

The book cover features a central image of a man with dark hair and a serious expression, wearing a dark coat. He is surrounded by vibrant green and yellow energy or smoke. A bright yellow light streaks across the middle of the image, curving around the man. The background is dark and textured, suggesting a stone wall or a similar surface.

Z J CANNON

NO PROMISES

IRON BOUND BOOK ONE

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No Promises

Iron Bound: Book 1

Z.J. Cannon

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No fae were harmed in the making of this book.

Chapter 1

I took a deep breath and savored the aroma of salt and sunscreen and sun-warmed sand as I leaned back in my beach chair. Ahead of me, the Hawaiian ocean sparkled blue-green like a massive gemstone set into the earth. My eyes followed a man in skintight latex shorts wading out of the water with a surfboard under one arm, then flitted to a bikini-clad woman who gave me a long look as she jogged past, a little closer to my chair than was strictly necessary.

Then I closed my eyes, and let the sun's warmth caress me. Every inch of my skin tingled, alive with the rays' life-giving fire—everywhere except my left wrist, where my thick steel watch hung. The scarred skin underneath felt chapped and frostbitten even here, in the balmy Hawaiian winter, when the metal should have been hot enough to burn.

I took a long sip of my drink, a White Russian made just the way I liked it, thick with creamy sweetness that did nothing to mask the bite of the alcohol underneath. I opened my eyes again, but didn't scan the beach for eye candy this time. Instead, I looked over my shoulder, and let my gaze rest on the mansion at the top of the hill. It stood like a modern castle, a wedding-cake pile of stone and gleaming glass, elegant in its asymmetry.

And it was all mine.

A child's shriek snapped my attention back to the beach so hard my neck stung. Reflexively, I scanned the shore until I found the source. A little girl, playing chase with her brother. Already her screams had dissolved into giggles. I shook my head at myself. Even if she had been in danger, it wasn't my problem. The beach had a lifeguard, and it wasn't me. I was here to enjoy myself.

I tore my eyes away, and found myself locked in the gaze of a woman crouched under a beach umbrella, slathering her pale skin with an entire tube's worth of sunscreen. Which was an especially impressive feat given that she didn't have that much skin showing to begin with. She wasn't dressed for the beach, in bulky black cargo pants and a skintight black turtleneck. But what she did have exposed was pale enough that she would likely be bright red by the end of the day, regardless of how much sunscreen she used or how long she spent under that umbrella.

She looked away almost as soon as our eyes met. But I had already seen enough to be intrigued. Between her pale skin, her long black hair, and her angular elegance, she looked like a modern-day Snow White. But it was her eyes that caught my attention, a blue pale enough to be almost white, like two chips

of ice set into her face. That one brief look had been enough to send the chill of winter through me even on a day like today. But it hadn't been altogether unpleasant, even for a creature of summer like myself.

And I hadn't missed the way those eyes had lingered on me for a couple of seconds too long.

I smiled. It looked like I had found my plans for the rest of the day.

I waited for her to look my way again, knowing it was only a matter of time. Sure enough, it took less than a minute before her gaze found me again. As our eyes met, I shot her a slow smile of invitation.

She didn't smile back.

Instead, she turned away again, letting her hair fall across her face. She stood, her movements quick and sharp. She packed away the sunscreen, and folded up the umbrella, and walked swiftly toward the thickest part of the crowd, all in the amount of time it would have taken most people to pop the tube of sunscreen closed.

As she melded into the crowd, her hair fell to one side. She hastily tossed it back into place—but not before I caught a glimpse, for half a second, of a sharply pointed ear.

A chill fell over me again, and this time, it didn't leave. Just like that, the pleasant haze of the day was gone.

For two hundred years, they had left me alone. Tristra had been the last of the assassins. I had assumed she had made some sort of deal on my behalf, after she had gone home to nurse her broken heart. Either that, or the two Faerie Courts had, simultaneously and inexplicably, simply given up on me. Either way, I hadn't spent much time dwelling on it. I didn't believe in questioning one's good fortune.

I should have known better. The Courts had never conceded to me. They had merely been biding their time, taking the long view as only immortals could afford to do.

But they weren't the only immortals in this conflict. I'd had time to prepare too. And being reluctant to question my good fortune wasn't the same as assuming it would last forever.

And I had no intention of letting my oldest enemies take away the peace I had earned. I had wasted hundreds of years in pointless misery before coming to my senses and claiming this life of luxury for myself. I intended to spend hundreds more enjoying my reward.

I pushed myself to my feet. But I didn't hurry after the woman. I stretched, and finished my drink, and pulled on a silky-soft Pima cotton t-shirt. Then I slowly packed up the wooden beach chair. With the chair under my arm, I

walked down the beach path and up the road. I kept a lazy smile plastered to my face, and my free hand ready to unclasp my watch at a second's notice. I didn't want to use that option if I had any other available. Not here in tourist country, with too many innocent people to get caught in the crossfire. But I would if I had to.

Anyway, when it came to caring about innocent human lives, I had already learned my lesson too many times over. If it was them or me, today I was choosing me.

I left the tourist street behind, and strolled up the winding road to the top of the hill. Ahead of me, my sanctuary beckoned. Sun reflected off the windowed walls like a useless lighthouse beacon shining at midday. But this lighthouse was only designed to protect one person: myself.

I held my index finger up to the fingerprint reader, and the door slid open. The bells and whistles of the security system had cost a fortune, but I had several fortunes to spare. Not that anything the security company could offer would be much good against what was coming.

Inside, I dropped the act. The smile fell from my face, and I let the chair clatter to the floor. I paused only long enough to lock the door behind me and reset the system before jogging through the house. I didn't spare a thought for my usual homecoming rituals. I passed the bar without pouring a drink, and crossed the living room without my usual long appreciative glance out the glass wall that faced the ocean. I didn't even spare a second to try to catch a glimpse of the woman. Even though there was only one route up to the house, I had no doubt that she I had seen was too well trained to let herself be spotted.

Instead, I went straight for the basement door. The doorknob rattled under my hand, but didn't open. It was locked.

Another chill crept over me as I drew back. My fingers tightened around my watch, sending an ache through the small bones. Even if I had wanted to keep the basement door locked—which I didn't, because I needed to be able to access the room below as easily as possible at all times in case of emergency—I couldn't have. That door only locked from the inside... unless you had the key.

It looked like someone had found it.

"You should keep a closer eye on your surroundings," said a cold female voice from behind me.

Slowly, I turned. The woman from the beach was standing in front of me, in the center of the living room. In one hand, she was holding a knife—one of *my* knives, the special ones I kept in the basement, with their black iron blades that didn't reflect the sun. She had pulled down one of my curtains, and wrapped it around her hand to create a barrier between herself and the metal, but her face

was still creased with pain.

I stepped back until I hit the basement door. The blade in her hand made me acutely aware of my own lack of weaponry. Not that I was ever truly unarmed. I played with the clasp on my watch, and tried to sound casual. “You can’t tell me you didn’t bring your own weapons. Ones that wouldn’t be quite so painful to use.”

The woman held the knife out at arm’s length, like it disgusted her. “When I saw this downstairs, I couldn’t resist the opportunity for poetic justice.” Icy hatred flashed in her eyes. “Is this what you used on them?”

I frowned. I’d heard many sneering fae speeches over the past seven hundred years, always the prelude to yet another assassination attempt. The fae did love to hear themselves talk. The ones who weren’t trained well enough to come in hard and fast without warning, that is. And this wasn’t how the speech was supposed to go. “Used on who?”

Instead of answering, the woman took advantage of my confusion. I didn’t see her throw the knife; my eyes only caught the movement once it was already halfway through the air, flying directly at me. I didn’t have time to dodge before the blade caught me in the shoulder, pinning me to the wall.

I didn’t scream, but only because I couldn’t breathe. Claws of ice ripped at my flesh from the inside as the burning chill spread along my veins. The sun outside seemed to dim. My legs buckled underneath me as all the strength left my body at once. I managed to stay upright, but only by sagging back against the wall.

My fingernails dug into my palms, in frustration as much as in pain. That knife had been coated in iron dust, meant to infect the bloodstream of whoever came to attack me. Now it was in my own. Even if I were to take off my watch, nothing would happen. The iron dust wasn’t enough to do permanent damage—not to me, at least—but it would take my body a few hours to clear it from my system. Until then, it would sap my magic as much as it had my physical strength.

