fanned across me, and I gasped, my head falling against the back of the chair. Lach growled as his thumbs spread me open. “I fucking need *you*.”

I shuddered at the first, hot lash of his tongue. “I need you, too.”

I needed him like air. I needed him to survive. And I was tired of questioning that.

I grabbed a fistful of his hair and jerked his face from between my legs. “Don’t push me away.” My voice cracked.

“I won’t,” he swore.

“Don’t hide things from me.” I couldn’t stand the thought of any distance between us. Not when he was part of me. Not when I was part of him. “We only work together.”

He brushed a kiss to my arm. “I won’t.”

“I need you.” The words sounded different as they fell from my lips, but he seemed to understand. Lach rose to his feet with inhuman speed, his arm sweeping across the table. Glass and porcelain shattered around us, and then I was across the table, my legs hanging over the side. I vaulted up, hooking an arm around his neck and dragging him on top of me. Our mouths collided, his fingers fumbling for his belt buckle. I whimpered at the promising swish of leather as he freed his cock.

“You have me.” He gripped my hips as he positioned and slid inside me inch by inch. “All of me.”

I clung to him, my nails biting into his skin as he thrust, each stroke deepening the bond between us.

“Being inside you feels like home,” Lach rasped, eyes searing into mine. “Nothing will ever be more right than this.”

He rolled his hips, hitting a spot that sent stars bursting into my vision. His thumbs brushed reverently over my hip bones. “I knew from the first moment I saw you that you were *mine*.” He punctuated the declaration with a sharp snap of his hips, darkness curling around him.

“I love you,” I moaned.

A grin carved his mouth, my words chasing away some of the shadows. “You better.”

My hands fisted his shirt and dragged his face to mine. He groaned into my lips, plunging faster and faster as we hurtled toward the edge.

With one final, deep thrust, Lach roared, his release triggering my own earth-shattering climax.

Gradually, I floated back to reality, limbs heavy and body spent. He rested his forehead against mine as we fought to catch our breath, pulses gradually slowing.

He stared into my eyes with a tenderness that made my heart ache as I smoothed a sweat-dampened strand of hair from his brow. His eyes fluttered open, meeting my awed gaze.

“You’re the only thing that chases the darkness away,” he whispered hoarsely, raw emotion coloring his confession. “You are the light in my world.”

Tears burned in my eyes as he kissed me once, the brush of his lips full of promise.

Barely drawing back, he closed his eyes. “I’m so s—”

I pressed a silencing finger to his lips.

“Stop saying you’re sorry,” I told him, and his eyes flew open. “I’m not keeping score.”

One dark brow arched skeptically, and a giggle bubbled up my throat.

“At the moment,” I amended with a playful grin.

“That’s my girl.” He helped me to my feet as my stomach rumbled so loudly that he flinched. “I guess I have to actually feed you.”

“I guess so.” I held out a hand. “Panties, please.”

He frowned as he reached into his pocket, muttering something under his breath as he helped me step into them. Smoothing my skirt into place, I looked around at the destruction. "I guess we aren't eating in here."

"Hopefully I didn't scorch it." He took my hand and guided me toward the kitchen.

The rich, spicy aroma hit me first, causing my mouth to water and another embarrassingly loud rumble from my stomach. Lach laughed, leading me over to the stove where a large pot sat simmering. He lifted the lid with a flourish to reveal a hearty gumbo. I peeked inside, surprised to see it looked nearly as delicious as it smelled.

"You actually cooked this?" I asked, hardly able to believe my eyes. Lachlan Gage, powerful fae prince, slaving over a *stove*? Too domestic. Too normal.

He stuck his tongue out. "I'm only mildly offended."

Grabbing a spoon, he scooped up a generous portion, blowing on it before offering it to me. I accepted the bite, and flavors exploded on my tongue. Rich. Spicy. Incredible. An involuntary moan escaped my lips.

"This is better than sex." I swiped the spoon from him.

"Now I'm definitely offended." But he was smiling as he ladled some into a bowl.

I clutched the bowl as he dished up his own. "I wish it could always be this simple."

"Me too." He dropped the ladle in the pot and settled against the counter, holding his own gumbo. But he didn't take a bite. "We caught the murderer."

I stilled, processing the information. Relief warred with a sense of unease in my gut. Finally, I managed a quiet, "Good."

"It was a vampire." He told me more as I continued to eat, his own food forgotten. When he admitted to staking him, I put my bowl down, fingers trembling. He fell silent for a moment. "I shouldn't have told you that part."

But I shook my head. "I meant what I said before," I murmured. "I want to know everything. You just have to remember I'm new to all of this. I'll get comfortable with it."

At least I hoped I would.

"Part of me doesn't ever want you to be comfortable with this, Cate," he admitted, the shadows returning in full force. "I wish you didn't have to face this darkness."

"I'm not scared of the darkness. I'm only scared of losing you."

"You have me," he promised, sadness shining in his eyes. "Every breath I have left is yours."

Because he couldn't promise me forever. Not with that mark burned into the back of his neck. The reality of our situation crashed over me like a tidal wave, dragging me under its weight. We stared into each other's eyes.

"I wish it was longer. I wish it was forever," he added softly.

And in that moment, I knew it could have been. I knew that I'd been holding myself back. I knew I had been waiting to lose everything again. But I also knew that whatever pain lay before us was nothing compared to this—to the bond that fate had gifted us. Because I had been meant to find Lachlan Gage, to find my family, to find my home.

"What is it?" he asked, concern knitting his forehead.

But I couldn't speak. I couldn't explain it. There weren't words. All I could do was show him.

Reaching down, I grasped my ring, unsurprised to find it loose. It had been waiting, too. Waiting for me to be ready. With a gentle tug, I slipped it off. Fear jolted through me as I held it out to him, my heart hammering in my chest.

We both stared at it in stunned silence, hardly daring to breathe as we waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Nothing happened.

No magical rush.

No otherworldly sensation.

Nothing.

My gaze found the floor, shame dashing the clarity I'd felt a moment before.

"Are you disappointed?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. "That I'm not fae?"

Not fated to live forever. Not part of his world. Just two lost souls that had somehow found each other on their own.

His gaze snapped to mine, eyes blazing. "Disappointed?" The word was choked. "Never. I wanted you to be fae because I couldn't bear the thought of a world without you in it."

"But the Terra Court," I croaked, tears streaming down my cheeks. "And

the spell and...I was supposed to help you get what you wanted. To help you resurrect the court."

He cupped both sides of my face, his thumbs brushing away my tears. "I want you. That's it. *You*. For who you are. I will always want you."

"I thought when I took off the ring..." My throat tightened, words bottling inside it.

"You don't need that ring," he said, pulling away abruptly. Then, to my utter shock, he dropped to one knee before me, his hand clasping mine. He grinned up at me. "I didn't have time to plan this, either, but I am prepared."

All I could manage was a single sob as he reached into his pocket and produced a velvet ring box.

"My life started the day I met you, and I want to spend the rest of it with you." He popped open the lid, revealing something sparkly. I blinked back tears just enough to make out a stunning diamond solitaire. Simple. Elegant. Freaking huge.

I swiped at my eyes, still blinking furiously. "I can't wear that. I'll hurt someone."

"I'm not buying one any smaller," he warned me, taking it out of the box. "Marry me."

Not a question. We were past that point. But I nodded anyway and held out my finger, new tears springing to my eyes as he slipped it on—for a moment, the future stretching before us bright and beautiful and full of hope.

Chapter Thirty-One

Cate

A new day pulled me from a deep and *satisfied* sleep, my body pleasantly sore in all the right places. I stretched, my hand coasting over a smooth, muscled back, and my new ring sparkled as the sunlight streaming through the windows caught the diamond.

“Like it?” Lach asked in a gruff voice, one eye peeking open from where his face was still half buried in his pillow.

I shimmied closer, tucking my body against his. “I still think it’s ridiculously big.”

“Like you said, it can double as a weapon.” He shifted, his low chuckle turning into a yawn as he took my hand and studied the engagement ring. “Ten bucks says that Ciara will think I should have gotten you a bigger one. I can, if you want.”

“No way.” I snatched my hand from him and cradled it protectively between my breasts. “I’m keeping this one—”

A frown creased his lips. “Speaking of, about your mother’s—”

The bedroom door burst open, cutting him off. “Rise and shine, lovebirds!” Ciara clapped her hands. She sashayed to the windows and drew the curtains back. “Everyone is on their way.”

I bolted upright, clutching the sheet to my chest. “What? Why?”

“Not sure. I was told we were meeting.” She planted a hand on her hip, an impish grin lighting her face. “Maybe it’s to discuss noise complaints. People could probably hear you two all the way in Fontainebleau last night!”

Lach groaned and rolled over, burying his face in the pillow again. “What have I said about boundaries?”

“I can’t recall. Maybe we need to put a soundproof ward around your quarters.” She waggled her eyebrows suggestively. “Now get your lazy asses out of bed before we have company.”

She smacked the edge of the mattress on her way out, shutting the door with a blown kiss.

My stomach sank. Company? Discussions? Did it ever stop? After the killer was caught, I thought we might have had a minute to ourselves. But no. It was another day, which meant another crisis. I slid out of bed, keeping the sheet wrapped around me as I hunted for fresh clothes in the armoire.

But Lach didn't bother to cover up. Not that I was complaining. He swaggered over, bypassing his usual clothes and opting for a black silk robe. I blinked in surprise as he slid it on.

"What?" he asked as he knotted the belt around his lean waist.

"I've never seen you so casual when there's business to be done." The man put on a suit to go to the bathroom.

"Who said anything about business?"

He was out the door before I could demand to know what was going on. I tugged on leggings and an oversize sweater, finger-combed my sleep-tousled hair, and padded out barefoot after him. Ciara perched on the arm of the leather sofa, sipping a cappuccino. Its scent curled toward me, and I nearly stole it. After last night, I could use the jolt.

Lach was seated nearby, still looking remarkably relaxed. But Roark, Shaw, and Channing were lined up in a row by the door, looking anything but calm.

"Look who decided to join us," Ciara said in a singsong voice.

Shaw shifted, sharing an uncomfortable look with my brother. "Will someone please tell us what's going on? Lach, you don't just send a text in the middle of the night that there's something urgent to discuss in the morning and then not respond."

I frowned, swiping the cappuccino from Ciara's hands. She let out a cry of protest. "Sorry," I said, stealing a sip before she took it back. "Something tells me that I'm going to want to be caffeinated for this."

But Lach turned to Roark. "Did you get what I asked?"

"It's right here," Roark said, holding up a brown paper bag. A muscle twitched in his jaw as he looked from Lach to me and back again. "Why do we need it?"

The floating euphoria I'd felt since the proposal popped like a soap bubble. One day. We couldn't have one freaking day without something going terribly wrong. My shoulders sagged under the weight of new dread.

What fresh hell awaited us now?

“Might as well get this over with.” He nodded to his penumbra.

Roark reached into the bag and pulled out a dark-green bottle. “As requested.”

I stared in confusion. Champagne?

Lach stood and took the bottle from Roark with a grin. “Thank you.” He turned to face the others, taking my hand and interlacing our fingers. “We have an announcement to make.”

“Oh my gods.” Ciara set her cappuccino on the side table with a dramatic *clink*. “Out with it already!”

Lach lifted our joined hands, the diamond on my finger catching the light. “Cate and I are engaged.”

For a split second, I might have heard a pin drop in the stunned silence—until Ciara let out an earsplitting shriek.

Lach winced and rubbed an ear. “I’m pretty sure they heard that all the way in Texas.”

She ignored him, leaping up and nearly tackling us. Over her shoulder, Shaw whispered something to Channing, and my brother forced a smile. I wasn’t sure why this was such a surprise to everyone, except maybe that it had happened so fast. Neither of our brothers knew we were mates. I’d drop that bombshell on Channing later. This was enough for him to digest for the time being.

When Ciara finally released us, she grabbed Roark’s arm. “I told you!”

“We all saw it coming,” Roark muttered, glancing at her hand with wide eyes. “Should I open the champagne?”

Ciara shuffled back a step as a faint blush colored her cheeks. “Good idea.”

Roark looked relieved to be assigned a new task.

Whipping toward me, she reached for my hand. “Let me see the ring.” She admired the glittering diamond, her mouth pursing into a pouty bow. “It could be bigger.”

“Told you,” Lach whispered under his breath.

A loud *pop* interrupted Ciara’s analysis, and I startled. But a moment later, a champagne flute was being pressed into my hand. Roark passed one to Ciara, and she clinked it against mine. “To true love,” she said with a wink, adding, “and to think that you used to hate him.”

“‘Hate’ seems like a strong word.” Lach frowned as he took a sip.

“Oh, she hated you.” Ciara beamed up at him. “Is that why you got her such a puny ring?”

“I’ll be right back.” I left Lach to explain that I was perfectly happy with the small asteroid he’d given me and strode toward our brothers.

“Congratulations,” Shaw said, giving me a hug.

I stared over his shoulder at Channing as we pulled apart. “Not going to say anything?”

His jaw worked for a second before he mumbled, “I’m happy for you, too.”

He sounded like he was offering his condolences.

“Thanks.” But my words were forced. I wanted him to be happy for me.

We both drank our champagne in silence. It was too early in the morning for booze or drama. Channing seemed to think the same, because he downed his in a single gulp. “We need to meet Dante,” he said to Shaw before turning to me. “Sorry to run.”

I waved him off. “Be careful.”

I still wasn’t happy that he was hanging out with a vampire.

“I wish you would give him a chance.” Channing shot a meaningful glance across the room at Lach.

Point taken.

I sighed. “Bring him around sometime.”

His brows rose, but he inclined his head. “I will.”

Channing headed toward the door, and I wondered if he would ever get used to this. I hadn’t done enough to make him feel comfortable in this world. I’d been too caught up with the business of the ring and the bona fides and the murders. That needed to change, especially if I was marrying Lach. He needed to feel like part of the family, too.

“He’ll come around,” Shaw said. His gaze dipped to the floor. “He’s just worried Lach doesn’t deserve you.” Something in his voice told me that was a feeling he shared.

But before I could say anything, Ciara jumped between us. “We need to go dress shopping! Today. Right now.”

Shaw waved as he backed out of the room, fleeing before his sister activated full wedding-planning mode.

I looked at Lach helplessly as Ciara pulled out her phone. He just shrugged and mouthed, *Better you than me*.

“I might want a shower,” I told her.

She nodded, her phone already pressed to her ear. Seizing Lach's arm, I dragged him toward the bedroom.

Ciara covered her phone and called after us, "Don't take too long."

Lach was still laughing as I shut the door behind us and slumped against it. I'd never seen him like this before—so light, not a single shadow lurking in his eyes. It soothed my jangled nerves enough for me to smile.

But Ciara knocked on the door before I could catch my breath. "They can do a private appointment this afternoon."

I tried to muster as much enthusiasm as I could as I called through the door. "Great!" I lowered my voice. "Is it just me, or are things moving at warp speed here?"

Darkness crept over his features. "Are you having second thoughts?"