The pain of iron poisoning was like nothing else. I always felt it as the utter cold of outer space, the winter chill that was anathema to my Summer nature. A Winter fae would probably have felt it as the nuclear heat of the center of the sun. It didn’t affect me as strongly as it would a full fae; even so, for those first few seconds, it was always all-consuming.

Which was why it took me longer than it should have to get past the pain enough to realize what was wrong with this picture.

I hadn’t had time to dodge, but the knife had caught me in the shoulder. A non-fatal wound.

“They had two hundred years to train you,” I said through gritted teeth, “and you can’t aim better than that?”

“I wasn’t aiming to kill.” She stalked slowly up to me as another gray wave of weakness swept through my body. “What did you do with them?”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about.” I tried not to let my weakness show in my voice, but I knew it was a lost cause.

Her hand, with the remains of my curtain still wrapped around it, shot out toward the knife. I grabbed it before she could. The touch of the hilt against my bare palm sent a bone-deep ache through me, but the steel watch had accustomed me to that pain long ago. I gripped it tightly and gave it one sharp yank. I swallowed a scream as the blade tore into my muscle a second time on the way out. Blood flowed from the wound, soaking into my shirt and dripping down onto the floor. It was a familiar sight, almost identical to human blood unless someone looked closely enough to see the sheen of fae blue atop the human red. I would have to watch that wound. Ordinarily, it wouldn’t have been a concern, but the iron dust would slow my healing. Not stop it entirely—I would be back to normal in a few days regardless—but slow it. And depending on how lucky she had gotten with her strike, I could lose a lot of blood in the meantime.

But I could worry about that later. For now, I had more immediate problems.

I held the knife out between us, and flicked a few drops of my blood onto the floor. She flinched back.

The temperature in her gaze dropped another few degrees. “You’ve got an impressive kill room down there. How many of us have seen it?”

“You’re the first,” I said. “No one else has been stupid enough to come after me in two hundred years.” I gave her a deliberate once-over, even though it wouldn’t tell me anything I didn’t already know. “Winter Court, by the look of it. That’s a change. Usually it’s Summer, trying to correct their own mistakes. They learned their lesson after what I did to their last assassin, but I suppose it makes sense that Mab is slower on the uptake.”

The woman’s jaw clenched. She let the curtain fall to the floor, and drew her own weapons from the waistband of her cargo pants. Twin curved daggers, carved from sharpened bone. They had been polished until they gleamed like ice.

I waited for the familiar pre-battle adrenaline to wash over me. Instead, I just felt tired. From the iron, yes—but more than that, it was from the weight of all the memories of all the fights. Every time I had faced down another one of the fae, just like this.

I had thought it was over.

I lowered my head—not enough to let my eyes lose track of her weapons, just enough for her to read the message. “I’m done fighting,” I said. “All I want is to

relax on the beach, then come home—alone or otherwise—and enjoy a drink and a good meal. I don't want this, and if you know anything about the Courts' history with me, you don't want it either. If you go home now, we can avoid an outcome that won't make either of us happy."

The woman sneered. "You certainly think highly of yourself, human, if you think you're a match for Mab's right hand."

"I'm not human. And unless Mab deliberately sent you out here ignorant of what you were facing, you know how many of you I've killed already." I straightened as much as I could, and shifted into a fighting stance.

She took that as her cue, and crossed the last of the distance between us.

I lunged for her, meeting her slow advance with as much speed as I could muster. She shifted from slow to quick instantly, dodging back and to the side. As she moved, too fast for my eye to follow, a burst of wind slammed me back against the door.

It occurred to me, then, that this fight was unlike any other I had fought against the fae. At least in one important way.

She had access to her magic. And this time around, with iron dust spreading through my veins like ground glass, I didn't.

But I had fought fae opponents who outmatched me before, even if not in this particular circumstance. And I had won every time. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have been alive to fight her.

And I hadn't forgotten the way she had chosen to wound instead of kill when she had thrown the knife. It also didn't escape my notice that, as fast as she could move, she could have slit my throat three times over by now—but she hadn't. She was hesitant. Afraid, was my guess, despite her veneer of cold ferocity.

I could use that.

When one of her daggers whipped toward my throat, I was ready for her. I blocked it with my own weapon, and shoved myself inside her guard. But I didn't go for the kill. I could already tell she was quick enough to take me down with her, if it came to that. Instead, I rested the tip of the knife, still red with my blood, against her arm.

A blister formed on her skin almost instantly. She hissed in pain and started to pull back. With my free hand, I grabbed her forearm and held it in place.

"You saw my basement," I said, low and serious. "You figured out that the weapons I have down there are designed for one purpose: to fight your kind. I coated this one with enough iron dust to render your magic useless for a few days—if you're very, very lucky. If not, you'll be facing a slow, lingering death, no matter what you manage to do to me before the end."

She fixed me with a look of cold disdain. “Do you think I’m stupid? The iron dust is gone—it’s in your blood now.”

“Maybe so,” I said. “But look what the knife is coated with now. *My blood*. The human blood your kind hate so much. The human blood you just dosed with iron. And even if the amount in those few drops isn’t enough to do any damage—and knowing how sensitive the fae are to iron, I wouldn’t count on that—do you know what else is in human blood? More iron. What do you think it will do to you if it gets into your bloodstream?” I pressed the tip of the knife a little harder against her skin, not hard enough to break the skin, but hard enough to threaten.

The woman held herself as still as an ice sculpture. The only movement was the time-lapse growth of the blister on her arm. It darkened as it spread, and jagged black streaks spread out from the center.

But she held onto that look of contempt. “The iron in your blood won’t hurt me. Do you think I don’t eat meat? Humans are just another kind of animal.”

“You digest the meat you eat. Are you so sure there’s no difference?”

As it happened, there wasn’t. I was bluffing. With at least one of the assassins before her, the fight had gotten vicious enough that more than a few drops of my blood had smeared onto their wounds. Nothing had happened.

But she was afraid. Fear came from lack of confidence. Confidence came from lack of knowledge. I couldn’t be sure what exactly she didn’t know, but I was dearly hoping human anatomy was part of it.

“Do you think the fae haven’t fought enough of your kind to be familiar with human blood? If it were deadly to us, we would know.” But she still didn’t move.

“You may have encountered human blood. Have you had anyone slide it under your skin and directly into your veins?” I pressed a little harder on the knife. “I’m giving you one chance to go home and tell Mab I’m prepared for anyone who makes the mistake of coming after me. All I want is to be left in peace. Tell her that. Tell them all.”

The woman’s face twisted. Something I had said had touched a nerve, but I didn’t know what. “You don’t deserve this life of luxury. You don’t even deserve the quick death I’ll give you when I’m done with you.”

“Because I have human blood in my veins? I’ve heard the speech. I’m tired of it. From you, from the humans. I’m done. I’m giving you this chance to go home—but make no mistake, if you don’t take it, I’m more than capable of stopping you another way.”

That part wasn’t a bluff. I hoped.

With no warning, the woman lunged at me again. I felt the slightest bit of

resistance as my knife bit into her arm. She didn't pull back. She let it happen. The dark blister burst, and black liquid flowed out, mixed with the dark blue of her blood. The tip of her dagger rested against the artery at the side of my throat.

I expected her to rip my throat out. She didn't. She pressed the knife deeper, a threat, as she wrenched the iron knife from my hand. She hissed in pain as she tossed it away. It skidded across the floor, toward the window—where, far below at the bottom of the hill, the tourists were still enjoying their day at the beach.

Her breath was quick and ragged, and the edges of her wound had gone black. But she made no move to stop the flow of blood. All her attention was on the dagger at my throat—and on my face, as her eyes seared hatred into mine.

“You’ve been dealing with the Summer Court too long. They’re soft. They don’t know how to properly calculate risk. Me, I’ve seen people die of iron poisoning. It’s a slow death, cruel, especially when the dose is small enough to let them linger. But slow has its advantages.” A smile of triumph spread across her face. “If your blood does kill me, or if your knife does, it won’t do it before I get what I need from you. And before I make you pay for what you’ve done.”