"No! God, no. Never." I shook my head. "I'm ready to be married to you. I just... I'm not sure I'm prepared for the full Princess Diana wedding extravaganza your sister seems ready to plan."

He prowled closer and planted a hand on either side of me. "What if we ditched them and went down to the courthouse right now? We could be married before lunch."

I laughed, only half sure he was joking. "Don't tempt me." Avoiding a full-blown fae wedding was my dream scenario. "But I'm pretty sure Ciara would hunt us down and drag me to that boutique by my hair if I tried to bail."

"So, no cold feet, then? You're just trying to get out of shopping with my sister." Lach shook his head in mock disapproval.

I was already exhausted from the night before. "I don't know where fae get their stamina," I muttered, "but your sister uses hers shopping."

He kissed my forehead. "Don't worry. I'll make it up to you later using mine."

"You'd better." My toes curled at the thought. I sighed, resigning myself to an afternoon of silk and tulle. "I better get in the shower before she breaks down the door to find out what wedding colors we want."

But a slow smirk spread across his face. "How about I give you an early demonstration of my stamina?"

I fluttered my lashes, pretending to be put out. "If you must."

Lach swept me up and threw me over his shoulder, playfully swatting my rear. "You're going to be the death of me, princess."

For once, he sounded pretty pleased about it.

I felt like I'd been ushered into heaven—if heaven came with what were sure to be jaw-dropping price tags. Creamy wallpaper with hints of gold softened the walls, chandeliers dripped crystals overhead, and, of course, there was more champagne. But the showpieces were the gowns lined up in rack after rack of lace, silk, and tulle. The shop, Blanche, had closed early for the day to allow us a private shopping experience, and the sales associate flitted around, fawning over us like a guardian angel. My stomach did a nervous little flip as she appeared with yet another gown strewn across her arms.

The champagne fizzed over my tongue, and I willed its bubbles to help ease my queasiness.

“What about something like this?” Ciara turned around, clutching a lace gown trimmed with white fur.

I wrinkled my nose. “It’s a bit much.”

She pivoted to the mirror, fiddling with its trim, a dreamy smile on her face. “But if you get married around Yule...”

“Yule?” I didn’t need anyone to translate that fae holiday. My stomach cramped at the idea of being married in just over a month. “Isn’t that kind of fast? We’ve been engaged for like ten seconds.”

“I just thought...” She trailed away, her mouth pressing into a tight line.

My brows creased at the obvious shift in her tone. “You thought what?”

Her eyes met mine in the mirror’s reflection, something flashing through them before she returned to studying the dress with a bit too much interest. There was no mistaking the hollow pain I’d seen for that split second. “I thought you might want to do it sooner, since...”

“Fiona is going to find something,” I said firmly. Even Sirius had said that they would. “We don’t need to plan a shotgun wedding.”

She rolled her eyes as she hung the dress back on the rack. “No one said anything about that.” But she frowned as she chose another one and held it up for my appraisal. “Although everyone will probably be heavily armed.”

My fiancé included.

“What about this one?” she asked.

Something told me this shopping trip wouldn’t be over until I’d picked one.

This dress was simpler, a silk A-line with cap sleeves that flowed into a short train, but I found myself shaking my head. My stomach did another tumble, the squeezing sensation moving lower. This was something more

than nerves or excitement. “I think I need to use the bathroom. I don’t feel so good.”

And a minute alone.

But Ciara hung the dress back up and dutifully followed behind. The ladies’ room was elegantly decorated in shades of creamy white with enough stalls to accommodate half a wedding party. At least I would have some privacy. I tossed her my purse as I rushed for the nearest one. “You don’t look so good.” A smile lit up her face as she caught my bag. “Wait. *Should* this be a shotgun wedding?”

She slipped her signet ring off with an excited squeal. “Roark doesn’t need to hear about this,” she explained. “It will make a better surprise!”

I frowned at the implication, holding up a hand to stop her before she joined me in the bathroom stall. “I got this part myself.” I shut the wooden door and locked it, swearing I could hear her pout. Fae might not have boundaries, but I did. “And there better not be a need for a shotgun wedding.”

Now I really did feel like I was going to throw up. We had enough to worry about.

“But you two would have such cute—”

“Do not finish that sentence,” I cut her off as I slid my panties down and discovered the reason for my stomach’s sudden theatrics. “Welp, I’m sorry to tell you that you are definitely not going to need a shotgun. My period started. Can you check my bag? I probably have something in there.”

“Sure.” Her disappointment radiated through the bathroom stall. Ciara might be let down, but I was relieved. Now was not the time to bring a tiny fae-human hybrid into the world. No matter how cute Ciara thought one would be. It might never be the right time, and I was a-okay with that.

“I’m not seeing anything.” I heard her digging around. “Are you sure?”

“I should.” Except that it wasn’t *my* purse, full of *my* shit. It was one of the ridiculous affairs Lach had given me so I could carry a gun for protection. So, of course, I didn’t have what I actually needed: a freaking tampon. But the cramps were beginning to subside as if they’d only started to keep me from ruining a wedding dress. Another small mercy. Maybe fate was on our side at last. I finally had the right ring on my finger, I wasn’t pregnant, and I hadn’t turned the pristine bridal showroom into a horror movie.

“Wait, I missed a pocket,” she called.

“They might have some by the sink.” A few seconds passed without an update. “Ciara?”

“What the fuck is this?” she asked, banging on the door like I could see through it.

“I don’t care unless it’s a tampon.”

But her hand appeared over the stall door, waving a familiar handmade doll. I’d seen a dozen like it in Willow’s shop.

“It’s an effigy,” I said slowly, a new uneasiness creeping through me. “Where did you get that?”

The tiny doll vanished. “It was in your purse in a hidden compartment. Okay, let me check my purse.”

A fist clenched my heart, but I shook away my fear. It was a coincidence. Nothing more. “I must have grabbed one in the Quartier Enchanté and forgotten about it.”

“Oh, I have something.” She held a tampon under the stall door, and I swiped it from her. “Now, about this creepy-ass doll.”

“It’s an effigy,” I repeated. “They’re used for spellcasting.”

“Why do you need one?” she asked.

But *I* didn’t need one. The effigy wasn’t mine. Something held me back from telling her that, a preternatural sense that made me close my mouth like when I was a child and I stopped myself from cursing to follow the rules. I tried to shake the strange feeling loose, but I couldn’t.

“Oh, are you hexing my brother?” she asked, sounding entirely too sympathetic to the idea.

I laughed despite myself. “No. Why would I do that?”

“Do you really have to ask?”

Fair enough.

A shiver rolled through me as I scrubbed at the bit of blood staining my panties with a wad of toilet paper. I didn’t want to risk the white sofas any more than the gowns. It took me a second to realize that Ciara had grown quiet.

“You okay out there?” I called.

She muttered something nonsensical.

“What?”

“I’m just playing with your doll,” she said more loudly.

“It’s not a doll.” It especially was not *my* doll. I unlocked the door to find her holding the effigy, a loose tangle of thread hanging from it. “It’s—”

Ciara looked up and froze, dropping it in the process. Then she screamed.

“What the hell...” I covered my ears, wincing at the shrill cry, and my fingers brushed a bit of hard, *pointy* cartilage. For a second, I simply stood there, afraid to move, afraid to touch it again. It wasn’t possible.

Ever so slowly, I felt the tops of my ears again.

But they weren’t *my* ears.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Lach

I should have been happy. I *was* happy.

But dread crept up my neck as I caught up with other matters at my desk, sneaking past the joy I'd allowed myself to feel for all of five minutes. The murderer had been caught and punished. There hadn't been a single complaint from any of the covens today. Cate had actually said yes. And a new bit of good news had arrived in the form of a text from Fiona. I'd missed it while I was seeing Cate and Ciara off.

I think we found something. Might be a long shot, but we'll call you in the morning.

Things were going *too* well. That usually meant that shit was about to hit the fan.

But despite the uneasiness lingering in the back of my mind, I stopped myself. There were half a dozen bills scattered in front of me that needed to be paid. I had plenty to do. Whatever Fiona had discovered could wait.

I found myself reaching for my phone anyway. I wouldn't be able to get in touch with anyone in Prague directly. They would have returned to court for the night, but it wouldn't hurt to try. I had half a mind to send Roark there to get their asses out of bed. Now I understood why Shaw had been annoyed by my late-night message to everyone.

As if summoned by the thought alone, Roark popped his head into my office, delivering me from my dilemma.

"I was just going to call you," I said, dropping the invoice in my hand. "Let's get a drink." I could be patient. Besides, Fiona had said it was probably nothing, and no doubt there would be a crisis to deal with soon enough. Maybe I should take a break while I could and live like Cate had demanded.

But he was biting back a smile. "Um, there's a tiny, angry witch here to

see you.”

“I heard that.” Willow pushed past him, her arms full of large, rolled-up papers. She scowled at Roark, completely unintimidated that he was practically twice her size. “And I’m not angry. It’s just my resting witch face.”

He stared down at her with bemused surprise before cocking his head in my direction, waiting for instructions on what to do with her.

“Cate is out shopping with my sister,” I told Willow, shuffling the bills into a stack before sticking them in a drawer. “She’d probably welcome a reason to get out of it if you want to call her.”

I was trying not to take it personally that Cate had looked like she was going on a death march when she left, rather than wedding dress shopping.

Willow continued inside and dropped everything onto my desk. “I’m not here to see her. I’m here to see you.”

I shifted in my chair, curiosity getting the better of me as she opened a map. Just what I needed: a presentation. But I pinned a bland smile on my face and gestured for her to continue as Roark stepped into the doorway, leaning against it to hear what she had to say.

“I’ve been looking into the murders.”

She might as well have turned a firehose on me. Roark straightened up and crossed his arms, tattoos starting to swirl. “You...what?”

It took me a second to process what she had said. I shook off my surprise and slid the map toward her. “I appreciate your concern, but the culprit has been dealt with.”

Willow smashed her mouth into an unimpressed line as she smoothed out the map. It looked like it was a hundred years old—at least. “That’s the bad news. I don’t think that’s true.”

So much for a day without the covens. I wasn’t sure what sounded worse: fielding complaints or hearing conspiracy theories.

I swallowed back a sigh of frustration. Willow had tried to help Cate. The least I could do was hear her out. “Show me what you have.”

“Am I annoying you?” Her eyes narrowed to frustrated slashes. “Because if you want me to leave, I can. I just thought maybe you’d want to stop murder number five, but if I’m annoying you, I’ll leave.”

“Like I said, a vampire has confessed—” I stopped myself as my brain finally processed her words. “*Five*? There were only three murders.”

I shook my head, doing the mental math. I looked to Roark for

confirmation, and he nodded like he'd come up with the same number. "Are you trying to tell me there are going to be two more?"

"No." She tapped the map on the desk with her fuchsia-painted fingernail. "I'm trying to tell you that there have been four murders. You missed one."

The concern I'd felt a few moments ago returned, burrowing deeper under my skin. Maybe it would never really vanish at all. I straightened, craning to see the map's faded lines. Willow stabbed her index finger at an inked star in Third Parish. "A rougarou was killed right around the time that the bona fides spell was created."

Dread sank into my bones. I didn't bother trying to dismiss it this time.

"I remember that," I muttered, searching my brain for details and coming up blank.

"His name was Haines," she said, her voice cracking slightly. "Sounds like he was a nice guy. I asked a friend in the pack. Apparently, not a single wolf confessed to biting him."

I looked at Roark. That was unusual. Alphas didn't have as much control over their packs as they once did. Now they mostly operated out of respect. Something I understood, but if that respect was compromised... "Who did we hear about this from?"

"It came in through the usual channels. No one thought much about it. A coven is within their rights to put a rougarou down," he said. But the frown he wore told me that he would be following up with the local leaders to see how this had slipped through the cracks.

But I already knew how we'd missed it—how everyone had missed it.

It was the same thing that had kept the covens at one another's throats for the last few weeks, or, if I was being honest, centuries. The tension that had always simmered in the city's melting pot: prejudice. It was always easier to see the ways we were different rather than similar, and different scared a lot of people.

"I missed it at first, too," she said, as if she might pat my head for being so adorably dense. "Just think about it. If you want to hide that you're up to something, make people believe you're doing them a favor."

She raised a good point. A rougarou, cursed to change without control over their shifting, was the perfect victim. No one would ever look twice.

But connecting it to the other killings was thin reasoning at best. "Why do you think it was related to the other murders?"

“Because of the eclipse,” she said like this was obvious. “The other night, after Étienne was killed, my flowers died. We asked your friend Sirius about them, and he mentioned a siphoning spell, and that got me thinking... There have been *a lot* of eclipses lately. That’s how I found out about Haines. Witches chart them, so I did some digging.”

And found a dead rougarou. Romy had mentioned the eclipse in New York. She’d heard about it from her sister.

“They found his body a few hours after the first one, but, like I said, no one worried too much about a dead rougarou.” She leaned down and looked directly in my eyes. “But those other eclipses? I might have put it together sooner if you hadn’t covered them up.”

“We know the bona fides spell is affecting the city’s magic,” Roark interjected.

“Only when there’s a murder?” She shot a look over her shoulder that would melt ice. “Give me a break.”

I clenched my jaw to keep myself from making an excuse. She was right.

But Roark wasn’t easily cowed. “There was no eclipse when the human was killed.” Still, he looked shaken. “How is her death connected?”

That earned him another glare. “Magic doesn’t react as strongly to the death of a human, does it?”

There was so little magic in human veins. It would barely register.

I leaned back in my seat, assessing the threat in front of us. Not the marks on the map but the woman who had pieced them together. “And why do you think there’s going to be another murder?”

“Pay attention because I’m not explaining this twice. Haines is murder number one. He was killed here.” She pointed to the spot on the map again. “Then a few days later, Thalia was killed here.” She moved her finger to a spot across town. “She died *near* the French Quarter, but she was actually *in* the Second Parish if you look at the territory lines that were drawn when the covens were first establishing boundaries. The only one that doesn’t make sense is the tourist. Her body was found in St. Roch.”

“Why does that matter?” I studied the map.

“You’ll see,” she said grimly. “Étienne died here.” She pointed to Jackson Square, and I felt a stab of sorrow.

“Okay, but I don’t see why that predicts there’s going to be another murder.”

She muttered something under her breath, but all I caught was *fae* and

hopeless. “If you trace a line, you have a big circle.”

“You’re going to have to give me more than a circle,” I said flatly.

“Too obvious, right?” She grinned, but her face fell quickly, like she had suddenly remembered we were talking about murders. “One more death, and you’ll have five points. Five points makes—”

“A pentacle,” I finished for her.

“One of the primary magical symbols used in binding spells.” She tapped one of the spots. “I thought they were targeting all three parishes—going after the heart of New Orleans. But the human tourist doesn’t match the pattern.”

“Cate examined that body,” Roark reminded me. “She thought the woman had been killed somewhere else and the body was moved to St. Roch.”

Not enough blood, clotting wounds, other little differences that didn’t fit the pattern—like the victim being human.

But Willow looked vindicated. “Then she could have been killed anywhere in the city, and I bet she was killed somewhere in this circle.”

“Why move the body all the way out there, though?” Roark asked.