She still hadn't killed me. Every other assassin—except for Tristra, but she was an exception in many ways—had gone for the kill right away. I had misread her. She hadn't hesitated because she was afraid. She hadn't hesitated at all. She had done exactly what she intended to do.

This woman wasn't here to kill me. Not right away, at least.

“And what is it you think I’ve done?” I asked.

“You know the answer to that.” The tip of the dagger pressed deeper, just enough to free a single drop of blood. “Luckily, I value results more than vengeance—most of the time. Which means if you give me the answers I need, I might allow you to die an easy death.” She drew in closer, close enough to let me see the white gleam of her teeth. “What have you done with the agents of the Winter Court?”

“I don't know what you're talking about. You're the first fae I've seen in two hundred years.”

The dagger dug deeper. The drop of blood turned into a trickle. I dug my nails deeper into my palms.

“Five of Mab's agents have gone missing in this world over the past six months. Before their disappearance, all five were spotted near the portal that opens onto Hawthorne, Massachusetts. Six months ago, you rented an apartment in Hawthorne, two weeks before the first disappearance. Since then, you've made regular flights back and forth, all of which match up with the days they went dark. And in your basement, you have a room perfectly suited to imprisoning and killing the fae.”

The dagger trembled against my skin. I could feel the effort it was taking her not to rip through my flesh here and now. I wouldn't have been surprised if she had decided to do it, and then sat back and waited for me to come back instead of finishing the job, just so she could have the satisfaction of doing it all over again.

But she didn't. She kept talking. "What did you do with them? Are any still alive? They aren't in your basement, so where are they?"

I wasn't lying when I said I had no idea what she was talking about. For the past six months, I had done the same things I had spent the past seventy-five years doing. Basking in the sun, eating rich and delicious food, enjoying the physical company of the occasional human, and generally savoring the fruits of hundreds of years' worth of accumulated wealth. I had never heard of Hawthorne, Massachusetts, let alone flown there. All I knew about that area of this country was that it was prone to cold, snowy winters and partial to witch-burnings. Neither of which recommended it as a vacation destination.

"If any of them had come after me," I said, trying to keep my voice steady despite the increasingly distracting pain at the side of my neck, "I would have done to them the same thing I did to the ones who came before. But they didn't. I told you—I haven't seen any of your kind in two hundred years. And I don't know where you're getting the rest of your information, but you need to check your sources. I haven't set foot off this island in nearly five years."

"There's nothing wrong with my information. I know who you are, and what you are, and what you've done. Kieran Thorne. Formerly known as Ciarán Dubh, as well as many other things over the years. You are half human and half fae, and as such, you are too dangerous to be allowed to live."

"You found out all that along with where I've supposedly been flying? Data mining really is getting out of hand these days." I kept my words and my voice light so as not to betray the thrumming tension in my body.

"If you think this is the time for jokes, I will be more than happy to correct your misconception. All I want to hear from you is the truth—and I'll get it from you if I have to peel every inch of skin from your body with an iron blade to find it." She smiled again, revealing too many teeth. "After that, we'll talk payback."

Chapter 2

She marched me down to the basement. As we passed the rack of weapons hanging on the wall at the bottom of the staircase, I eyed the remaining blades longingly. She saw where I was looking, and jerked me roughly away, drawing another sharp line through my skin with her knife in the process.

She risked letting go of me with one hand long enough to grab an iron chain from the wall. She tossed it away from her immediately, into the open door of the single room. Even that wasn't enough to stop the brief contact from raising a line of blisters across her palm. She hadn't thought to bring the stolen curtain down here to protect her hands.

She stopped at the door to my safe room, where the overhead lights were still on from when she had come down here earlier. The polished metal of the walls and floor shone a dull silver under the harsh fluorescent light. She took a deep breath, straightened her back, and strode through the door, shoving me ahead of her.

The room was an iron box. The walls, the floor, the ceiling, the door itself—they were all bare metal. I could feel it as soon as I crossed the threshold, digging deep into my bones and squeezing hard. It felt like winter had finally come to Hawaii, and I was the old man in the rocking chair complaining about his creaking joints. I was used to the watch, yes. And I had spent my fair share of time in this room. But even I had my limits, and there were some things it was impossible to accustom oneself to.

But whatever I was feeling, it was nothing compared to the agony my captor must have been in.

I could see it as soon as she stepped through the door. With how sensitive all fae were to the slightest presence of iron, she must have felt the room down here from the moment she had stepped into my house. But that wouldn't compare to actually stepping in and being encircled by iron on all sides. In two important ways, she had lessened her advantages by bringing me down here. This room would weaken her physically, for as long as we were inside—a lot more than it would me. And until she stepped out again—maybe until she retreated back upstairs—her magic would be as useless as my own.

But she had chosen to bring me here anyway. Which meant that whatever she had planned for me, she thought it was worth the risk.

With a kick, she slammed the door shut. "Face the wall," she ordered.

She might have traded away some of her advantages, but she was still armed

and I wasn't, which meant she retained the upper hand. I did what she asked, walking to the far wall and placing my hands flat against it. I did that as much to demonstrate my iron tolerance as to prove I wasn't going to attack. Maybe she wasn't afraid like I had thought she was, but with any luck, I could change that.

But if she was beginning to regret placing herself in an iron cage, she didn't show it. She wrenched my wrists roughly behind my back, and bound them together with the chain, tightly enough that I couldn't tell where the pain of the metal itself ended and where my body's protests at having my circulation cut off began. Instantly, the ever-present ache from my watch doubled. She spun me around and shoved me down to a sitting position. Then she bound my ankles with as little gentleness as she had treated my wrists.

I watched her blistering hands, waiting for an opportunity to overpower her. She had to tuck the daggers away while she was doing her work with the chain. But no good possibilities presented themselves. My old reflexes were already coming back—muscle memory from seven hundred years ago, when I had still been young and the fae assassins had been plentiful and eager. And that memory told me that even if I tried to kick out at her with my half-bound legs, she would be on me before I made it halfway to the door.

She finished her work and stepped back, daggers already in her hands again. "Now," she said, "we can talk."

Every inch of my skin was hyperaware of the floor under me, the wall behind me, the links of the chain digging into my flesh. "If we're going to talk," I said, trying not to betray the pain I was in, "why don't you start by introducing yourself?"

"If you insist," she said. "My name is Vicantha, Exalted Knight of the Winter Court. Right hand of Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness. Righter of wrongs and instrument of vengeance."

I tried not to smile at the overblown titles. "I didn't think Mab was overly concerned about right and wrong." Tristra, the only one of the fae I had ever gotten to know well enough to have a real conversation with, had described Mab's court as a cold and brutal place. But then, that was exactly how someone from the opposing Court would have described it.

"Anything that goes against Mab's interests is a wrong to be corrected," said Vicantha. "And anything—or anyone—that harms her people requires more than simple correction."

With no more warning than that, she dug the tip of the dagger into my skin again—this time, just above my collarbone.

"How did you cross into the fae realm undetected to capture Mab's agents?" Vicantha asked. All the emotion was gone from her voice, as if she had flicked a

switch.

There was only one answer I could give. “I didn’t.”

The tip of the dagger traced a line of blood. “What did you want with them?”

“I don’t know how many ways I can say the same thing.” I didn’t take my eyes off her hands. Which meant I saw in too much detail as she carefully shaved a strip of flesh from my chest.

Fury flooded into her voice as she hissed in my ear, “Where are they?”

She didn’t wait for me to answer this time. She carved another strip from my body. My blood dripped faster, joining the steady trickle from my shoulder, bright red under the lights.

I had faced worse than this, I reminded myself. A dozen times over. More. “How do you know they didn’t cross over on their own?” I asked through a clenched jaw.

“Because this world has been closed to the fae for two hundred years.”

That explained the lack of assassins. “You’re here,” I pointed out.

“Only out of necessity.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, as something occurred to me. “If none of the fae have crossed into this world for two hundred years, why do you talk and dress like a modern human?” That incongruity might have made me doubt that she was telling me the truth, if not for the fact that the fae—full fae, at least—couldn’t lie.

For me, the situation was a little more complicated.