“To keep us from realizing they were targeting the three parishes.” She rolled her eyes.

I remained silent as I considered what she said. If she was right, the murders were more than an attempt to intimidate us. They were trying to undo the spell. I’d known someone was betraying me, but this? Whoever it was had put my entire court and all of New Orleans at risk.

“There’s a lot more to the bona fides than some boundaries on a map,” Roark reminded me in a low voice, casting a meaningful glance at her. A signal to warn me that we might need to act.

“Like what?” she asked.

A smooth smile slid over his face. “That’s just what I’m told,” he lied. “The covens created the spell. Your guess is as good as mine as to how it works.”

Even I didn’t quite know how they’d done it. That had been part of the plan. The fewer people who knew how the spell worked, the harder it would be to destroy. And Willow already knew more than she should.

“Thank you for telling me.” I stood, offering her my hand, willing her to leave before I had no choice but to act. “We’ll reinforce the boundaries.”

Roark cast a wary look over her shoulder at my outstretched palm. I

could almost hear his voice in my head—even without the signet.

You're letting her go?

But Willow didn't take the hint. "If there's more to the spell—if we can figure out what's binding it—we might be able to stop the killer. Will the covens tell you how they did it?"

"They're protective of their magic," I hedged.

She already knew too much.

Another look from Roark. Leaks had to be controlled before they did irreparable damage. What Willow knew had to be contained, even if she was Cate's friend. There was only one way to be sure the witch wouldn't speak to anyone else. I just wasn't sure how I was going to explain that to my fiancée.

I had no choice.

"Have you told Cate about this?" I asked her softly. I needed to know how much harm had been done before she walked into my office.

"I didn't tell Cate shit." Her eyebrows rose as she held up her hands. "Like I said, I only just put this together, since you geniuses thought you should keep us all in the dark about the murders."

No wonder Cate liked her. My lovely mate, who trusted people, who asked for their help, who let herself have friends.

But friends were a liability in our world. That's why only family mattered. It was a painful lesson.

And one it was time for Cate to learn.

"So you believe me?" Willow asked. When I nodded, she sighed, the sound both relieved and exhausted. Roark took a step closer to her, shadows twisting around his knuckles. She didn't seem to notice. "Good, because I rather like having my magic back, and since I have no clue what will happen if magic gets taken out by something this big, I figured I should warn you. Now go do something about it before someone else gets killed."

Her finger whipped between us. Roark hesitated.

"Us?" I repeated, realizing she was being very specific. "They could attack anyone."

"They won't," she said darkly. "Every choice has been purposeful. Choosing Haines was tactical. They didn't want anyone to know what they were up to, and I'm guessing that they wanted to wait until you were back in the city before they moved forward after that."

There would be no point in bringing down the ward if I wasn't here for

the Wild Hunt to collect.

“And Étienne wasn’t just any vampire, and Thalia wasn’t just any witch. They both supported creating the spell. They convinced their covens to help with it.”

“The human was just a tourist,” Roark hedged.

“Better to cover tracks. Just like with Haines. If the victims don’t have too much in common, it’s harder to establish a pattern. But I’m guessing if they went after Thalia and Étienne, they won’t choose a random victim to bring down the bona fides.” She held up her hand. “So like I said, one more murder. Five points on the map. It’s not just about the ward. They’re sending a message. To *you*.”

The Cabal. Goemon had tried to warn us. We weren’t just up against a killer. We were up against a fucking conspiracy.

One more murder, and the bona fides would fall, taking my court with it.

“Thank you.” I meant it, and that made what I had to do even harder. If the Cabal discovered that we knew, they would act. Surprise was our only advantage. If Willow was right, if they were trying to send a message, the first thing I had to do was keep my family safe. The Cabal couldn’t find out that we knew what they were up to, and that left me little choice in the matter.

I tilted my head at Roark.

He lunged for Willow, careful to pin her hands to her side with one arm.

“What the...” Roark’s other hand covered her mouth before she could start an incantation. Willow arched, her feet kicking wildly, but without magic, she didn’t stand a chance against him.

“Deal with her,” I ordered him. Willow’s eyes went wide, and she tried to shake her head.

“How...permanently?” he asked carefully.

Willow had helped us. She was Cate’s friend, so I found myself saying, “Take her to the Otherworld. Put her in the oubliette.”

Willow thrashed in his arms, but she was no match for Roark. She wouldn’t be able to access her magic there, and she knew it. Still, it wasn’t a death sentence. Not yet.

“Get everyone home,” he said, starting to turn. We needed to reinforce the spell through whatever means possible, but their safety had to come first.

“Wait.” Something else had occurred to me. “We’re going to need a witch

we can trust to weave new threads into the spell.” I eyed Willow for a second. Maybe a deal could be struck. I waited for her to stop fighting him, waited for her to turn eager, pleading eyes in my direction.

Instead, they rolled back in her skull, only the whites visible. Her entire body went limp, and then she seized. A thin string of spit dripped from her mouth as her body spasmed.

“What the...” Roark lowered her to the ground and knelt beside her while she convulsed.

“Careful,” I warned him. “It could be a trick.” But something told me it wasn’t.

He knelt beside her, his eyes flashing up to mine as hers fluttered. Suddenly, she went still. Roark leaned over her, concern creasing his brows, and her hand shot up. She grabbed his collar, her eyes opening just long enough for her to deliver one final warning. It came out in spurts, each word rattling me to my core.

“Cate... My spell... I think she just undid it.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Cate

My ears were rounded and normal and human. I knew that because I'd had them since I was a kid. These were... These were...

"Fae," Ciara whispered, her eyes growing large as she took a step away from me like I was a threat. "You're a fae."

I'd spent the last few weeks facing the possibility that Lach was right, that there was a glamour on my ring, and that everything I thought I knew about my existence might prove to be a load of crap.

And all that had in no way prepared me for the moment when said load of crap hit the fan.

She continued to back away from me like I was a ghost—not her friend, not her future sister-in-law, not me. I pushed past her, rushing to the mirror hung over the sink.

A stranger stared back at me. I had to coach myself to breathe as I took in my own reflection. But *I* was in there, hiding behind sharper cheekbones and a nose that tipped a little more up than the one I'd been blowing my entire life. Now my skin glowed with that faint, ethereal light that I'd been glamourised to exude when by Lach's side over the last month. My ears sloped and ended in elegant tips. But it was my eyes that snagged my attention and refused to let go. No longer simple, boring brown. Now they were endless and unyielding, as dark as the abismine stone in Ciara's signet ring, save for piercing flecks of gold that shimmered with an unearthly radiance.

I needed proof that the reflection before me was flesh and blood. I raised a hand to touch my face and gasped. Gold ribbons twisted across the back of it, down around my wrist. A sob slipped from me as I saw the mating bond on my own skin for the first time. I stared for a moment, startling when a line of reddish-brown Theban flashed over my fingers and disappeared. Not just the mark of the mating bond, but also...

I turned my attention back to the mirror as I wrenched down the neckline of my shirt and found more Theban—not in the dark ink of shadow magic; instead, it was in the same tawny hue as the ones racing somewhere else on my body. But these symbols remained fixed firmly in place, not moving from their vigil over my heart. Seven of them. I clapped a hand over my mouth as I realized what they were, but it was too late. Tears rolled down my cheeks, their heat at odds with the cold confusion that had taken hold of my entire body.

And peeking from behind my shoulders—

“Who are you?” Ciara asked angrily.

I forced myself to turn and face her—and found a gun leveled directly at my head. “It’s me. Cate,” I murmured, holding my hands up and hoping I could prove it to her. “I’m still Cate.”

My own heart was still beating in my chest. My thoughts swirled and swarmed inside my brain, trying to process what was happening. I was still me.

Wasn’t I?

How? How? How?

Ciara’s arms shook, her finger hovering over the trigger. She studied me, her gaze sweeping across my face in swift, sharp passes as if looking for proof.

“You saw me go into the stall,” I pointed out, annoyance thawing some of my shock.

Her lower lip trembled, and she bit down on it. The gun remained pointed between my eyes.

I looked at her, at the perfect skin of her arms, her neck, her face. It was unblemished. No tattoos giving her away. Not a single ancient symbol to show that she was thinking this over. Nothing to tell me if she was capable of shooting me, and somehow that was exactly the answer I needed.

“You aren’t going to kill me,” I said softly.

She flicked the safety off. “You don’t know that.” But her voice cracked.

Maybe I was wrong, but I doubted it. “You won’t.” I swiped at my tears, my eyes straying to the effigy on the floor. I considered for a moment before I bent and picked it up.

The gun tracked my movement, Ciara beginning to breathe heavily.

“Willow...” I forced myself to swallow, something made difficult by the knot in my throat. “She came to the Avalon.”

With her dead tulips, poking around, looking in my purse... And when I was finally ready, when I *finally* took the ring off. A laugh burst out of me. I plucked the thread fully off the effigy, and my shoulders felt lighter.

"Start explaining," Ciara demanded.

I turned around, still clutching the tiny doll, determined to make Willow explain later. Ciara's eyes followed it. The gun stayed on me. My temples began to throb, because cramps, a period, and a life-altering revelation weren't enough for one day. Now I was getting a migraine.

Worst. Day. Ever.

"Put the gun down, and I will," I snapped at her. "And have some sympathy. I'm PMSing."

She blinked a few times, and then her arms collapsed to her sides, the gun clattering to the floor. "I just need you to answer one question." Her voice shook. "Does Lach know?"

I slumped against the wall, my thoughts drawing together my brows, which only made my head hurt more. "Kinda." I closed my eyes to help with the pain. "Yeah, I think so. At least, he guessed it."

Ciara crossed her arms as her body began to quiver. "And you?"

I should have expected a follow-up question, but I frowned at her. "Wait, you think that I was keeping this from you?"

"I don't know what to think."

That made two of us. I drew a deep breath, startled to find my lungs burning. My hand shot to my chest and began to rub.

"It's a tad harder to breathe on Earth than the Otherworld," she said, her voice softening. "You'll get used to it."

She stared at me for a minute like I might transform again, like she didn't quite trust her sight, and I couldn't blame her. Slowly, she took a step forward, her gaze zeroing in on my neck. I clamped a hand to the spot in alarm. "What is it?"

"Theban," she whispered, "but it's..." She lifted her head, looking into my eyes, and her mouth fell open. "Oh gods... Are you... It's not possible." Her attention drifted to my hand, to the engagement ring I wore, but I knew she was seeing something else. She was seeing the color of those tattoos. Not Nether Court black. Not the iridescent pearl of the light courts. "*Does Lach know?*"

The question sounded different the second time she asked. Like she might be angry if she ever got over the shock. Like she didn't really want to know.

Like she knew the answer was going to *hurt*.

Regret flooded through me. I'd been too scared to face what part of me had suspected when Oberon demanded the ring in his garden.

I'd felt it every time he had called me "princess." More memories fell into place—ones that didn't make sense. Ones that swam to mind like watching videos of someone else's life. A pair of deep-brown eyes watching over me. Someone spinning me in a circle while I laughed. A fleeting memory of safety and belonging and home still tinged with innocence I'd lost long ago. My knees felt weak, and I lunged to grab the sink before I collapsed.

"Cate." Ciara moved a single step but stopped short of reaching out for me.

I couldn't blame her. I didn't trust myself, either.

I didn't *know* myself.

Someone knocked, the door opening a crack, and Ciara flew over to stop it.

"Everything okay in here?" the saleswoman asked in a chipper voice. "You've been in there for a while..."

"She got her period," Ciara murmured, firmly gripping the door to keep her from entering. "I think we need to reschedule."

"Poor thing," the woman said, instantly sympathetic. "I'll get something on the books *right* away."

"Sounds good. We'll be out in a second," Ciara told her before shutting the door in her face. Ciara turned, pressed her back to it, and then, she snickered. "I bet that woman thinks *she* is having a bad day."

And despite everything that had changed, despite everything that would never be the same again, I realized one important thing had not. My best friend. My sister. The woman who had my back when I'd just pulled the rug out from under her feet. Sure, she had trained a gun on me, but nobody was perfect.

"There's a lot I don't know," I told her, "but I'll tell you everything that I do." I glanced around the bathroom. "Just somewhere *else*. I could use a real drink."

Ciara drew in a deep breath as she considered my offer. Finally, she nodded.

"I guess first we have to find a way to get me out of here before someone sees." I glanced around the room like a solution might present itself on a

silver platter. “Maybe a hat? Or you could distract her while I sneak out the door?”

I prayed it wouldn’t come to walking out of here in a veil.

Another giggle erupted from her. “Okay, you definitely had no clue, because you don’t think like a fae. Someday you’ll learn not to make things harder than they have to be.” She grabbed the effigy from me and began looping the string until I felt a comforting tingle of magic. “There.” She tucked it safely in her pocket. “You look human again. Now let’s get out of here so you can tell me *everything*.”

Why did that sound like a threat?

Chapter Thirty-Four

Lach

As was often the case, the choice to tie Willow up wasn't personal. It was purely transactional. I had questions. The witch had answers.

I'd long ago learned that it was better to have the upper hand during a negotiation when the stakes were life or death.

Roark had left to pick up Ciara and Cate in the car rather than send a driver, a strategic decision to not draw too much attention from anyone who might be watching us from the outside. And there was no reason to worry either of them...yet. Not until Willow explained more about the spell she'd confessed to placing on Cate. Their day would be ruined soon enough. Someone might as well have some fun until then, because I wasn't.

Unless you counted being locked into a staring contest with an infuriated witch among your favorite pastimes.

For many reasons, I did not.

Willow had already wasted twenty minutes while she tried to free herself, called me every curse word she knew—it turned out that her vocabulary was quite extensive—and learned that if she attempted an incantation, I could add another fun accessory called a gag.

When she finally sagged in defeat, I picked up the Scotch I'd poured for her and lowered the handkerchief.

"Have a drink." I brought the cup to her lips.

She turned her head away from the rim. "So you can poison me?"

"You know *why*," I told her quietly, keeping the glass in place. "If I wanted you dead, Miss Broussard, you would be dead. This is an insurance policy to keep you from doing something reckless when I release you. The effects will only last a few hours."

"If I do, you'll take off these stupid gloves and untie me?" Her hands clenched open and shut as if she were bothered more by the presence of the former than the bindings.

Ropes were nothing to a witch, but gloves? Even when worn by choice, as many vampires and members of her kind still did, it was said to be like having an itch that could never quite be scratched. They weren't enough to fully stifle her magic, which was why she was tied up. "I will."

"I don't know why I would trust you," she muttered.

"I like to think it's because you don't have a choice." I moved the cup to her mouth once more. "Now drink."

She took a grudging sip, gagging a bit as she swallowed. The burn of the Scotch made the bitter mix of yarrow and hedgethorne easier to swallow—and hid the veritum I'd added to ensure she told me the truth. She coughed. "Geez, do you have anything stronger?"

"A bullet," I said with a smile. "But I'd rather it didn't come to that."

Her nostrils flared. "I brought you information. I *helped* you. I should have known better than to believe Romy."

Curiosity got the better of me. "Romy?"

"She vouched for you." Willow shook her head, disgust evident on her face.