“I’ve trained for infiltration,” she answered brusquely, and dug the tip of the dagger under my skin again. “This isn’t what we’re here to discuss. Let’s move on.”

“How did you train to interact with the modern world,” I pressed, “if none of your kind know anything about it?”

She huffed out a breath. “I enjoy human television in my spare time,” she said, teeth gritted. “I find it useful.”

“You get TV in the fae realm?”

“It’s called Faerie,” she corrected. “Names confer respect. Use them properly. And yes, what happens in your world influences our environment. The geography in our world corresponds to yours—more or less—and it changes with yours. If a building has enough importance in your world, it appears in Faerie. If a certain location is the site of atrocities in your world, we hear the echoes of the screams.”

“And you get TV.” Everything that had happened in the past few minutes, and that was the part I was hung up on. Maybe because I didn’t want to think about the rest. Like the fact that there were records placing me in a part of the world I

had never been. Or the even more inconvenient fact that I hadn't yet found a way out of this.

This time, she didn't use the dagger. She ripped the next strip of flesh off between two fingernails, quick and brutal, with none of the precision she had shown on the first two cuts. I didn't scream, but couldn't suppress a sharp gasp.

"Do not," she growled, "try to distract me." She dropped the tiny piece of myself she was holding between her fingers onto my chest. It lay there like a dead insect. I looked away.

She held up the dagger, although she didn't need the threat at this point. "Why were you in Hawthorne?"

"I wasn't," I repeated. "Think about it. You said those fae were spotted near the portal. If I forced them across, whoever saw them should have seen me too. The more likely explanation is that they were there to cross over on their own. Unless someone lied to you. Who saw them near the portal in the first place?"

"Those details are unnecessary," she snapped.

The defensiveness in her voice told me she had received the same answer when she had asked that question. "Maybe Mab sent them on a mission you didn't know about."

"I know everything that happens in the Winter Court. And I ask the questions here. If you aren't killing our kind, why did you build this room?"

Finally, an easy question. "In case one of you came after me again." I didn't intend to say the next part, but it left my mouth anyway. Maybe the constant assault of the iron, from within and without, was getting to me more than I thought. "And for me."

Vicantha frowned. "For you?"

I held up the wrist that held the watch, as well as I could with the chain still biting into it. "This does damage if I leave it on for too long. Every few weeks, I need to take it off. If I don't do that in a place where my magic can be adequately contained, it can do... considerable damage."

She sneered. "What kind of sorry half-existence is your life, that you need to bind your own magic with iron? This is why humans shouldn't have magic."

"I'm not human," I told her for the second time today.

"You're not one of us."

"I never claimed to be." Nor would I want to be, although I didn't intend to say that to her. The truths I had already given her had provoked her enough. Humanity might be rotten to the core, but the fae weren't any better. I had gotten a firsthand look at enough of their viciousness and cruelty to be certain of that. They were unrelenting in their pursuit, unforgiving in their judgment, and all too inventive in their torments.

“There’s a reason we don’t allow those like you to live,” said Vicantha. “And a reason we used to spread the changeling myth so humans would kill you for us before you grew old enough to become a threat. The human body is too weak to control the power the fae command.”

“Then it’s a good thing my mother was too smart to believe in fairy tales.”

Vicantha curled her lip. “I’ve known some smart hunting dogs in my time. I still wouldn’t let them sit at the dinner table.” She lowered the dagger, but didn’t pierce my skin this time. Instead, she rested the edge lightly along the other side of my chest. Waiting. “How many of Mab’s agents are still alive?”

“Be very careful what you call my mother. She was good enough for one of you, after all.” I met her cold eyes, and didn’t look away. “How closely did you look into those flight and apartment records? Did you even know what to look for? Television doesn’t teach you how to spot when something has been faked.”

“I examined the records closely enough to be sure they’re genuine. Lack of experience doesn’t equate to lack of intelligence. And don’t call your father one of mine. I do not belong to the Summer Court. And your father barely deserves to be called fae. Everyone knows about Oberon’s sickness.”

“You mean his taste for human women? He’s hardly the only fae to have had dalliances with humans over the centuries. You lot may see the humans as dogs, but you like them well enough when it’s convenient for you.”

“I’m not talking about his questionable desires. I’m talking about the sickness in his heart.” The blade’s edge slid softly under my skin, drawing a sharp noise from my throat before I could hold it back. “And I warned you—don’t try to distract me.”

I still didn’t see an opening. But I was going to need to find one soon, if I wanted to make it out of this with my body intact. “Don’t forget that iron inhibits healing, even for someone like me. Do enough damage, and you might kill me accidentally. And if you do, your agents will keep dying. Because I’m not the one killing them.”

“Don’t worry. I intend to be very careful with you. And we have a long way to go before I allow you to die. Did you think I was exaggerating about peeling your skin from your bones?” The dagger dug deeper—then abruptly receded. She wiped it on her pants and tucked it away. “But not with this.”

She stood and strode out of the room. I wasn’t about to waste the brief freedom from her scrutiny. I immediately started trying to struggle free. But she had endured the touch of the metal long enough to tighten the chain past the point where I could loosen it. I couldn’t even reach my watch—not that it would have done me much good, with my limbs still bound in iron.

No, I wasn’t going to be able to fight my way free. The more I thought about

it, the more certain I was that I only had one chance of getting out of this.

I didn't like it. But it would be better than dying here. I had already died more than enough for one lifetime.

Vicantha returned to the doorway, and my brief window of opportunity passed—not that it had been much of an opportunity to begin with. She took a breath to steel herself before forcing herself through the door. In her hand, she was holding the twin to the iron knife she had brought upstairs with her earlier. She had torn a scrap of fabric from the bottom of her shirt and wrapped it around her hand. Not that it seemed to be doing much good—her hand moved stiffly, like she no longer had full control of the muscles. I hoped that would work in my favor, since little enough else was.

She squatted beside me again. “How many of them did you bring down to this room?” She wasn't even trying to keep the rage out of her voice anymore. “Which of these weapons did you use on them?”

If she hadn't believed me the first few times I had told her the truth, saying it again wouldn't change anything. So I stayed silent. I wasn't quite ready to commit to my single idea. Not yet. Not until I was sure I wasn't going to find something better.

“If you won't tell me what you did to them, I'll have to use my best guess. Was it something like this?” She dug the tip of the iron knife under my skin, under the cut she had already made, and peeled another strip of skin away.

I barely felt it rip free. I was too consumed with the touch of the metal against muscle and vein, and the iron dust spidering through my blood. I bit my teeth shut on a scream, but only succeeded in transforming it into a low, deep whine. Like the dog she had accused me of being.

It would have to be now. Before I lost the ability to think. I wasn't going to find a better solution. “Wait,” I choked out.

Vicantha paused, and let the knife hover half an inch above my chest. “Ready to talk already? That was fast. Although nothing less than I would have expected from a human.”

“I'm not human,” I ground out. I sucked in a breath through frozen lungs, still deep in the grip of that one shallow cut. “But I do have resources in the human world. Money goes a long way toward smoothing one's path here, and for the past seventy-five years I've been selling historical artifacts I've ‘discovered’ from the centuries I've lived. Not only that, I know a lot more about this world than you do from your TV shows.” I had to pause to draw in another gulp of air. “I didn't do what you're saying I did. Torturing me won't change that. Keep it up for long enough, and I'll start lying to you—a then you'll be further from the truth than you were before.” I paused for half a second before my next words,

reluctant to commit myself to this path even now, half an inch away from the alternative. “Let me go, and I can help you.”

Another bluff. Most of it, at least. I didn’t have the first clue how to find her missing agents. I had lived a long life, it was true, but those centuries had only taught me two things about the human world: how to get myself killed by doing stupid things, and how to live a life of luxury by making smarter decisions. But the last part was true, as far as it went. I could help her. As limited as that help might be. And I would—for as long as it took me to buy myself a moment of inattention from her, so I could slip away.

For a second, Vicantha looked like she was considering my offer. Then she shook her head. “Stalling again. I warned you not to do that.” She lowered the knife.

I thrashed against my bonds, my body no longer under my control. But I managed to retain enough presence of mind to speak. “What if I’m telling the truth?”

The knife paused a fraction of an inch from my flesh. “You’re not. I’ve seen the evidence. Including this room.” But I thought I detected the slightest hint of doubt in her voice. And she hadn’t cut me again yet.

I took advantage of the reprieve, and pressed on. “But what if I am? What if you can’t get anything useful from me? What’s your backup plan? Do you have one?”

I knew I wasn’t imagining her hesitation now.

She brought the knife up to my neck. I tried not to flinch back as the tip met the hollow of my throat. I didn’t succeed.

“If I let you go,” she said, inches from my face, “you will help me find them?”

I tried to speak as though I didn’t have a poisoned knife at my throat. “I have resources and knowledge at my disposal that you could find very useful.”

The knife pressed deeper, not quite breaking the skin. “Say it,” she challenged.

I smiled through the pain. “You’ve done your research.”

It was like I said—the fae couldn’t lie. It was nearly impossible for them to force an untruth from their lips, and if they did manage it, their own magic would turn on them and consume them from the inside. I had never seen it happen, but from what I had been told, it was a crueler death than iron poisoning. I had felt the first stages of it, and that had been more than enough.

Me, on the other hand... I could lie all I wanted. As long as it was in a purely informal capacity. What I couldn’t do was break my word. If I went back on a contract, written or verbal—and my magic stretched the definition of “contract”

far too much for my liking—I would meet the same fate. And only fulfilling my promise would keep the sickness from killing me. A couple of close calls early on had taught me that the hard way.

“Promise me,” said Vicantha. “Promise me you will find Mab’s missing agents for me.”

“I can’t promise that.”

“If you’re telling the truth,” said Vicantha, wincing as though it caused her physical pain to admit that possibility, “you have no control over whether they’re dead or alive. But you can promise me you’ll get me answers. Or I can go back to carving those answers out of your flesh.”

“What I mean is, I don’t know if I’ll be able to find the information you’re looking for. This isn’t my area of expertise.” I didn’t want to admit to that. I didn’t want her to decide this deal wasn’t worth her time. I had already gotten too close a look at the alternative. But I wanted to be eaten alive by my own magic even less.

“I thought saving lives was what you did,” Vicantha said with a sneer. “Everyone who knows your name knows you inherited your father’s sickness.”

“I don’t do that anymore. And in any case, I have no desire to save any agents of the Winter Court. Or Summer, either. What is there to save? The fae are soulless bundles of cruelty and spite, wrapped in mortal skin.” Not the brightest thing to say to someone who was holding me at knifepoint. The double dose of iron dust must have compromised my judgment.

Either that, or hearing her bring up my past mistakes had rattled me that much.

“Say that again,” said Vicantha, “and I’ll slit your throat now and see if the stories about your healing capacity are exaggerated.”

“If they are, you’ll have lost your only lead.”

“If what you want me to believe is true, and you know nothing about the disappearances, I won’t have lost anything of importance. And I will not have you disrespecting the lives of my people—the people you probably killed.” Her voice was getting louder. “You dare to call us soulless? We have sacred fire running through our veins. Your greatest accomplishment was crawling out of the primordial ooze. When one of you gets a taste of spiritual power, you’re forced to keep it in chains so it won’t destroy you. And yet you’ll die again and again to save human lives, but refuse to lower yourself to do the same for one of us?” Her anger rose in a hot spiral, filling the room like a tangible thing. If this place hadn’t been suppressing her magic, she would have blown me away in a hurricane by now.

One slip of the tongue, one brief loosening of the leash I held on my centuries

of resentment, and I was losing her. And possibly my chance of making it out of this alive. “One lead,” I gasped, before the knife could pierce my skin. “I promise you. I’ll find you one lead that will get you closer to finding Mab’s missing agents.”

She pulled the knife away. I couldn’t stop myself from letting out an audible sigh of relief.

“One lead,” she repeated. “Within a day.”

I shook my head. “It’ll take me most of a day just to get to Massachusetts. You’ll have your lead inside of a week.”

“Three days.”

I didn’t like it. But the look in her eyes told me I wasn’t going to get a better offer. “Three days,” I agreed.

“And you will not harm me.”

“I will not *intentionally* harm you,” I said. “Not before I give you the information I promised.”

Vicantha raised an eyebrow. “Are you planning on attacking me afterward?”

“I don’t know what you’re planning after I hand over whatever I find,” I said. “I have to be ready for anything.”

Vicantha frowned in thought. The seconds stretched by. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the knife in her hand.

Finally, she nodded. “I accept.”

At her words, I felt the verbal contract settle over me like a weight.

I held out my wrists to her. “You can start by letting me out of these chains, so I can check my accounts. Just in case I can see where those false records came from. After that, I’ll book a flight.”

She wrapped the scrap of fabric tighter around her hand before she started undoing the chains. She eyed me warily as she loosened the bonds, like she thought I might attack now that she didn’t have a weapon in her hand. But she wasn’t in any danger. If I killed her, I wouldn’t be able to give her the information I had promised, which meant I would have no way of avoiding a horrible death of my own.

“How will I be able to contact you once I’m in Hawthorne?” I asked. “I doubt you have a cell phone—too much iron.”

Vicantha paused, letting the length of chain slipped from her fingers. “Were you under the impression that I would let you do this unsupervised?”

“I’m on your leash now, whether you’re there to watch me or not. The promise is binding.”

She shook her head. “I don’t trust that you haven’t left yourself a way to wiggle out of it.”

If only I had. Maybe if I hadn't been weak from pain and the poison in my veins, maybe if she hadn't been holding a knife to my throat, I would have been able to think of a loophole to work into my words. But I had been desperate, and I had given her exactly what she had asked for.

But telling her that wouldn't convince her. "Did you fly here?" I asked instead.

"Do you mean on an airplane?"

I blinked. "Is there an alternative?"

"I didn't fly," she said, without answering the question. "There's a minor Faerie portal a couple of hours from here, for those who know how to convince it to open."

"Then let me explain airplanes to you," I said. "They're gigantic tubes of metal, and once a plane takes off, there's no way out until you land. A flight to Massachusetts should take around twelve hours, if I'm remembering my geography correctly. If what I know about the fae is true, by the end of that time you'll feel like you're the one getting your skin peeled off. How do you feel standing in this room? How do you think you would feel after twelve hours?"

She gave a full-body shudder. "I do what I must do in Mab's service."

"Go through the portal," I urged. "Meet me in Hawthorne. That way you won't be half-dead when you get there. You'll be in a lot better shape to track down those missing agents." And maybe, by the time I touched down in Massachusetts, I would have found that loophole she thought was hiding in my promise.

For a second, I thought she might say yes. But then her eyes hardened with resolve, and she shook her head. "You're not leaving my sight until your promise is fulfilled."

It had been worth a try. I held out my wrists again, reminding her to finish freeing me, and resigned myself to the prospect of a long and unpleasant flight.

Chapter 3

A flight attendant, concern creasing her face, leaned down and held out a vomit bag to Vicantha. She was the third one to do so. Face green and eyes half-shut, Vicantha shook her head in silent refusal. From the look of it, she was biting her lip too hard to answer out loud.

The flight attendant waited another few seconds, then tucked the bag away and continued down the aisle, casting one last worried look over her shoulder at us. I gave her what I hoped was a reassuring smile, although it wasn't easy. I might not have been as sensitive to the metal surrounding us as Vicantha, but that didn't mean I was having an easy time of it. There was a reason I hadn't left Hawaii in years, and it wasn't just because the climate suited me.

I wasn't sure Vicantha even noticed the flight attendant was gone. Her eyes had closed all the way now, but I knew she wasn't sleeping. If she had been, she wouldn't have been able to dig her fingernails that deeply into her legs.

I might have felt more sympathy for her if I hadn't been her prisoner.

The one bright side to this was, we weren't stuck in economy class. I stayed off planes whenever possible, but when I was forced to fly, it was first class all the way. But all the extra legroom in the world couldn't make up for the suffocating ache of the thick metal walls to all sides. Not only that, but someone had thought it was a good idea to turn the air conditioning up as high as it would go, and I had the misfortune of sitting directly under a vent that was stuck in the "on" position. Cold, stale-smelling air had been blasting me in the face since I had sat down almost half a day ago.