That was surprising. "I can't allow you to repeat your theories to other people. We can't afford for the bona fides spell to fall."

"*You* can't afford for it to fall," she corrected me. "How does it feel to hide behind someone else's magic to save your own skin?"

"Careful," I warned her. "I haven't untied you yet. And this is about more than protecting me. There are threats outside New Orleans."

"I know that." She tilted her head, a strand of platinum falling across her face. She puffed at it, trying to get it out of her eyes.

I reached over and pushed it away. "You know nothing."

"Is that so?" She raised one brow. "Try me."

But I didn't care about more of her theories. I wanted to know about her actions. Particularly the one she'd confessed to before losing consciousness on my office floor. "Why did you have a spell on Cate? What kind of spell was it?"

"Untie me," she said through gritted teeth, wiggling her hands like she could force herself free.

"I'd rather wait a few more minutes." I was clocking the passing time on my Rolex.

She groaned and slumped against her restraints. "It was a protection spell."

That wasn't the answer I'd been expecting.

"Why were you protecting her?"

Willow glared up at me. "You know *why*."

My own words turned back on me, the implication just as clear but for entirely different reasons. "Did...Cate tell you?"

"She told me the ring was stuck and she needed help breaking the spell to get it off." Willow shrugged. "But I'm bright and I read, so I figured shit out."

"Kudos," I said flatly. Clearly, Cate hadn't updated her since last night. "She took off the ring. She isn't fae." Somewhere deep inside, that accusatory voice I always heard whispered again. The one that had warned me that it was what I wanted. That it had all been foolish desperation. So smug that it had been right and I had been wrong.

But Willow snorted, allowing her head to hang for a moment as she chuckled to herself. "What do you think I was protecting her from? She wasn't ready. That's why the ring wouldn't come off. That part of its spell was basic magic. All she had to do was decide she wanted to know the truth."

For a moment, I could only stare. "You...lied to her."

"I *redirected* her," she said carefully. Her muscles twitched a little, a sign that the herbs were doing their job. When Cate found out, any trust she had built with the witch would be destroyed.

My phone rang, but I ignored it.

"You going to get that?" Willow asked, shooting an irritated look at my pocket. "Roark went to check on Cate, didn't he?"

She raised a reasonable point. I whipped it out, wondering if she had a touch of the second sight when I saw it was him calling.

"They left the shop a while ago," he told me. "Ciara isn't answering her phone or the signet." Bitterness edged the words as if he often found he couldn't reach her through the ring meant to keep them constantly connected. What was the point of giving it to her if she never wore it?

"I'll call Cate." Hanging up, I dialed her, trying to shake off the concern gripping my heart.

The call went straight to voicemail.

I shot Roark a text to try tracking them. Both the women could handle themselves, but...

"She didn't answer?"

“She’s busy.” I shook my head. “Why did you really suggest the séance? And send her to talk to an alchemist? What else have you been investigating?”

“She had some shit to work out with her family, and I needed her distracted to bind a stronger occlusion spell to her.”

“Stronger?” I repeated.

“Than the one on the ring.” She rolled her eyes. “Try to keep up.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. Now she was waiting longer to get untied. “I thought that was basic magic.”

“Binding it to her desire was basic, but the occlusion spell on it was quite complex. It would have had to be to hide her for long. Probably only one of many spells meant to obscure her from being discovered by your kind. I mean, she was right under your nose.” She smirked at me.

“Then she’s not just a changeling?” I steadied myself against the desk.

Willow frowned. “I thought you knew that.”

A new and different weight settled over me. I had wished. I had hoped. Part of me had dreamed. But I had never allowed myself to truly believe it. That would have been dangerous—for so many reasons.

“Is she...” Still, I couldn’t bring myself to ask.

“After the first time she came into the teashop, I communed with my sisters in Ireland. The witches who saved her from the Hallow Court,” Willow murmured.

I frowned. “Communed? How?”

“Via séance,” she said bitterly. “They’re *dead*. Oberon hunted them down like dogs for helping her and some siren escape.”

I winced. “I am truly sorry to hear that.”

“Make it up to me by untying me.” She wiggled against her restraints. “I’m not your enemy.”

I wasn’t convinced that was a good idea. She struck me as feisty, but a deal was a deal. The yarrow and hedgethorne would be well into her system by now, but for good measure, I lifted my jacket and flashed her my holster.

“Is that supposed to scare me?” she asked, sounding anything but.

“Just a reminder.” I made quick work of her restraints.

Willow ripped off the gloves, and my hand slipped back toward my gun.

But she simply began rubbing the rope marks on her wrists. She looked at me. “Did you really think Oberon would just let her go without consequences?”

I'd hoped he would, but I shook my head again.

"The witches who helped her knew the sacrifice they were making," she continued, a note of pride in her voice. "Because they saw what she was despite the ring's glamour."

"Fae?"

"No. She's far more important than just that." Willow shook her head, turning toward the door. "We need to find her before someone else does. It's our only hope."

I held out a hand to stop her. "Roark is on that."

But she moved past me. "You wouldn't sit here if you understood what I meant."

"What is she?" I demanded, my temper lashing out in waves of shadow.

Willow backed away from me, but the expression on her face turned to one of reverence as she answered, "An icon."

"A what?" The shadows settled, deciding, like I had, that she had a few screws loose.

"My family's grimoire speaks of an age to come when all creatures will be tested in the face of great chaos." She paused as if waiting for me to laugh at her, but I didn't feel amused.

Chaos.

The word held me to the spot.

Willow studied me for a minute before she sighed. "Many years ago, a witch from our oldest bloodline mated with a fae and produced a child. The union was forbidden."

Somehow, that didn't surprise me. Even now, fae and witches rarely mixed, and offspring? That was completely out of the question. A coven would see to that by any means necessary. I wondered if she would have deigned to help Cate if she had walked into her shop without her glamour. "Your people have always been a tad backward about that kind of thing."

"They have," she agreed. "The lovers were sought out and killed."

Thankfully, that was less common nowadays, even if the old biases ran deep. "And the child?"

"Disappeared," she whispered. Her hands twisted like she was fitting together a puzzle. "And not long after that, the bloodline was wiped out entirely. The child is all that remains of one of the original three sisters. Even now, with magic returned to our veins, we are incomplete. Our power remains fractured, only a shell of what it could be."

I was starting to understand. “And you think it’s Cate.”

“I hope it is.” An undercurrent of desperation bleated in her voice. “The prophecy in the grimoire stated that during the time of chaos, icons would rise. Creatures with different powers running through their veins. More powerful than the rest of us because they could draw off multiple magics.”

Something clicked into place. I stared at her. “But if that’s true, then every baby born from a familiar and a vampire would be—”

Her smile told me I was right. She pressed a single finger to it. “Why do you think the witches agreed to be subjugated? It wasn’t a matter of protection; it was a matter of *survival*. It is our most carefully guarded secret. If anyone knew that I had told you...”

Even now, as she spoke of mixing bloodlines and forging new magics among our various species, the old prejudices held her captive.

I bowed my head. “It will die with me.”

Something that was likely to happen soon if she was right about the other shit.

“Damn right it will.” Willow crossed her arms. “You suspected Cate was fae, but there’s more to it than that, isn’t there?”

But Stacia—*Calista*—had disappeared, too, and she wasn’t a witch. Calista, who hadn’t even returned while the world was falling apart. Who hadn’t shown up when her throne had fallen. I could think of few things worth sacrificing that much for—but a child might be one. Had she died to save Cate? Hidden her away, waiting for the right person to find her? For *me* to find her? “How long ago did this child disappear?”

“About a hundred years. If it’s Cate, if she was kept in the Otherworld—”

“After her parents’ deaths,” I finished. It made a sick sort of sense. The child would have aged slowly until she was finally taken to Earth. She might have been young enough to have no memory of our world. She might have believed she was *human*.

It was possible. My mate remembered little from her childhood.

I shook my head. “The ring wasn’t just for some random spell. It was a signet—the signet of the heir to the Terra Court. You’re wrong. She isn’t your missing princess. She’s mine.”

“Maybe,” she said, to my surprise, her arms tightening around her stomach. “But somebody unbound my spell. *Whatever* she is, she is exposed. So, I have to ask: Do you know where your princess is?”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Cate

I wasn't certain which one of us was more on edge. It was a bad sign that my first attempt at wedding dress shopping was set to end in day drinking. I didn't bother trying to talk. I barely even noticed Ciara's terrifying driving. I was too lost in my own head, but there was no way to sort through it.

None of it made sense.

"Where are we?" I asked, peering out the Porsche's window as we pulled up to an empty spot on the street.

"Best Doberge cake in town," she promised as she escorted me inside, lowering her voice to add, "and the owner is a vampire so we can talk freely."

I doubted her on both counts.

But The Fontaine was empty. The hostess's head was bent to a black ledger, poring over the evening's reservations. "We're closed. Dinner service doesn't start for an hour."

Relief flooded through me. I wanted to go home and crawl into bed and hope I woke up to discover this was all a dream. I nudged Ciara, my eyes already straying toward the door.

"What about the bar?" Ciara asked her. "My money is good, I swear."

The woman startled, slamming the book shut. She dashed from behind the stand and threw her arms around my friend. "The bar is always open to you."

"Even these days?" Ciara drew back, giving me a better glimpse of the woman. "Listen, I'm sorry about Étienne."

I blinked, realizing I'd met her before. Not some hostess. The *owner*. Baptiste. The vampire who owned La Porte.

Lach's ex-girlfriend.

Because today couldn't get any weirder.

"It's still surreal." Baptiste forced a smile, noticing me for the first time.

“We’ve met before, haven’t we?”

“Cate,” I reminded her.

Ciara bumped a hip against mine. “Lach’s fiancée.” She grabbed my hand and held out my engagement ring for the vampire’s inspection.

And today *could* get weirder.

But Baptiste let out a sharp whistle. “Someone finally landed the whale. I never thought I would see the day when that man settled down.” She grabbed a few menus and nodded toward the dining room. “We can open early for friends.”

“That’s not necessary,” I started.

But she shook her head. “You deserve a drink if you’re going to marry him.” She winked at me. “We used to date, you know?”

“She knows,” Ciara teased. Her eyes rounded, and she grabbed my shoulder. “Oh gods, I should have taken you somewhere else.”

“Why?” Baptiste asked as she led us to a booth tucked into the corner. “Because of Lachlan and me? We were old news eons ago.” Her eyes went distant like she was searching through all those decades of memories. “I think I was over him before we broke up. Honestly, I don’t even remember.”

“Hush!” Ciara smacked her shoulder playfully as we slid into the seats. “Don’t scare her away.”

A feline smile slid onto her lips. “I would never.” She passed each of us a menu in turn. “Since we’re celebrating, I’ll open the kitchen early, too.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said quickly.

“Nonsense. It’s all on the house today.” Baptiste waved our attention toward the menu before disappearing into the back.

I hadn’t gotten a chance to talk to her much on Halloween, when she had been busy playing hostess. It was good to see she wasn’t holding a grudge, especially with so much drama between the covens.

“She’s...nice.” I breathed a sigh of relief as we settled into the booth, its high-backed velvet seating providing a discreet place for us to talk.

“Oh, she hates you,” Ciara said casually. She opened her menu but didn’t look at it. She just kept staring at me as though she could see past the glamour on me that she had put back in place in Blanche’s restroom.

“Hates?” I choked out. She had acted perfectly pleasant. “So, she isn’t over him?”

Ciara snorted. “No, that much is true. It’s just a vibe I get. Vampires tend

to look at humans as snacks. I mean, not that you're a... But with the glamour..." Her cheeks reddened as she reached for the wine list. "White or red?"

I shook my head. On the ride over, I'd decided I wanted to keep my head clear. I needed to process what had happened.

She gave up and dropped both menus on the table. "How long have you known?"

"Known?" I blinked. "About twenty minutes."

She frowned. "You're telling me that you didn't know you were a fae until I unwrapped that thing?"

"No." I swallowed, suddenly questioning if wine might be a good idea. "But Lach..."

"Lach what?" She planted her hands on the linen tablecloth, leaning forward. "You can tell me anything."

There was unmistakable pain in her eyes, but she didn't allow it into her voice. Didn't allow it to become accusation or recrimination. Ciara might be upset that I'd hid some things from her, but she would listen with an open mind. She would listen like a friend and respect that I'd kept a secret.

And so the whole story spilled out of me, pausing only when we accepted bottles of white *and* red from a waiter who'd had the unfortunate luck to turn up to the restaurant early. Ciara poured while I shared, gulping down three glasses before I'd started my first. I needed to get it all out of me. I needed to tell her everything, if only to make sense of it myself before I faced Lach. How my bargain with her brother had hinged on the ring. How Oberon had wanted it for himself and revealed its origin. Her face remained impassive even as I told her about his plans to resurrect the Terra Court, but she poured another glass, finishing off the bottle.

I braced myself as I continued on to what I'd learned since I returned to New Orleans—about her mother and father and the secret they had kept from everyone, the secret Lach had known for decades and never shared with her.

Ciara stared at me when I finished, the empty wineglass clutched in her hands. "You're telling me that my brother thinks you're Stacia's daughter? Or Calista's, I mean? Gods, this is confusing. Can we just call her Stacia? That's how I knew her."

I nodded, taking a long sip from my glass. "I've been trying to prove him wrong ever since he told me."

"I can't believe he didn't tell me." Her hand closed around the butter knife laid before her, and she squeezed it so tightly that her knuckles turned white. I might have to take it away from her. Before I could intervene, she dropped it back on the table. "Why didn't he tell me?"

I didn't buy Lach's claims that we needed to withhold this from Ciara because she couldn't keep a secret. "I think he didn't want to cause you pain."

"Pain?" Her eyebrow arched. "Why would this cause me pain?"

"Because your parents lied to you," I said slowly. Was this a trick question?

"Of course they lied to me. I was a brat back then," she admitted, reaching to open the bottle of white. "But knowing the truth doesn't change anything. Well, not for me."

It changed a lot for me. I was fae, and I didn't know how to feel about that.

"You look like you're about to throw up." She abandoned the bottle and picked up the drinks menu, flipping it over. "Maybe we need something harder than chardonnay."

"All my life, I wanted to know who my parents were." My voice was quiet. "I wanted to believe that there was a *reason* I lost them. That someday it would all make sense. But..."

"We all want that." She reached over and squeezed my hand.

But there was something that even now made no sense.

"Why couldn't you tell I was under a glamour?" I asked her. "How could you have glamourised me all those times and not have realized?"

She shook her head, studying my face again. "I don't think the effigy was a simple glamour. Most of us can see through a glamour if we really look, especially if we want to see past it. *I* should have been able to see through it." Just like she could see past the human glammers the others wore on the streets of New Orleans. Just like I had seen past the glammers in the Garden District on Halloween. "I still don't understand why it just fell apart when I unbound the threads."

Neither did I. "Lach assumed that there was a glamour tied to my ring." I told her about the day we met and how I'd started to remove it in his office. "But when it finally came off the other night, nothing."

"Unless someone rebound the threads of the spell and tied it to that thing." She shivered. "You have no idea where it came from?"