Vicantha had used her magic to get herself through security. Lucky for us both, she had air magic, which tended to confer a gift for illusions and other mental magics along with the ability to throw people around with gusts of wind. The brief bite of my iron knife had done a little damage—her magic was still weak enough to make the security agent scrutinize her ID for a few seconds too long. But she had shrugged off the injury better than I had expected, well enough to get herself through the security line—and camouflage my watch for me so I could walk through without incident. I suspected in the iron dust in my blood was still suppressing my magic enough that it wouldn't have been a problem if I had needed to take it off, but in a crowded airport, I hadn't wanted to take the risk.

The injury was still hurting her, though—I could tell every time she shifted her arm. The walls of the plane were inhibiting it from healing. That had to have

been contributing to her general misery. But there was nothing I could do for her—and even if I could have, I saw no reason to offer her any help. She had chosen to get on this plane. She had chosen to make me a prisoner of my own words. As far as I was concerned, she had earned every consequence of those choices. And yet, even though I tried to muster up some small sense of vindictive pleasure when I looked at her suffering face, I couldn't. Even with the wounds she had given me still throbbing under my shirt. Even with the weight of my promise pressing down on my soul. I had no desire to see her in pain. All I wanted was to get out of this with body and soul intact, and get back to my life.

And I wasn't any closer than I had been when I had stepped onto the plane. I frowned at my laptop, which I had open on the tray in front of me. Back at the house, I had decided to save precious time by grabbing tickets for the next flight out and going over my accounts while I was in the air. Free wifi—another benefit to first class. I had hoped to find an answer in the mountains of aliases and transactions and dollar amounts. But I had gone over everything by now, and while I had discovered the false transactions that had sent Vicantha after me, that didn't give me any clue as to who had set me up, or why. All I could say for sure was that the transactions she had seen did actually exist. On paper, I was a rent-paying resident of Hawthorne, Massachusetts, as well as a frequent visitor.

Which only left me more confused than I had been before.

Just finding the transactions had taken some doing. The payments had all been made from an account I had forgotten I had—one I had only used once, to transfer money from my previous main alias to this one, once that former version of myself had lived long enough for his longevity to start looking suspicious. It was no surprise that someone had managed to get into it without my noticing. I hadn't so much checked the balance in decades.

It looked like someone had transferred a large sum of money into the account six months ago, then used it to rent the apartment and by the flights in question. Among other things. There were restaurant bills, tickets for a couple of plays in Boston, the works. Whoever had set this up, they had been thorough. Not only that, they had set me up from the beginning. The false transactions had started a few days before what Vicantha had given as the date of the first disappearance.

My other accounts, of course, told a different story. When I had realized what kind of counterevidence I had at my disposal, I had applauded myself silently for my expensive tastes as I had tilted the laptop toward Vicantha—who had still been able to keep her eyes open at that point—and shown her restaurant bills from closer to home, charges from high-end clothing stores, and a few tickets for museums and scuba-diving expeditions from the times I had gotten bored and decided to play the tourist game. But Vicantha hadn't been impressed. As she

had pointed out, if both sets of records existed, there was no way of knowing which ones were real and which were the fakes. My argument that no one with fae blood would set foot on an airplane unless they had no other choice didn't do much to sway her. It didn't help that she had been doing plenty of swaying of her own by then, rocking back and forth and clutching her stomach. The longer the flight dragged on, and the worse she felt, the worse her mood became.

Now I was studying the town of Hawthorne itself. It was an interesting place, to say the least. From what I had been able to glean from a few hours of internet browsing, the town had a reputation for unexplained happenings—hauntings, the occasional Bigfoot sighting, even a report of a leprechaun. It seemed everyone who had been to Hawthorne knew someone there who had seen a ghost, or lost objects they knew they couldn't have misplaced, or heard voices out of nowhere. It was also known for bringing its residents wild swings of luck—both good and bad. In Hawthorne, it was commonplace for businesses to go from struggling to wildly successful in a matter of days—and crash equally abruptly, for as little reason.

The more I looked, the clearer a picture emerged. And that picture didn't make me any more enthusiastic about our destination. When people went looking for magic and mystery in New England, Salem was the town that got all the attention, where the locals made a lucrative game out of it. People would drive up to Salem for a day, visit a half-dozen witch-themed shops, and go home smiling and clutching their souvenirs. But when Hawthorne came up in conversation, those same people would laugh nervously and change the subject. They would take the long way around to make sure they didn't drive through, although few would admit to the reason. Instead, they would give an excuse like, "I know this way is longer, but I want to make sure I can visit that little restaurant my aunt told me about."

I closed the latest page I had been reading—a woman's account of her great-grandmother's supposed love affair with a ghost in Hawthorne a hundred years ago—and tapped Vicantha's shoulder to get her attention. Her whole body jerked. Her hands clamped down on my wrist so hard that for half a second, I was afraid she might tear my arm in two.

I tried to tug my hand away. As soon as she released her grip, I pulled it back to my lap. I gestured toward the laptop, which now showed a site titled *Weird Hawthorne*. "Do these things happen in all places near Faerie portals?"

"What things?" From the sound of it, Vicantha should have accepted that vomit bag.

I started to edge away from her, then reconsidered when I realized that if I moved any further away, it would put me up against the wall. Yes, there was a

layer of plastic between me and the bones of the aircraft, but that plastic was too thin for comfort.

“Strange swings of luck,” I answered. “Supernatural occurrences.”

“Only... major portals,” Vicantha mumbled. “Humans... used to have the sense... to stay away.”

I switched tabs. If it was a known consequence of the portal, reading about “weird Hawthorne” wasn’t going to get me anything I didn’t already know. “What were the names of those missing agents again?”

In her queasy voice, Vicantha listed off five long and flowing fae names. I didn’t have to look at the social media site I had open in front of me to know I wouldn’t find anything like those names in the human world. But I looked anyway, killing another few minutes browsing through Hawthorne-specific communities, creating fake accounts to get myself in when necessary.

“Do you have any idea what they were going by in the human world?” I asked. I couldn’t be the only one who went by an alias. Or several.

Vicantha managed to shoot me a glare through her slitted eyes. “Still... not convinced... they were here voluntarily. Let alone here long enough to establish false identities.” Her glare hardened, even though I hadn’t given any reaction. “And don’t use that term again.”

I thought back over what I had said, and frowned. “What term?”

“Human world. It was ours first. You...” She winced and clutched her belly as the plane lurched. “You made us retreat from this world to Faerie, when you crawled from the muck and started spreading over the land like an infection.”

“If I have my history right, you were born from the magic of Faerie,” I said. “It’s not our fault you decided you liked the look of our world better. And you had a long time to rule over the humans before they gained the ability to defend themselves. I’m not old enough to remember your glory days—not quite—but my family had plenty of stories. If we’re bringing up old resentments, I’m sure the humans could more than match you.”

“Still not your world. Don’t speak as if it is. Names confer respect. Humanity hasn’t earned it.”

“What did you call this world when you ruled it?” I asked.

Vicantha gave as much of a shrug as she could without shifting position. “Nothing. It was the world. Faerie was only ever its spiritual echo. It was never meant to be—” Whatever she had planned on saying next was cut off when she wrapped her arms around herself, keening softly. The plane hadn’t lurched again, but I understood what she was feeling. I could feel it too, even if only as the slightest echo of what she was experiencing. With every hour, with every minute, the walls were pressing closer. My chest was tight enough that every

breath felt like a minor achievement.

The white-haired lady in the seat across from us looked over with a concerned frown. “Are you all right? Do you need a drink of water?”

“Attend to your own business, mortal,” Vicantha snapped, cheeks flushed with what I guessed was embarrassment at having shown weakness—in front of a human, no less. “This is not your concern.” Then she winced, as if realizing too late that her instinctive response hadn’t been the correct one. “I’m all right. I’m not used to flying.”

The woman drew back as far as she could without bumping into her seatmate. She grabbed the magazine from the pocket in front of her, opened it on her lap—upside down—and stared down at it, as if trying to prove to Vicantha that she was no threat. Her hands shook.

A flight attendant rushed up to us, drawn by the raised voices. “Is everything all right over here?” She took one look at Vicantha and held out yet another vomit bag.

“We’re fine,” I said hastily, before Vicantha could speak.

She nodded, clearly unconvinced. But the woman across from us didn’t say anything, so in the end, all the flight attendant said was, “You should put your laptop away. We’ll be landing soon.”

The skin around the wounds on my chest stretched painfully as I bent to slip the laptop back into my bag. Even after I got off the plane, there was no telling how long it would take them to heal, not with the remnants of the iron dust still floating around in my veins. I had no idea how long it would take to wear off, since I had never been masochistic enough to test it on myself. What I wanted was to soak away my aches in a hot tub, a White Russian or several beside me, and then sleep until noon and wake with the sun beating down on me full-force through the skylight. What I was going to get was Massachusetts in winter and Vicantha’s constant presence beside me.

Three days, I reminded myself. Three days before I had my life back.

As long as I managed to pull off something I had never done before, and find these missing fae. Otherwise, three days from now I would be in the process of dying one of the cruelest deaths imaginable as my own magic turned on me.

We narrowly managed to land without Vicantha losing the contents of her stomach. But by the time we touched down at Logan, violent jerks were running through her body, once every few seconds. She had her knees pulled up to her chest. When a flight attendant told her to put her feet down, she snarled with such force that the woman jogged back down the aisle without another word, feet quick and head ducked low.

I couldn’t look at Vicantha without feeling my body lock up in sympathetic

pain. I stared out the window instead.

I kept reminding myself that she had chosen this.

When the doors opened, we joined the press of people streaming off the plane. For a moment, I had the thought of losing her in the crowd. Then, of course, I remembered that if I lost track of her and cost myself the ability to give her the information, it wouldn't be an escape so much as an unnecessarily painful form of suicide. But apparently she hadn't connected those same dots in her head. As soon as we stepped off the plane and the surging crowd behind us threatened to break us apart, she clamped her hand down on my wrist. Her fingernails dug in so hard I was surprised when I looked down and didn't see droplets of blood pooling around them. Every touch of her fingertips was a tiny pinprick of ice.

The airport we had flown out of had been sunny and expansive, designed to put tourists at ease and lull them into spending their money. Logan, on the other hand, reminded me of a well-worn carpet, frayed at the edges and discolored from years of road dust, in the hallway of a building where important decisions were made about people's stock portfolios. That was the best way I could think to describe the strange but somehow logical mix of shabbiness and corporate efficiency. Every few minutes, an announcement about flights delayed due to snow echoed off the walls, drowned out by shouts and hurrying footsteps. The air smelled like fish, which didn't make much sense to me until we passed a sit-down seafood restaurant that seemed to be doing a brisk business.

"We'll need to make arrangements for temporary accommodations," said Vicantha as we followed the signs for the exit. Her voice still sounded shaky. "What do you call them? Hotels?"

I shook my head. "Already taken care of. I've rented us an apartment, fully furnished."

"I thought apartments were for long-term use."

"I looked into the hotels in Hawthorne, while we were on the plane," I said. "They're... adequate. At best. As it turns out, not that many people want to plan a vacation to a town best known for the effects of its resident Faerie portal. If I'm going to spend the next few days as your prisoner, I plan to do it in comfort." I gestured toward a bench, the first wooden one we had passed. "Let's sit for a minute. I'll hire us a driver."

Vicantha shook her head, then winced at the movement. "No. We need to get out of this building." Her eyes darted toward the metal frames of the signs hanging above us, the grate in front of a closed store, the steps of the escalator we were headed straight toward. Her nails dug harder into my wrist. "It's too much. We have to get out."

We stopped just in front of the escalator. I looked around for another sign marked *EXIT*, one that didn't lead down those steps. Next to me, I saw Vicantha doing the same. Neither of us saw anything.

Vicantha took a deep breath, and yanked me forward, onto the moving metal stairway.

The crowd pressed past us as people tried to shave an extra few minutes off the walk. I tried to join them, but couldn't get past the family with two strollers blocking our way. Someone crashed into me from behind, and the breath rushed out of my lungs as I slammed against the handrail. The strip of metal below the rubber rail brushed my arm, and I drew back a sharp hiss as if I had touched a burning coal.

At the same moment, Vicantha drew in a strangled gasp. She went rigid. Her nails dug even deeper as her breathing paused with a choking jerk.

The person who had bumped into me shoved something into my hand. Then he—or she, I couldn't see well enough to say—took off at a run through the crowd, collecting shouts of outrage from jostled travelers on the way.

My fingers felt sticky and wet. I raised my hand—and quickly dropped it again. I pressed it up against the railing, metal and all, to hide the unwanted gift as well as possible.

I was holding a bloody knife. And the blood was fae blue.

But I hadn't been quick enough—not for Vicantha, anyway. With a movement quicker than I could follow, she snatched it away. “What... did you... do?”

Her voice sounded weaker than it had on the plane. That wasn't right. Even considering the escalator underneath her feet, she shouldn't have been feeling worse than she had when she had been entirely enclosed in metal.

Then I looked down, and saw the spreading circle of wetness creeping across the side of her black shirt. And the dark blue drips on the escalator steps.

It wasn't hard to figure out what had just happened. Someone had stabbed Vicantha, and placed the knife in my hand before running away. Whoever it had been, they wanted her dead, and me blamed for it.

And unless I had encountered my own run of monumental bad luck before so much as setting foot in Hawthorne, I was guessing it had to do with the reason someone had decided to frame me for the disappearance of five Winter Court agents.

I quickly considered making a run for it while Vicantha was slowed down by her wound, and just as quickly dismissed the idea, for the same reasons I had decided not to try to lose her in the crowd. Besides, I wasn't sure I could have if I had tried. Her fingers only dug deeper as she dragged me at lightning speed down the escalator, no longer concerned with propriety or avoiding notice. We

amassed our own small collection of yells, but they quickly disappeared behind us as Vicantha and I hurried down the next corridor.

“You know you’ll die if you break your promise,” said Vicantha. With a labored breath, she stumbled, clutching her free hand to her side. “Is keeping me from finding the missing agents worth your life? I should have known better than to entertain the possibility that you were telling the truth about not being involved.” She lifted her hand from her wound to raise the knife, as if she was considering driving it through my heart.

I tried to pull away, but couldn’t. “Keep it down,” I said, with a glance around us to make sure airport security wasn’t anywhere nearby. “And don’t wave that around.” Ahead of us, I spotted a sign for a family bathroom. I dragged her inside and locked the door.

As soon as the lock clicked shut, Vicantha spun and slammed me against the tile wall. The edge of the knife tickled the skin of my throat. “What game are you playing?” she demanded. “Why bring me all the way here only to kill me? Did you want to see me suffer on the airplane? Was it amusing to you?”

My gaze rested on the weapon—then traveled past it. “Your hand.”

Vicantha looked down at her hands, then scowled, like I had tricked her into something. “What about it?”

“No blisters,” I said. And the metal against my throat was causing me no pain. “There’s no iron in that weapon.”

Vicantha studied her hand again, slowly and carefully this time. Without dropping the blade from my throat, she pulled up her shirt and examined the wound. Even with so much iron in the building all around us, it was already closed up and well on its way to disappearing.

“Explain yourself,” she ordered. “Why stab me with a knife you knew wouldn’t kill me? You didn’t even try to incapacitate me by going for a vital organ.”

“You tell me.” I tried not to think about the fact that the weapon in question was now at my own throat, and she was showing no sign of lowering it. “Why would I do that? For that matter, how did I get it through security? Even if I had enough control over my magic to create that kind of illusion, I’m still wearing my watch. I’m sure you can sense the iron in the watch well enough to know it’s no illusion.”

Vicantha frowned at the knife, but still didn’t lower it.

“Someone wants you to believe I’m responsible for those disappearances,” I said. “They bought those plane tickets in my name. They rented the apartment. And a minute ago, they stabbed you and shoved this weapon into my hands.”

For a long moment, Vicantha held herself perfectly still, the blade still

pressed against my throat. “A plausible theory,” she finally said—somewhat reluctantly, I thought.

“Someone stumbled into me a second before the attack,” I said. “I didn’t get a look at them—they were gone too fast. But from the lack of iron in the weapon, I would guess fae.” My mind worked as I spoke. “It would have made more sense to use an iron weapon, and make the wound shallow enough that you probably wouldn’t die of iron poisoning. That would make it look like a much more believable assassination attempt. If they used a non-iron weapon, it was because they had no choice.”