I bit my lower lip, unsure how to answer, but the hesitation was enough. “I saw them in a shop in the Quartier Enchanté. The witch who runs it, Willow, called them effigies. She said people would use them to cast protection spells on loved ones or curses on their enemies.”

Ciara’s eyebrows jumped a full inch, her forehead wrinkling. “Do you think she’s the one who made it?”

“Maybe. But she was trying to help me understand where the ring came from. We did a séance on Samhain. I...” Trusted her. At least, I had. Now, I wasn’t sure.

“Why would she want the spell to stick if she was trying to help you take off the ring?” Ciara asked, voicing one of the questions bouncing around in my own head.

I forced myself to say it. “Maybe she isn’t my friend.”

Ciara shot me a sympathetic smile. I could guess from the kind sadness written on her face that that’s what she suspected. “This is a lot to digest. You don’t have to know how you feel about this right now. Or tomorrow. Or even next year.”

And I was a fae, which meant I had time to figure things out. Somehow, the prospect of a very long life wasn’t a comfort. What if I never worked through this? What if I lived for hundreds of years and all I had at the end of them were more questions? What if I didn’t want to be immortal?

“How does it work?” I asked her, dread forcing the questions from my tongue now. I needed some answers, even if they weren’t the ones I wanted. “We don’t know for sure that Stacia was my mother.” Although it seemed more and more to be the case. “Or whether both my parents were fae. Is there a way to tell?”

“Not really.” She chewed on her lower lip a minute, looking so much like Roark toying with his lip ring that I almost wanted to smile...despite my crippling existential dread. “Obviously, you’re part fae. Anyone with more than half fae blood stops aging in the Otherworld. That’s why we spend most of our time there. Well, usually.”

I blinked. Why was now the first time I was hearing about this? “But what about here?”

She picked up her water goblet and frowned. “I really need to order some wine,” she muttered.

And now she was avoiding my questions, too. “Fae don’t age in the Otherworld,” I repeated. “What happens when you are here?”

“You know those old stories about changelings.” She traced patterns in the water’s condensation, refusing to look up at me.

“Yes.”

“There’s some truth to them. Not much,” she added hurriedly, her eyes flashing to mine. “Our kind doesn’t switch our babies with human ones. But when fae are born, most of us are nursed on Earth because we grow more quickly into adulthood here. It would take much longer for us to reach our prime and settle in our world. Most of us were cared for by fae nursemaids. At least, Lach, Fiona, and I were. Roark, too. Shaw—”

“Went to school,” I remembered. My brain felt like it was full of cobwebs, and I shook my head, trying to clear the thoughts and questions sticking inside it. “But once you reach your prime, once you settle,” I repeated her words, “you stop aging.”

“Not exactly.” She took a drink. “When we’re deemed old enough, we return to living in the Otherworld, and that’s that. As long as we return to the Otherworld every day, we age at fae rates.”

I couldn’t breathe. Not just because of what it meant for Lach but because of our original bargain. “So if you wanted to see if someone was fae, you might make them spend every night there?”

“Cate...” Her mouth remained open as she searched for words of comfort or an excuse or anything...

Lach had suspected what I was from the moment we met. I already knew, but now I finally understood the terms he’d chosen. Mercy for Channing in exchange for half of my life spent in his world. “He really did know,” I said softly. “That’s why he wanted me to stay in the Otherworld.”

“I think he was in love with you from the beginning.”

“He made me stay at the court or in the Avalon because I wouldn’t age and it would prove I was fae. It was another test.” But a twang in my heart reminded me that it could be both. Lach was complicated like that.

But Ciara shook her head. “We still age in the Avalon. The veil between our worlds is thinner there, but it’s not our world. We just like our phones too much to live down there, and like I said, we just have to pop down.”

I squinted at her, my eyes narrowing as my thoughts did. “But Lach can’t return to the Otherworld.”

She bit her lip. Silver lined her lashes, and she blinked away tears. “That’s why the bona fides spell is only a *temporary* solution.”

Roark had said as much that first day after I’d made it home, and Lach

had silenced him.

“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“I don’t know, but I think maybe you do. Maybe it has something to do with all of this. The ring. Your own glamour.”

And he’d tried to convince me to visit the court, tried to talk me into leaving him behind and seeking shelter deep within his world. Not because being with him was dangerous but because staying here kept me from being protected by the Otherworld’s magic.

“He should have told me.” A pit churned in my stomach. “What if I had left him here?”

“My brother has an annoying tendency to make decisions for us, like proclaiming me his successor,” she reminded me. “I think he cares more about making sure we’re all safe than he does about saving himself.”

That was the other truth I didn’t want to face. Lach believed he couldn’t save himself—that absolution from the Wild Hunt was a lost cause. I prayed he wasn’t right about that, either.

But to keep this from me...

“Did you know?” I asked her, uncertain if I wanted an answer. “That Lach hadn’t told me about this?”

Ciara hesitated before bobbing her head. “But only because Roark knows.” She scowled at the signet ring by her plate. She hadn’t put it back on since the bridal shop, and I was grateful. I needed more time to sort through this before Lach found out, to get bearings in this strange new reality before he celebrated his victory. “He asked me not to tell you.”

“Roark or Lach?”

“Roark.” She sighed, scanning the restaurant. “Where the hell is the server? I’m ready to skip food and order a bottle of whiskey.”

“I’m actually on board with that plan, because I think I need to set a few things straight with my mate when I get home.”

“Me too,” she agreed, flushing pink. “I mean with Roark. Gods, can you imagine if we were...?” She smothered a giggle with the back of her hand before shaking her head. “Is there anything else you need to tell me?”

“Nope, I have nothing else to hide. I might be a fae princess, and I’m mated to your brother. If I have any other big secrets, I don’t want to know about them.”

“Seriously, is anyone even working here?” She pushed up on the table, trying to get a better view over the back of the booth.

Baptiste appeared like she'd been summoned, and Ciara settled into the booth. "Sorry. We got busy preparing for tonight. There have been some changes to the schedule, so I'll take care of you myself."

"Thank you. I think we're going to stick to celebrating," Ciara said, her smile growing sloppy from the wine. At least celebrating sounded better than drowning our sorrows. She tapped the menu. "A bottle of this and two slices of Doberge."

I had never needed cake so badly in my life.

"Oh, bless your heart. I think you misunderstood what I meant by 'take care of you.'" Baptiste reached into the pocket of her half apron. There was a flash of movement that my brain couldn't quite process, and then Ciara froze as the barrel of a 9-millimeter pressed to the back of her head. Baptiste chuckled. "Now, let's not ruin the tablecloth."

Chapter Thirty-Six

Lach

She was nowhere to be found.

Every guard in the city was looking for her. Roark had torn through the three blocks surrounding the bridal shop.

Nothing.

Cate had gone to look at wedding dresses. She had tried to get out of it. And now... I shook the thought loose. It wouldn't do me any good. I needed to find her.

"I can try to do a locator spell," Willow offered, still looking queasy.

"How? I took your magic." My heart pounded like a drum in my chest.

Another mistake. My sins were catching up to me.

But I would know if something was wrong, just like I'd been sure she was still alive after Oberon abducted her.

That begged a new question: Would I feel it if someone took her from me?

"I forget how faithless the fae are. Even without my magic, I still have someone watching out for me." She flashed the triple moon tattoo on her wrist. "I'm not entirely powerless. Give me the map."

I didn't bother to defend myself. Instead, I laid the map back on my desk, smoothing out the crumpled paper. "Do you think it will actually work?"

It had to. I couldn't live with the other option.

"Let's hope."

"That's encouraging," I muttered.

She chewed her lip as she dug into her purse and produced a crystal pendulum.

"Do you have anything of hers?" she asked me.

I hesitated before I reached into my breast pocket and pulled out her mother's signet ring. "How about this?"

She frowned as she recognized the ring that had brought Cate to her shop

and so much trouble to our door. “It should.” She snatched it from me, closing her fist around the ring as she began to mutter in an ancient witches’ tongue. She held the pendulum over the map, but it didn’t move.

“Should something be happening?”

Her scowl deepened. “Oh, so you’re one of those rush-the-magic types. I hope for Cate’s sake you’re more patient in bed.”

“Life and death, remember?” I didn’t have time to deal with her attitude. Moving behind the desk, I took out a loaded clip and put it in my pocket. Something told me I was going to need it.

“Do you solve every problem with bullets?” she asked with a sigh. The pendulum remained static over the map.

“Only the ones that need a bullet.” And if someone had taken Cate, that’s what they were going to get.

Willow returned to muttering, her voice growing louder and more insistent, but still the pendulum didn’t swing. Finally, she slumped against the desk. “It’s not working. How much of that shit did you give me?”

“Maybe it’s the spell you put on her?” I suggested. Maybe it was both our faults.

No. Somehow, I knew it was mine.

“No, the occlusion should be helping me,” she said with a shake of her head. “It blocks others from seeing the secret. Not the one who binds the spell. So it was definitely unraveled. If you’re right—if she’s fae...”

Whoever was with her would know, barring a miracle.

“I don’t understand.”

“I think I do,” she said grimly, “and you aren’t going to like it.”

I didn’t like anything about this situation.

“I tried to find the killer before I came to see you,” she admitted, “but I think they’re under protection of their own.”

And the hits just kept coming.

“Like the occlusion spell?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Different and more powerful. It’s like the bona fides spell, in a way. I couldn’t get close enough to see anything, and I don’t think it’s a coincidence. If they had Cate...”

Every thought emptied from my head.

I strode toward the door before she had finished her sentence.

“Where are you going?” she demanded.

“I need to find her. Now.” If there was any chance that the killer had her,

if they had discovered what I'd known in my heart even when that stupid ring had come off—that she was fae...

"You can't just run around New Orleans hoping you run into her." She planted her hands on her hips. "That's stupid, and right now, we need to be smart."

She might be right, but that didn't change the facts. "Your magic isn't working. I don't have another choice."

"Try tracking her phone?" she suggested.

I stared at her.

"Look, magic doesn't solve everything."

"It's off," I reminded her. "There has to be a more powerful spell."

"There is, but it requires tapping into ancient magics and more power than I can muster on my own at the moment—thanks to you. We could go to the shop—"

But her tirade jogged something loose in my frantic brain.

"Wait," I cut her off. "What kind of ancient magic?"

"Like *old*...can't be tampered with...core-of-our-world-type shit. I have a few talismans that might help." She screwed up her face, reaching for her bag again. "And I can call the coven."

Something told me she liked that idea even less than I did.

"No." I held up my hand. "We can't involve anyone else. We have no idea who is behind this."

And now more than ever, I was certain there was a snake in my garden. The Cabal wasn't a group of strangers. They were close. Something told me I'd feel their fangs soon enough.

"Well, without something, I can't help you."

But there was one secret she didn't know. A secret we had trusted only with those closest to us. "You said ancient." I dropped the glamour I kept on my wrist, revealing the golden ribbons snaking over my flesh. "Would this work?"

Willow didn't move. "Is this what I think it is?"

"We're mates." The magic sealing the mating bond wasn't just old. It was pure. Magic that couldn't be tricked or stolen or corrupted. Magic woven out of selfless love. Magic that tethered our very souls as one.

There could be nothing more powerful than that.

She finally blinked, bobbing her head. "Magic will see you as the same person."

But she continued to stare.

“What?” It had to work.

But Willow screwed up her face. “I’ve been wondering what she sees in you.”

“You aren’t the first.” And she wouldn’t be the last, because we would reach Cate. We would save her, and I would never hide the mating bond again.

“Let’s see. Got a knife?” she asked.

Arming her seemed like a risky move, but what choice did I have? I opened the desk and pulled out a letter opener.

She swiped it from me. “That will do.”

“Why do you need—?”

She grabbed my hand and sliced open my fingertip, grinning broadly when I winced. “For this.” A bead of blood spilled onto the map and trembled.

“Come on,” she urged. “They’re mates.”

As she spoke, the drop split in two, each half gliding slowly across the paper in opposite directions. The first reached the Avalon and stopped.

“That’s you,” she whispered.

“I figured.” I couldn’t tear my eyes from the second drop.

It continued south toward the river, slowing as it reached the streets of the Quartier Enchanté. Willow shook her head. “It can’t be,” she breathed as it glided to a stop a few streets from the hidden magical district, right in the heart of the French Quarter itself. “That won’t form a pentacle. It’s too close to where Étienne was killed.” She looked up at me, relief wiping the worry from her face. “I guess I was wrong.”

But she wasn’t. I stared at the map, at what should have been obvious all along, at the spot where the drop of our shared blood had landed. How could I not have seen it sooner?

“It’s not about the location. You were on to something, though,” I said, recalling what Roark had said the day I returned. The memory was a touch foggy, given the condition I’d been in. “The only way a spell as powerful as a bona fides ward could work is by weaving multiple forms of magic through it.” And those threads formed the heart of the shield that emanated from the covens. The covens who were the magical, beating heart of the city. I lifted horrified eyes to hers. “It’s not a pentacle geographically.”

“A werewolf, a familiar, a human, and a vampire,” Willow said slowly,

her relief vanishing. “Who else is keyed to the spell?”

“Fae,” I said quietly. “The strongest magical line in New Orleans.”

“It’s a pentacle of our blood, and Cate...” She clapped a hand over her mouth before she shook herself into composure. “What’s there? Do you recognize that street?”

I did.

And we were—quite simply—fucked.

“I know who has her.”

“Who?” she demanded.

But I was already dialing Roark. He answered on the second ring. “Tell me you have something.”

“She’s at The Fontaine.” I didn’t bother telling him how I knew. “I think Ciara is with her.”

Roark cursed. “Wait for me.”

It was suicide to go in alone. Baptiste was well protected. She’d always been paranoid. Now I knew why. The Hunt might grab me, but that was a risk I no longer cared about. I needed to reach Cate before it was too late. I heard his engine rev through the speaker.

“I’m close. *Wait*,” he repeated.

Our only chance was going in together.

“Hurry.” But the line had already gone dead.

“So, uh, what is the plan?” Willow asked as I opened the tracking app on my phone.

I clicked Roark’s name, watching as his avatar appeared on a map of the French Quarter. “Shoot first. Ask questions later.”

“That isn’t a plan.”

People kept telling me that, but you couldn’t plan for life and death. You couldn’t plan how to survive. You just had to do it. “Planning isn’t my strong suit.” I glanced over at Willow. “You should stay here.”

“I could be helpful.”

“Gods willing, only four of us are walking out of that restaurant.” And you didn’t bring magic to a gunfight. “Something tells me a lot of people are about to die, and no offense, I don’t think the Belle Mère would approve.”

She blanched. “What if they surrender?”

“They won’t.” My mouth pressed into a thin line. Baptiste would never bow to me. I should have seen her betrayal coming. Bad blood didn’t wash

itself clean with time. It festered.

"If the wards fall, the Wild Hunt will come for you," she reminded me.

"Tell me something I don't know."

"I'm just saying that shooting the place up could mean hitting a fae. So when I ask what your plan is, I suggest you come up with one."

"They're going to kill her unless I kill them. So that's the plan, like it or not."

"What does Baptiste want?" Willow asked. "Why would she do this? I thought she agreed to the bona fides spell."

"Revenge?"

Willow snorted. "Because you dated like a million years ago? Don't think so highly of yourself. She isn't just dropping the wards; she's putting every magical creature in the city at risk. Why?"

"Before, when you told me about the icon—"

"Icons," she corrected me.

I ignored her. "You said that they would come in a time of great chaos."

She nodded.

"I've heard chaos mentioned before." I just couldn't remember where.

"I don't understand," she admitted.

Neither did I. Not quite. "Only the witches know about the icons?"

"In theory."

Roark was nearly there. My fingers itched. "What does that mean?"

"How many secrets do you keep from Cate?" Willow asked.

"I try not to anymore." I shot her a sharp look. "She'd kill me."

"Exactly. Everyone trusts someone, no matter what they swear to keep secret. You always tell someone."

She was right. Roark knew everything about my parents, about Cate, about the mating bond.

"You're saying that it stands to reason that other creatures might know about the icons." Something about that possibility chilled me to the bone.

"Could you make an icon? Combine bloodlines?"

"It would be an abomination," she whispered.

"Abominations are what happen when men try to play God." I stared at my phone, watching Roark's location on the map. I needed him to drive faster, needed to reach her before it was too late. We had been stupid to think we could outsmart fate. All we had done was lead ourselves to the slaughter.

“Congratulations, by the way,” Willow said softly.

I shot her an incredulous look. “On what?”

She gestured to the golden tattoo I no longer hid on my wrist. “Most people would kill to have a mate. It’s written about in the old book. It means you’re touched by destiny, descended from the gods.”

But I didn’t want destiny or divinity. I only wanted Cate, and nothing was going to stop me from getting to her. Roark’s avatar stopped at The Fontaine, and I offered Willow a final smile, knowing it might be my last. “Then let’s hope those gods are listening.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Cate

The kitchen at The Fontaine was deserted, the stoves off, the pots empty. It didn't look like anyone had cooked here today. Baptiste hustled us toward a walk-in freezer, the gun wedged hard against Ciara's back. "Try to nip, and I shoot," she warned her. "And then I kill your brother's toy. Or should I say his *mate*?"

"Do you really want to piss off Lach?" I asked her. He would come after her with everything he had.

Baptiste had been listening. She knew the truth. If she was smart, she would blackmail the family. But she could do that without holding us captive.

Dread pitted my stomach. She could also use the information as currency, trading it—or worse, *us*—to the highest bidder.

"Keep going," she said, pushing the muzzle into Ciara's spine and glaring at me. "I have absolutely no reservations about shooting her. In fact, I'd rather enjoy it."

"And to think I tell everyone about your Doberge cake," Ciara muttered, but her lower lip trembled, betraying the false edge of her bravado.

Baptiste leaned closer, smiling widely. "I have you at gunpoint. We can stop pretending that we like each other."

"That is a relief, because I can finally tell you that you're a bitch," Ciara hissed.

"And you're a stuck-up fae brat." She shoved her toward the door of a walk-in cooler. "I'd planned to snatch any old fae that walked through my doors tonight. You have no idea how thrilled I was when it was you. If I ever had any doubts about what I've been doing, the universe really sent me a sign."

"Doing?" I eyed her as a terrible realization began to sink in, and my mouth fell open.

“Don’t look so surprised.” She whacked Ciara in the back with the muzzle. “Bitches get shit done.”

“It was you.” It was all so clear now. *Baptiste* had killed Étienne and the others. “You’re the one who’s been murdering creatures in the city.” I shook my head—one thing still didn’t make sense. “Why did that vampire confess?”

She nodded, not looking the least bit guilty. “A good vampire respects their elders.”

“You mean they blindly obey their sires,” Ciara corrected her.

“What’s the difference?” Baptiste pushed Ciara to the floor, sending her careening into a crate, and bell peppers tumbled around her. Ciara stared at me, panic in her eyes. Even if she thought she could outrace a speeding bullet, she would never leave me behind. It would be worth the risk to nip, but she couldn’t grab me and get away before Baptiste took a shot.

“Don’t you want to know why he did it?” Baptiste kept the gun trained on her, pointed as if she might prod Ciara into action with it—and by doing so, have an excuse to shoot her. “Come on. We have to wait for everyone to join us before we can wrap this tragedy up. Aren’t you *dying* to know?”

A chill descended over my skin as I stepped inside, the temperature cool enough that I wrapped my arms around my waist, trying to retain as much body heat as I could.

I shook my head in disgust. “I don’t really care. You let one of your own people die to save yourself.”

“Yes, and he didn’t even question my authority. It’s called being a leader.” She flashed a razor-sharp smile at me as she pushed me down next to Ciara.

“You aren’t a leader. You’re batshit,” Ciara hissed, snatching my hand as she snapped her fingers to nip.

Nothing happened.

Ciara shot me a panicked look as she tried again. The second time, her eyes darted to my ears. My heart skipped a beat, realizing she was checking my glamour. Baptiste already knew enough, but if she discovered I was fae... Ciara exhaled a reedy breath, nodding ever so slightly to tell me it was still intact. The effigy was working, concealing my true nature. So if Ciara couldn’t nip, that meant something was wrong with *her* magic.

“You never notice yarrow in a merlot, but it does such strange things to magic,” Baptiste said smugly. “Don’t worry about the tab, by the way. Your

drinks are on the house.”

“How generous,” I said flatly.

“And it loosened up your tongue. Such an interesting conversation.” Baptiste swiveled the gun to point in my direction, ignoring her. “I should have known that you were his mate. It’s the only thing that explains what he’s doing with a human.”

Whatever she’d tainted the wine with hadn’t affected the spell on the effigy, and Baptiste hadn’t heard our *entire* conversation, which meant that she had no idea what I really was. Ciara’s eyes met mine, and she shook her head so weakly that it might have been a tremble.

But if Baptiste was going to remain chatty, I’d squeeze whatever information I could from her. “What do you want with a fae?”

“What I wanted with the other creatures.” She winked at Ciara, who whimpered. “But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. The others aren’t here yet, so that gives me time to grab the other thing I need.” Baptiste glanced at me. “I thought I’d have to send someone else to collect you, but Lach’s arrogance knows no bounds. He continues to let you walk around in this city like his family can’t be touched.”

“We can’t,” Ciara said, rising to her feet.

Baptiste aimed the gun at her and chambered a round. “You are making it very difficult to be patient. I can hardly wait to put a bullet between your eyes. My only regret is that you won’t be there when the ward falls.”

Ciara’s eyes widened. “That’s what this is about? The spell? But you helped us put it into place.”

“My gods, you’re even more dense than I thought.” Her smile widened, revealing a glimpse of fangs. “It helps to know how a spell is crafted. That way you know just how to *undo* it.”

“No,” Ciara breathed, her head moving slowly side to side.

“Sacrifices must be made, right? Isn’t that what you believed when you watched so many creatures spill their blood in the name of protecting your family, allowing the essence of their magic to be perverted for that spell?”

I found myself swallowing hard. “Blood?”

They had used blood to put the bona fides in place, which meant...

“Only a few drops,” Ciara said weakly.

“Tell her the rest. Explain that the spell demands more to end it.” Baptiste stopped pacing the tight space and fixed Ciara with a cold, even gaze. “Tell her it demands a complete sacrifice.”

“It was a fail-safe!” Ciara bleated, then trailed off. Her voice was hoarse when she continued. “Once the spell was in place, no creatures would willingly end it.”

“So you took what you needed by threat of force—a little blood from all of us. Enough that we wouldn’t dream of paying the second price,” Baptiste finished, her voice dripping bitter venom.

But not knowing that—keeping the fail-safe from Lach and me—had prevented us from knowing why the murders were happening. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“No one else knew. Only a few of the people behind the spell.” Her head fell like she was unable to meet my eyes. “I even managed to keep it from Roark.”

Because if Roark had known... If any of us had known, we might have put a stop to this after the first life was claimed.

“I’m responsible for all of this.” Ciara’s voice was barely a whisper.

“And now I only need the blood of one more creature to tear it down.” She nodded at the understanding on my face. “But first we must discuss another matter. Where is the ring?”

Fear strangled my heart, but I blinked, refusing to let it cross my face. “This ring?” I flashed my engagement ring, knowing it wasn’t the one she meant. But why would she want it? “Jealous that he gave it to me?”

“Jealous?” Her mouth pinched around the word. “I was through with Lachlan Gage a long time ago.”

“And yet, you have his fiancée trapped in a freezer.” I lifted my chin, enjoying the way her eyes flashed at the taunt. “It makes it worse, doesn’t it? Not only magic matched us. He chose me, too.”

Her hand shook. I was on dangerous ground, betting that she needed the *esmeraude* ring more than she wanted to kill me. Well, maybe not *more*, but enough to keep her from pulling the trigger.

“Cate,” Ciara whispered, “don’t.”

“I’d listen to your friend.” Baptiste sauntered to me and dragged the pistol’s muzzle across my collarbone. “I’m willing to bet I can find that ring whether or not you’re still breathing.”

“But you can’t risk it.” Whatever her agenda was, it was no coincidence that she was after the signet. She knew what it was, and if she knew what it was...

She wasn’t working alone. This was about more than bringing down the

spell. The Cabal that Goemon had warned me of wasn't just a bunch of pissed-off creatures tired of bowing to the Nether Court. They were organized. They were after something bigger. Crippling the Nether Court was just the start, and I could only think of one person cunning enough to pull it off.

And it wasn't the bitch standing in front of me.

"I don't have to shoot to kill," she whispered, leaning in close enough that I saw the crimson flecks in her irises. "You would be surprised to know how much damage these things can do without killing someone."

But I wouldn't be surprised, because I'd seen it myself a thousand times at the hospital.

"And then I can heal you and shoot you all over again." She kissed my cheek, pulling back to admire the lipstick she'd left behind. "So why don't you tell me where the fucking ring is so we can move on with our lives?"

"I don't know." It was the truth, at least. Lach hadn't told me what he planned to do with the signet, and I was glad that I hadn't asked. If Baptiste wanted it, the last thing I could do was allow her to get it.

"That's unfortunate. Now things have to be painful." In a blink, she swiveled and shot Ciara in the calf.

Ciara crumpled, her screams echoing in the cramped space. I dropped to the floor, my training kicking in as I pressed my palm over the mangled wound. The iron slug had shattered, splintering bone and shredding through muscle. Blood seeped through my fingers, hot and slippery, as I tried to staunch it. I glared up at Baptiste. "I don't fucking know where it is!"

She shrugged, taking a step through the freezer's open door. "And now I know that I can believe you. If you'll excuse me, I need to make a few calls. You two chill here."

She laughed at her own joke as she locked us inside.

"Vampires have the lamest senses of humor," Ciara grumbled, her eyes glassy with pain. She craned her head, her face paling at the gruesome wound.

"You have to nip us out of here." I didn't know how, not with whatever Baptiste had slipped into her drink.

"I can't." Ciara panted, her chest heaving as she tried to cope with the pain. "And even if I could, I don't think I could nip us both out. Can you try?"

I hesitated. I'd barely had any wine, and Baptiste wouldn't expect it. But

Ciara had bound the effigy's threads before we left the bridal shop. Still, with the spell intact, I might have a little of my own. I'd been wearing the ring when I nipped in Dublin using Titania's stolen powers. When I'd redirected Lach and me to the library.

"Maybe I can do it." I fumbled for the magic, but it slipped through my numb fingers. So much for option A.

I lifted my other hand to examine her wound again. A gunshot, I could handle. I had no clue how to get us out of here.

"Is it bad?" Ciara asked.

"It's nothing." At least it wouldn't be if we got her help. The hospital could easily take care of it, and with her healing abilities, she would be fine. The trouble was that we were locked in a refrigerator by a vampire psychopath who I suspected was calling her other psychopath friends. But there was one way to ensure that Ciara got out of here. "You have to listen to me. When she comes back, I'm going to unbind the effigy. Do you still have it?"

"I think the pain is making me hallucinate." Ciara blinked at me as I tore a strip of cloth from my shirt and began winding it around the wound. "You can't seriously expect me to let you do that. She'll find out that you're fae."

"Exactly." Baptiste wanted a fae, and something told me she would much rather put a bullet in my brain than Ciara's, even if there was no love lost between the two of them. I doubted that whatever drove Baptiste was as pathetic as sour grapes over a man, but she'd see killing Lach's mate as a bonus.

"She'll kill you." Ciara shook her head, her lips beginning to quiver. "No fucking way."

"I never had a sister," I whispered as I tied off the makeshift tourniquet. "If I had, I would have wanted her to be like you."

"Cate, I—"

Tears spilled onto my cheeks, and I blinked, trying to hide them. "Whatever this is about, it's linked to the bona fides. You heard her. One more death, and the spell comes down. And when that happens..." I choked, trying to hold back a sob as the full weight of what that meant hit me. "The Wild Hunt will execute Lach."

"Lach is a tough bastard," Ciara said through gritted teeth, her own tears beginning to stream down her face. "He won't go down without a fight."

But he had sent me away the night he'd been branded for death, sent me

toward safety, because he knew what was coming for him. He'd spent the last few weeks forcing Ciara to prepare to take his place.

He knew the clock was ticking. I felt it every time he kissed me, felt it when his body claimed mine. The desperation and grief and acceptance of a man facing his own death. And when he realized why the creatures had been killed, why his friend had died...

He might not fight at all.

"The bona fides bought us time." I laced my bloody hands with hers. "I can never thank you enough for that, for giving us a chance to really fall in love with each other, to get to know each other, to see what the future might have been like, but..."

"You can't give up." She was sobbing now. The sound of it pulled at the splintering fragments of my heart. I wouldn't have chosen to end it like this, but if I had to, if I could do one more good thing for our family, what more could I ask?

I shook my head, smiling through my own tears. "I don't want to live without him. I never felt like I belonged in my own world or your world. I just belonged with him."

Ciara swallowed. "I can't let you do this. If you're gone, he won't even try. This is about more than you and more than me. Whatever Baptiste is after, she's not going to stop when the wards fail. So fuck you for even asking me, because I will never allow my court to fall. Never again."

I opened my mouth to protest, but the lock on the freezer silenced me. I angled my body in front of Ciara as Baptiste stepped inside, my hands still covering her wound.

"Isn't this sweet?" Baptiste crooned. "Look at you playing doctor." She waved the gun. "Unfortunately, the game is over."

"You don't want to kill her. You want—" My voice cut off even as my mouth continued to move. I grabbed my throat, eyes flashing to Ciara. My voice was gone like that night in the alley with the Redcaps. This time stolen by my friend. Her smile was sad, but she didn't turn away as she used whatever lingering magic she had to keep me silent.

To save me.

"Help her up," Baptiste ordered me. "The others will be joining us soon."

She held the gun on us as I bent and helped Ciara to her feet. The fae princess slung an arm around my shoulder, shrieking as she tried to put weight on her leg. I heaved her higher, and she moaned.

“Not much longer,” Baptiste said, “and then you’ll be put out of your misery. Well, *you* will be. Cate and I have unfinished business.”

She grinned as I guided Ciara into the kitchen, its warmth prickling my chilled skin. We were running out of time. I slipped my hand into Ciara’s pocket, my fingers closing over the effigy.

“I shouldn’t shoot you,” Baptiste said to her. Ciara glared daggers at her, and she laughed. “In the fridge, I mean. That would be a mess, and I would ruin half the vegetables. It will be much easier to clean up out here.”

I tried to say something—tried to raise the effigy to show her—but whatever magic was tied to the effigy wouldn’t let me so much as lift a finger, as if it could sense the danger I was in and was shielding me from it. I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t act. My hands were tied just like the stupid fucking doll.

Except they weren’t, and if I could unravel it, she would see. Ciara didn’t have enough magic to glamour me if the effigy failed. Not if she couldn’t nip.

“Keep her on her feet,” Baptiste demanded.

I forced a nod, keeping one hand around Ciara, the other clenching the effigy behind my back. I fingered the thread, trying to find a loose end. Difficult with only one hand, but not impossible. My thumb snagged it, and I began to work, trying to get the strand free. One end slipped out like a broken thread in a hem, and something burned in my throat. I shimmied the doll, pinching the loose bit between my thumb and index finger. I couldn’t risk speaking, even if Ciara didn’t realize what I was up to. The moment I spoke, she would double her efforts. She was stubborn like that. I loved her for it. That tenacity was why she needed to walk out of here. She could unite the fae willing to listen. The Otherworld needed her.

Conversation echoed from the dining room, and I whirled toward it as Baptiste’s face lit up. “They’ve arrived.” The smile she leveled at me was so terrifying, my thumb slipped on the tiny bit of thread. “I’ve been looking forward to this moment.”

Two men strode into the kitchen. I recognized one from Halloween: the witch from the club.

“I guess I’m getting another shot at the dance,” he crowed.

But I wasn’t paying attention. My eyes were on his companion.

Dante.

The vampire cast an apologetic look in my direction and turned away.

Rage burned in my throat. My brother had always had bad taste in friends. Apparently, near-death experiences had not cured him of the condition.

"Where is he?" Baptiste demanded, eyes pinned on the swinging doors as they slowed.

"On his way," Dante said. "He'll be here."

"We don't have time for this," she grumbled as she whipped out her phone.

I closed my eyes, searching frantically for that bit of loose thread on the effigy before I ran out of time. But the door burst open, and my world stopped, restarting like a record scratch as Channing ambled casually in. His dirty-blond hair was tousled, and he was still laughing at some joke, but he fell silent when he caught sight of Ciara and me.

"What the fuck is going on?"

His surprise squeezed my heart, threatening to break it even further. He didn't know. He wasn't part of this. But he was with them.

Why?

"It's my favorite human." Baptiste sauntered toward him, my pulse ratcheting higher with each step she took.

Channing blinked at her, a muscle tightening in his jaw as his eyes flashed between us.

"Let her go," he said, his voice low with warning.

I no longer cared if Ciara knew I'd undone her spell. Or about playing along with Baptiste. Because my brother was human, and there was only one reason the vampire had brought him here. "Channing, run."

He cast a confused look at me, his muscles stiffening like he was going to finally listen to me.

"Oh, sorry!" Baptiste paused in front of him and tapped his nose. "That is not part of the plan." She nodded once at Dante.

"Go!" I bellowed.

But Dante moved, the lines of his body blurring from his sheer speed. In an instant, he had Channing in a chokehold. "I'm sorry, but orders are orders." Dante gripped my brother's head, yanking it to the side to expose his neck.

"No!" My scream shattered the room as Dante's fangs sank into my brother's neck. Channing struggled as his friend drank from him, the color leaking from his skin. The vampire was draining him rapidly, his wild eyes already completely black.

Leaning Ciara against the wall, I pivoted to face Baptiste, shoving the effigy in my pocket. There wasn't time to argue with her. To trick her. "Let him go," I begged her. "I'll get the ring. I'll do anything you want."

"That's my dilemma." She picked at her sleeve. "Because I do want you to die, but I can't have that before we have the ring. Plus, you claimed that you don't know where it is."

"I can get it." Not quite a lie. Lach would give it to me. He had to. Channing's lips were wan. He wasn't fighting anymore. "*Please.*"

Baptiste waved a hand. "Let him live. For now."

But as soon as Dante released him, Channing swayed on his feet and fell. No one stopped me as I rushed to my brother. His pulse was fading, stuttering. Any second, it would stop. "He's lost too much blood," I told her. "If he dies, I will make sure you never get that ring."

"So you *do* have teeth of your own." Baptiste lifted a brow. "Normally, I don't respond to ultimatums, but for some reason, I respect you." She tilted her head at Dante. "Feed him."

I bit back the urge to stop him as Dante knelt by Channing. His eyes held mine for a moment before he sliced open a vein on his wrist and brought it to Channing's pale lips. My brother coughed, blood spluttering from his mouth as he barely managed to swallow. Color bloomed onto his cheeks, and he grabbed Dante's wrist, sucking at the bleeding wound before the vampire gently pried him away.

"That's enough." Dante brushed the hair from my brother's forehead, something tender and broken moving behind his eyes. "I'm so sorry."

Channing stared at him for a moment, covered in his blood, and then he turned away.

Dante stood, backing away from us, but his eyes, full of longing, never left Channing. I glared at him, wishing I had torn the threads from that effigy, wishing I could pounce, wishing I knew how sharp my teeth really were.

"Hey sis," Channing grunted, drawing my attention back to him.

"I think we need to discuss your taste in...friends," I whispered, a few pieces of my heart knitting back together.

"That's complicated," he admitted.

I knew a thing or two about complicated relationships. Standing, I helped him to his feet as the vampire blood continued to heal him.

"Now, about that ring," Baptiste started.

I turned to face her. Determination settled over me, heavy but not like a burden. It was an anchor, tethering me to who I was, what nothing could ever take from me. “About that,” I began, lifting my chin as I lied. “It’s at the Avalon in the top drawer of my dresser. Once the bona fides spell is down, you should have no problem getting to it.”

“The Gage family will have other things to worry about,” she agreed, her gaze searching me. “It’s not wise to show your hand before all the cards are on the table.”

But I had more cards to play.

“You’re working for Oberon, aren’t you?” I had to keep her talking, keep her distracted.

Her smile was feline. “*Very* good. Better late than never, anyway. What detail was it, exactly, that tipped you off?”

“It was that you don’t strike me as smart enough to plan this on your own.”

Baptiste’s lip curled, revealing her fangs. “Maybe I’ll drain you, too. Then you can be with your precious brother.”

“No, you aren’t going to do that, because Oberon wants me alive.”

“Oberon wants the ring. He doesn’t need you,” she snarled, but her face softened with reverence. “He has made himself a god, harnessed the powers of light and shadow, claimed the other magics. And he will raise an army of icons to fight the coming chaos.”

We had never been safe from Oberon. His puppets had been here the entire time, waiting for the right moment to bring down the bona fides, waiting for me to take off that ring, waiting until the Nether Court was broken.

“Reality check. He will step on you to take what he wants. He doesn’t care about you. He destroyed his land—his court—and he’s going to destroy this one if you drop the bona fides spell.” I had to make her see what she was really doing. It was our only chance. “Magic has a cost.”

“And I will pay it!” she screamed. “As I have paid it in blood for centuries. Now shut up!”

I knew what I was doing as I reached into my pocket. She needed a fae. I would give her one. “Let Ciara and Channing go.”

“I still need to kill a fae.” Her attention turned to Ciara. “Cooperate, and your brother might live. Keep trying to argue, and they both die.”

My fingers closed over the effigy. But Ciara limped forward, face drawn

with pain. “Just get this over with.”

“No.” I took out the doll as the door swung open. We were out of time.

Baptiste smiled as Shaw walked into the kitchen. “And now the Cabal is complete.”

My mind reeled. Both of our brothers, here. One bloodied and nearly broken. The other standing with the enemy. With the monsters who had killed innocent creatures. Who would kill more. The betrayal hit me like a punch to the gut, sucking the air from my lungs. It couldn’t be true.

Channing was a pawn, but Shaw...

He couldn’t be a member of the Cabal. He couldn’t be working with her. With Oberon.

He froze mid-step, and for a fleeting second I believed it might be another trick. Another brother lured here to force our hands. Shaw’s gaze darted around the room, bouncing from Channing to Ciara and back to me before it finally landed on Baptiste. “What the hell is this?” he demanded, anger coiling in his voice.

“Shaw.” Ciara dragged herself another step, her voice barely a whisper. A new pain sparkled in her eyes—one that had nothing to do with her wounded leg.

His jaw tightened, but he didn’t look at her.

“Shaw.” She choked back a sob as she stretched a hand out to him.

“This wasn’t part of our arrangement,” he said, continuing to ignore her. Sweat beaded across his forehead, and he continued shakily, “You said we wouldn’t involve them.”

It was enough to stir me from my stupor. I forced myself up, my knees weak, an oily dread filling my stomach. Darting to Ciara, I drew her to the floor next to Channing. My brother’s eyes were wild, his chest rising and falling as the vampire blood worked its way through his system.

I held a finger to my lips. I needed to get them out of here.

“They walked into my restaurant,” Baptiste told Shaw with a shrug.

His nostrils flared. “This wasn’t the plan.”

He was part of this. All of this. Shaw, who gave the best advice. Shaw, who made me laugh. Shaw, who had been my friend when I couldn’t so much as tolerate his brother.

A thin smirk played at the corners of Baptiste’s mouth. “Plans change. I saw an opportunity, and I took it. Besides, some extra leverage never hurts in a negotiation.”

Shaw took a menacing step toward her. "Leverage? These people are my family. You expect me to just stand by while you threaten them?"

"You wanted to hurt your brother. I'm only here to help."

"Not like this." He shook his head, finally daring to look in our direction. I met his eyes, and he flinched. "This ends now. We had an agreement. I help you get to him, and you leave the rest of them out of it. Let them go."

He might as well have stabbed me. "You can't do this." I started to tremble. "He's your brother."

"Stay out of it, Cate," he warned me.

"See?" Baptiste sneered, tossing a curl over her shoulder. "She'll never forgive you, anyway. Killing her would be doing her a favor. Gods know what Oberon will do when he arrives."

My legs threatened to buckle, but I kept myself upright.

Baptiste noticed. "That's right," she taunted me. "First, we'll bring down the bona fides and let the Wild Hunt take Lach, and when your precious mate is dead, we'll hand the Nether Court over to the true king." She stuck out her lower lip, pretending to pout.

"Mate?" Shaw's head swiveled toward me. "What is she talking about?"

"Does it matter?" Heat prickled my eyes, but I refused to cry.

But Baptiste barked a laugh. "They didn't tell you? What a surprise. They kept another secret from baby brother."

His eyes dropped to the floor, heat rushing to his cheeks.

"She isn't your friend, Shaw. She never was. Friends don't keep secrets." She tried to press her gun into his hands, whispering, "End her."

A roar tore through the air, and Channing leaped to his feet. He lunged, swiping for her, but she sidestepped him easily.

He stumbled forward, falling to his knees. The club witch raised a hand, and Channing doubled over, thrashing and screaming. A cruel smile twisted the witch's face as he tortured him.

"Stop it," I screamed. "You've done enough to him."

"At least we agree on that." Baptiste flicked a finger to Dante. "Put him out of his misery."

"No!" I pleaded. "Just take me."

Dante hesitated, glancing between Baptiste and Channing's shuddering form. He started to shake his head, his black eyes beginning to lighten.

"I won't ask twice," she hissed.

Shaw held up his hands. "There's no need for that—"

“You don’t give the orders here,” she snapped. “Do it.”

I looked to Shaw, silently begging him to do something, *anything* to stop this.

But Shaw stiffened, his face a mask of indecision and guilt. He was just as trapped as the rest of us, and his silence would cost Channing his life.

“Channing, I love you,” I called, each syllable so broken I knew he couldn’t understand me, but I had to try. I had to tell him. “I’m sorry. I love you. I’m so—”

A sickening crack cut me off as Dante wrenched Channing’s head to the side. His body went limp, slumping to the floor like a puppet with its strings cut.

Something raw and primal tore out of me. “No! Channing!” Sobs racked my body as I collapsed to the floor and began to crawl toward my brother. No one tried to stop me as I gathered him into my arms.

Dante opened his mouth, but I shook my head. I didn’t care what he had to say. I didn’t care if he had been sired by Baptiste.

“I didn’t have a choice,” he muttered, backing away. He stared at Channing, tears filling his eyes as he repeated the excuse. “I didn’t have a choice.”

I held Channing closer. “There’s always a choice.”

But Baptiste clicked her tongue in annoyance. “I told you to kill him. Not put him to sleep.”

I gaped at her. Channing’s neck was broken, his eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling. There was no coming back from that.

Unless...

A tiny flicker of hope ignited in my chest. Unless he was under some type of spell.

“He has my blood in his system,” Dante said, and the hope sputtered out, dashed by cold horror as I realized what he had done.

Anyone who died with vampire blood in their system...

Shaw clenched his fists, his face ashen. “You’ve made your point, Baptiste.” His eyes shuttered with a deep sigh. “What do you want?”

Broken. He was so very broken, and I hadn’t seen it.

I’d been so caught up in my own shit, too annoyed with Shaw for letting Channing hang out with a vampire, and too frustrated with Lach for bickering with his brother to notice. It had cost me the last piece of my old life. Something told me that it had taken more from Shaw.

But I couldn't afford to feel sympathy, not now. Not with Channing growing cold on the floor and Ciara's life hanging in the balance. Whatever mistakes Shaw had made, whatever misguided reasons had driven him to this point, he would never make this right.

His shoulders bowed like he knew it, too.

"Enough family drama. I'll spare your sister. But we still have a ward to take down." She turned her merciless gaze—and her gun—on me. "Let's kill two birds with one stone."

I stared into Baptiste's cold eyes, a sickening realization settling in my gut.

She knew.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Lach

My phone rang once, but I'd already tracked his arrival.

"He's there. Are you sure?" But Willow's words were like an echo. My decision was made. In life, in death, I would choose her.

I didn't fear the Wild Hunt. I didn't think through my options. I didn't doubt my decision.

I snapped my fingers.

Scenarios flashed through my mind as I hurtled between worlds. Cate bound. Cate bleeding. Cate dead. I shook my head, banishing the gruesome images. We would get to her in time. There was no other option.

The world rushed to meet me, my knees popping as I slammed into the pavement outside The Fontaine. Tires squealed, the acrid scent of burned rubber assaulted me, but my eyes were on the door. A car door slammed behind me as I pulled out my 9-millimeter, and then Roark was at my side, his own weapon drawn.

"No guards." He didn't sound surprised.

It was practically an invitation—one Baptiste knew we would accept. No RSVP required.

I met his gaze, jaw clenched. "I don't have a choice."

"Neither do I." He clapped one hand on my shoulder, something in his eyes telling me he understood more deeply than I'd expected. This was more than duty—to both of us. Walking in there probably meant our lives were forfeit. Walking away guaranteed they were.

Because my heart was inside that building.

And maybe his was, too.

Roark gave a sharp nod, grabbed the handle, and yanked the door open. It gave without any resistance. Baptiste might as well have strewn the path with rose petals.

"Careful," Roark muttered, eyes scanning the dim interior as we stepped

over the threshold.

An eerie silence hung over the empty booths. No ambush waited.

Baptiste knew she had already won. The blood was spilled. The end was in motion. She was waiting for her prize.

Waiting for me.

"I don't like this." Roark strode to a booth in the corner and picked up an abandoned wineglass. Then he froze.

"What is it?"

He plucked something off the table, pain moving across his face.

The signet ring of the Nether Court.

I swiped the finished bottle of wine from the table and sniffed it, nose wrinkling. "She dosed them."

"That'd better be all she's done," he snarled. And I heard it in his rage—something primal and ancient. Something that clawed inside me, too. Proof of what I'd only guessed. There wasn't time to be surprised.

A muffled cry echoed from the direction of the kitchen, followed by a chorus of shouts, and we were moving. Each step a stolen heartbeat, my pulse quickening. Roark flanked me as we moved swiftly and silently across the dining room, hugging the shadows, as cold laughter shattered the air.

I pushed through the swinging door, and my heart stopped.

I barely processed the scene before me. My sister clutching her bloody leg, a witch standing over her like she was a trophy. Dante watching me with wary eyes from the floor, Channing laid out before him. Channing, who wasn't breathing.

Baptiste stood in the center of the kitchen, greeting me with a feral grin, demanding my attention. Blood on the floor. Faces I knew. But the only thing that mattered was the woman at her feet, the woman with a gun pressed to the center of her forehead, the woman who even now wore a look of defiance that devastated me.

Cate.

"It's about time," Baptiste drawled. "I thought I was going to have to call you myself." She jammed the muzzle of her gun hard enough that Cate flinched. Her finger twitched on the trigger. "I can't decide if I want to give you time to say goodbye or not."

Silent tears streamed down Cate's cheeks. Our eyes met, and she mouthed one word: *Run*.

Like hell I would.

I lifted my hand, my fingers working in a practiced motion.

“What are you doing?” Roark growled behind me as his magazine clattered to the ground. “Lach!”

But I didn’t turn toward Roark. I wouldn’t explain. Not while that gun was pointed between my mate’s eyes.

Baptiste’s eyes lit up, a delighted smile twisting on her cruel face. “I didn’t even have to ask. She has broken you!”

But someone like her could never understand. Love didn’t break a man. It built him. Forged him. Love made a man who he was meant to be. “She *saved* me.”

“Then the pleasure will still be mine,” she said triumphantly.

“Wait.” A sharp voice stopped her. “Allow me.”

A figure stepped from behind her, and the world tilted sideways.

Shaw. My own brother. On the wrong side of that gun.

He was a hothead like me, but working with her? Working with our enemies? Shaw hated me. I’d groomed him to. But Ciara? Cate? How could he do this to them?

Betrayal unlike anything I’d ever known ripped out my heart.

“What have you done?” I breathed.

This wasn’t my brother. A brother would never betray his court, his friends, his family. The man standing in front of me might as well have been a stranger.

“I did what I had to do,” Shaw said, his voice hollow. “You would never understand.”

Rage boiled and spilled out of me. “You betrayed your family. There’s no coming back from this, Shaw. You’re out.”

His jaw clenched, and he released a frustrated huff. “Face it. I was never in.”

That’s what this was about? He wanted more power, more responsibility, more attention?

I choked back my disgust and turned toward Baptiste. “Let them go. I’m a much bigger prize.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” Baptiste laughed and tapped Cate’s nose with the pistol. “I could lie and say I waited for you as a courtesy, but the truth is that I wanted you to watch. I want to look in your eyes the moment your world crumbles.”

I had to keep her talking. If letting her toy with us kept Cate alive, then so be it. I tucked the unloaded gun into my holster and forced a smirk. “I had no idea that you were still in love with me.”

“In love with you?” She looked genuinely offended by the idea.

Almost as offended as I was by even putting Baptiste and the idea of love into the same sentence.

Cate’s gaze flickered to me, and she blinked like she was trying to tell me something. I regretted not having those signets made for us, if only so we could communicate with each other when we found ourselves in these life-and-death situations—especially if they were going to keep increasing in frequency. We just had to make it out of here first, avoid the Wild Hunt, and start living happily ever after.

“This isn’t about us, Gage.” Baptiste took her eyes off Cate. “This is much bigger than any of us. The time of the convergence is nearing.”

“Do they know what you’re talking about?” Roark asked, hitching a thumb at the other members of the Cabal. “Or have you just compelled them to go along with your ramblings?”

“Maybe I’ll shoot you,” she said, momentarily flicking her weapon in his direction. “We only need one fae death to bring down your cursed spell. It would be poignant to know the faithful dog’s death would ensure your master died.”

Ciara snarled. “If you lay one finger on him—”

“You’ll what?” Baptiste bent down and aimed at her. “Give me a reason.”

But Ciara clamped her mouth shut.

“Please!” Baptiste threw her other hand in the air. “I’m having such a hard time deciding which one of you to kill.”

“Stop wasting time, Baptiste,” the witch said, rolling his eyes. “Just kill one of them, and let’s be done with it.”

“Me.” I took a step forward, crooking my finger at her. “You know you want to.”

“Tempting.” She pushed out her lower lip before shaking her head. “But let’s let fate decide. Eeny.” She turned the gun on Roark. “Meeny.” It swiveled to Ciara, and this time Roark growled. “Miny.” Baptiste giggled and pointed it at me.

There was no one left, but...

Baptiste squatted and put it back between Cate’s eyes. “Moe,” she breathed. “It’s time to come out and play.”

“What?” Dante called from where he knelt by Channing’s side. “Stop screwing around.”

“Show them, changeling,” Baptiste whispered.

Cate closed her eyes for a heartbeat, and I found myself taking another step. Not like this.

“Anything you want,” I said in a hoarse voice, not bothering to hide my panic. “*Anything*. Just let her go.”

Cate opened her eyes and met mine, bright determination sparkling in them. The same determination I’d seen on the night we met. She smiled at me, and I started to shake my head.

“*Anything*,” I repeated.

But Baptiste’s cruel laugh shredded what little hope I had. “Or I can kill them, Cate. One by one. And then you’ll still die. Slowly on the floor next to their bodies. What will it be?”

Cate slipped a hand into her pocket and took out a tiny doll bound in thread. She shot me an apologetic look before she lifted her gaze toward Baptiste. “I’ll offer you a bargain.” She tugged a strand loose and let it unravel.

The spell came with it. The human glamour protecting her dissolved like wisps of smoke.

Cate *glowed*.

There were gold flecks in her eyes, which were now a darker shade than midnight. Umber curls spiraled over her shoulders down to...

Shaw gasped. “It’s not possible. You’re...”

Gossamer wings unfurled from behind her back, shimmering in hues of blue and violet.

“I thought your kind lost their wings,” Baptiste said, raising her brows as she reached out and pinched one of them.

Cate yelped, the wings tucking tightly against her, and curled forward, instinct knowing what she couldn’t—that her wings were delicate and sensitive and that she needed to protect them.

No one moved. No one breathed. Silence stretched through the room like an eternity.

“It’s really a pity.” Baptiste studied the wings like they were a prize, like she might pin them to a wall like a captured butterfly in a box. “But...”

Her index finger curled over the trigger. Roark stiffened, preparing to spring. Shadows ached at my fingertips, ready to lash out. Even Ciara

shifted almost imperceptibly on her knees. We could take Baptiste, but not faster than her trigger finger would kill Cate.

"I have wasted my life," I said softly. Baptiste paused to cast a curious stare in my direction, and I continued desperately. "When my parents died, I vowed I would never allow this court to fall. I armed myself with control. I held power as tightly as I could. I made choices for my family and told myself I didn't care if they resented me as long as they were *alive*. And when I hated the man in the mirror, I told myself that was the price I paid to protect them, to protect the Nether Court."

Tears traced sparkling paths down Cate's flawless cheeks. She was as lovely as a fae as she was under her human glamour, the beauty both different and somehow perfectly and undeniably belonging only to her.

I kept my eyes on Cate as I nodded. "But you're right. Love broke me. It shattered my illusions. It ripped apart that armor. It showed me that I was nothing before she walked into my life. Because there was no point to any of it if it came at the cost of laughter and joy and family. *Real* family. Not edicts and orders and business. So if you let me die in her place, it will have been worth it to save her, to have one last moment, one more breath, to hear one more beat of my heart knowing that I called her mine."

Baptiste's gaze traveled from me back to Cate, her eyes softening. "Dante," she murmured, "I want you to call Oberon. I need to tell him there's been a...development."

Hope sparked in my chest as Dante took out his phone and dialed. "She needs to speak with you." He passed the call to her.

"We've had a bit of a hiccup," she said, and I held my breath. "The entire Nether Court paid me a visit. Don't worry, though; it won't be long now. I thought you might like to be here after the ward falls. I'll be able to wipe out most of them. Bring your sister to collect her toy, and he'll be ready to make her his queen. The throne will be yours in minutes."

"Bitch." Roark sprinted for her, but she caught him in a chokehold. "Dante"—she barked his name—"kill the changeling."

But the vampire hesitated, his eyes dipping to Channing's body. Resolve hardened his features. He opened his mouth, pain twisting his face as he managed one word: "No." And then, "I won't kill his sister."

Baptiste stared, unaccustomed to having a vampire disobey a direct order. "She's not his sister!"

But Dante backed up a step. He shouldn't have been able to defy his sire,

but his decision was clearly made. Not for Baptiste. Not even for Cate. This wasn't about an agenda. It was the same thing that had stopped me from murdering Channing for his betrayal of Cate. It was what had driven me to welcome her brother into my home. Love changed the math. It changed *us*. Love made us capable of doing the impossible.

"We need to break the spell," she hissed, eyes as sharp as broken glass. "Disobedient little switch. Fine, we'll start with this one. Make your peace with the gods." She raised the gun to Roark.

Ciara released a shattering scream, lurching forward on hands and knees, dragging her wounded leg behind her. I drew my gun, reaching into my pocket, my eyes locked with my penumbra. He nodded just once, understanding passing between us.

"Stop," Shaw bellowed, producing his own weapon and pointing it at my heart.

Baptiste grinned, triumph written all over her face.

"Why?" I asked him. "Is it because of Titania?" I should have seen it, but my arrogance had made me blind.

"Titania?" He bit his lip as he waved his gun. "It started that way. She loved me. Or I thought she did. I've never had much experience with love, you know? Now? Now, there's no choice. My bargain with Oberon demands the bona fides be destroyed. The only way to do that is to spill fae blood. Someone has to die. It was easier to agree before...before I met Cate. Before she came into our lives. She changed things." His voice cracked. "But a bargain is a bargain. It can't be broken."

I looked to Cate instinctively, something darker and oilier than betrayal swimming in my veins, and found the same bleakness dimming her eyes. The feeling oozed into the pit forming in my stomach. This was all my fault. Since he'd returned from school, I'd pushed Shaw away in an attempt to keep him from the family business. I'd treated him like a kid, shunted him to guard duty, rolled my eyes at his choice in friends. And it wasn't just him. There was another reason Fiona preferred New York. Even Ciara, who had stuck around and put up with me, had fallen all over herself to befriend Cate. Because I'd failed all of them, and I knew what this horrible, ugly thing inside me was finally: shame.

"Then let it be me," I said softly, daring a step in his direction. "But don't let them hurt *our* family."

But Shaw chuckled. "You don't get to be the hero," he said, finger

curling. “Not this time. Not when I can finally do something right. Good luck.”

The movement was so swift there was no time to react. No time to lunge.

No time to stop him before he pulled the trigger.

Time slowed even as everyone around me moved. Ciara lunged forward, her shadows flying toward Baptiste, piercing her through the heart. Roark spun free, getting off a clean shot at the shocked witch. Dante scooped Channing off the ground and raced toward the door.

And Cate...

Cate didn't move toward me. She moved *with* me.

We dove toward the sickening crack of a bullet splintering flesh and bone and brain.

And we were too late.

The building shuddered, dust raining down, the ground below us trembling as the ward started to fall.

But Shaw fell first. The light in his eyes was gone even before I caught him in my arms.

And something in me broke. Something that would never fully heal.

I cradled his head in my lap, hot blood seeping through my pants to the floor below. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m going to make this right.”

I didn't know how, but I would, even if it was the last thing I ever did.

“Lach.” Cate said my name softly. Her hand touched my shoulder. “The bona fides...”

The earth shook, rain falling on my brother's bloody head. I lifted my face to her, tears sliding down my cheeks. Not rain at all.

“I can't leave him.” I shook my head. I couldn't run from this.

She grabbed my face with both hands, forcing me to look at her. “They're coming. Enough blood has been spilled. You don't owe more.”

But I did.

“If you stay, he wins,” she continued frantically. “And then we're all dead. There will be no Nether Court. No Terra Court. Oberon will make this a world of monsters. We're the only thing that can stop him. Only the other courts stand a chance. You have to go.”

“The Nether Court doesn't need me.”

“I do,” she said fiercely.

And without her...

I nodded once, still numb, and Cate gently lifted Shaw from my hands.

Roark and Ciara were already there, kneeling, weeping.

“We will take care of him,” Ciara promised me, her chin quivering. A line of Theban materialized on her blood-spattered hands. She stared for a split second before shaking her attention from the indelible stain on her soul. “Go before they get here. Before he gets here.”

I stumbled to my feet, and Cate grabbed my bloody hands. “You can’t come,” I told her. “If they follow...”

She was everything. Not just to me. To everyone.

She closed her eyes. “I know.”

“Get to the Astral Court. Aurora will—”

She cut me off with a kiss and pulled back. “I can handle myself.” She sobbed. “Now get out of here.”

She always could. I stopped for a moment and allowed myself one final look at my family. At Ciara, and Roark, and Shaw. We had something worth fighting for, and I wouldn’t allow Oberon to take it away.

“I’ll find you,” I promised her. “You are my life now.”

She pressed a kiss to my mouth. “I know.”

“When Oberon comes—” I started.

“He’s going to be in for a surprise,” Cate promised me. She managed a sad smile. “I love you.”

The air around us swirled, golden threads lacing through it. The Wild Hunt was coming. We were out of time.

So I returned that smile one last time as I snapped my fingers. “You better.”



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Acknowledgments

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About the Author

[Geneva Lee](#) is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and international bestselling author who writes books about recovering alpha males and the strong women who bring them to their knees. Geneva might travel at any time, dreams of a Paris apartment, and spends her days raising her kids with her soul mate and an ever-growing collection of cats.

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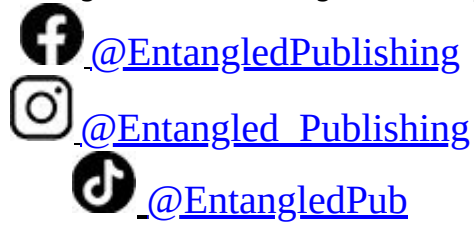
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