Vicantha shook her head. “There are no other fae in this world. There haven’t been for two hundred years.”

“Except for you,” I pointed out. “And the five who went missing.”

Vicantha scowled at the floor. “If they’re responsible for the disappearances, why not simply kill me? They can clearly get to me easily enough. Why go to the trouble of framing you instead?”

“Maybe because you’re too important to kill. If you die, they draw Mab’s attention. They don’t want that. What they want is for you to kill me, assume you’ve solved the problem, and go back to Faerie, leaving them to keep on doing... whatever it is they’re doing.”

Abruptly, Vicantha lowered the knife and stepped back. She reached for the doorknob, but drew back in pain the second her fingertips brushed it.

“Not so fast.” I plucked the knife from her hands. “Wash your hands first. You can’t go out there like that. It would attract attention.”

Vicantha held her breath and grasped the doorknob. She left glistening blue fingerprints across the metal as she yanked the door open. “You think I care about the human authorities? If your theory is correct, whoever is responsible is out there right now.”

I slammed the door shut before she could step outside. It creaked and rattled on its hinges. “They’re long gone by now. Lost in the crowd.”

“Are you suggesting we let them go?”

“I’m saying we should get to Hawthorne and look into these missing fae,” I said. “However difficult it might be to find them, it will be easier than combing through that crowd for someone who will be doing their best not to be found.” I gave a thin smile. “Besides, if they want to frame me this badly, they may come to us again before too long anyway. Let’s be ready for them when they do.”

Chapter 4

My assistant had done a good job of getting the apartment furnished on such short notice. I hadn't given him much in the way of direction, just told him to make it comfortable. He had. My home in Hawaii was filled with sleek, modern furniture—although I had made sure anything designed to be sat on or slept in was plush enough to feel suitably luxurious for the price, because unlike some people with more money than sense, I valued function over form. But that style wouldn't have worked in Hawthorne, with its solid brick buildings and narrow streets. My assistant must have figured that out simply from the photos of the apartment, because instead, he had made the place gloriously cozy.

The table was a dark, rich wood that made me want to run my hand along it every time I passed by. The living room, small but not cramped, was adorned with an enormous puffy couch that took up most of one wall, plus two chairs that looked like twin quilted marshmallows. In both bedrooms, the beds were draped with thick woolen blankets—at least three each. To say the apartment was more modest than my home would have been a vast understatement. Nestled above a convenience store, it was six hundred square feet compared with my house's nearly six thousand. But the choice of decor made the size work for it rather than against it.

But I didn't get much time to appreciate it before falling straight into bed. I knew that wasn't a good idea. The sky was still light outside, and going to bed during daylight hours was the exact wrong way to deal with jet lag. But I hadn't slept on the plane, and I still felt weak and sluggish from the last of the iron in my bloodstream... not to mention my body's efforts to heal the wounds Vicantha had given me. So when Vicantha asked a question I could barely process about where to start looking for information, I mumbled something about doing it tomorrow, and fell asleep wrapped in all three blankets before she could voice her objections.

I woke with the sun streaming through the window. The sun was my first clue that I wasn't home in bed. The light looked wrong. Colder. And I felt like I had a large animal sitting on me—a sheep, from the smell of it.

I reached a hand up out of the covers, and ran my hands across thick wool. The memories of the past day came back to me like a lead weight to the head. With a groan, I pushed the blankets aside—and instantly grabbed for them again. I wrapped them around my body as I sat up. The apartment was freezing. When my assistant had been getting the place set up, hadn't he remembered to have

someone connect the heat?

The good news was, my body's exhaustion had kept me knocked out long enough to sleep through my jet lag. From what I could see of the sky, the position of the sun suggested that this was about the time when the rest of the world would be waking up. A glance at my watch confirmed it. Even though my body was screaming at me that it was too early to be awake.

"Is this excessive need for sleep a human characteristic?" Vicantha asked.

I tensed at the sound of her voice, and scanned the room. She was standing in the doorway, arms crossed. Watching me.

I hadn't thought to lock the bedroom door. Or I had, and she had found a way in anyway. I had slept for the better part of a day, lying here unconscious and vulnerable with her only a few feet away. If she had wanted to kill me, she could have done so at any time, and I wouldn't have so much as gotten the chance to fight back.

Of course, if she had killed me, she would be back where she had started when it came to getting the information she needed. I supposed that was one reason to be grateful for the leash she had me on.

"How long have you been standing there?" I asked. Had the creak of the door been what had woken me? Or had she been there in the doorway for longer than that, studying me while I slept?

The corners of her lips tilted up in cold amusement. "I won't hurt you. I still need you."

I dragged myself out of bed, trying to keep the blankets wrapped around my body like robes. My foot caught on one, and I stumbled, narrowly avoiding pitching facefirst onto the hardwood floor. I let the blankets fall, wrapped my arms around my chest, and stared darkly at the cold and silent radiator. "What happened to the heat?"

"I turned it down," said Vicantha. "It was boiling in here."

I turned my glare on her. "Turn it back up."

"You had it set to mimic summer in Hawaii," said Vicantha. "A waste of energy. Besides, we've only just escaped that scorching hellpit. I have no desire to recreate it here, now that we've finally reached a civilized climate."

A frigid breeze drifted past her through the doorway, making me sorely regret letting the blankets fall. A car honked outside, louder than it should have been from up here on the second floor. I tilted my head, trying to see past her. "Did you open the windows?"

"I had to do something to cool the place down. I couldn't sleep." She was standing directly in the path of the breeze, but she didn't show the slightest hint of discomfort.

I strode past her and slammed the windows shut. Then I cranked the thermostat up. Vicantha started to reach for it, then shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. We’re leaving anyway. We have work to do.”

“Not without a good breakfast. Time limit or not, I’m not traipsing around the city on an empty stomach.” I walked into the kitchen. “Let’s see what the fridge is stocked with.”

Before I could reach for the handle, Vicantha shoved something hard and rectangular into my hands. A slick wrapper crinkled under my fingers. I looked down at it. It was a protein bar. “Berry Blast” flavor, whatever that meant—nothing good, I was sure. I wrinkled my nose.

“Ration bar,” said Vicantha. “Quick and functional. One of the few good things this world has to offer.” She marched past me and threw the apartment door open. “Now let’s go.”

I didn’t get her to agree to a civilized breakfast. But I did talk her into pausing for a few minutes while I got myself a change of clothes. All the clothes I had packed, of course, were meant for summer. I had blocked the full understanding of what winter in Massachusetts meant out of my mind. But my assistant had anticipated this. The closet was well-stocked, with clothes that were both warm and high-quality. After a moment of consideration, I put on a pair of soft jeans that hugged my legs, a black silk button-down shirt, and a sleek gray coat made out of something thick and magical that almost made me forget that it was winter outside and my keeper had thrown the windows open in the night. Almost.

Vicantha was wearing the same cargo pants and turtleneck she had worn on the plane. At least I thought so at first, until I noticed the lack of dried blood—not to mention the smooth, unbroken material where the knife slice should have been. Not the same outfit, then. Just an identical one. I had a feeling that if I took a look through her bag, I would find several more black cargo pants and turtlenecks, and nothing else.

She didn’t even put on a coat as we left the apartment. I watched her closely for a hint of discomfort as we walked down the creaky stairs and stepped out into the cold. But she only smiled and tilted her head into the wind.

We started down the sidewalk together. She didn’t hold onto my wrist this time, but she kept her hand close enough that she was ready if I tried to run. Not that I would. Now that my head was clearer after a good night’s sleep, I was even less willing to face the consequences of breaking my word.

The sky was clear and bright. The wind was erratic, always dying down enough to get my hopes up only to punch me in the face with knuckles of ice again a few seconds later. With every punch, Vicantha’s small smile grew larger. It was almost enough to stop her from wincing every time we passed something

made of metal—a fire hydrant, a street sign, a car with a broken muffler rattling past. Almost, but not quite. I was beginning to see why the fae had abandoned our world.

The streets were barely wide enough for two cars to safely pass one another, and even the sidewalks felt claustrophobically narrow. That wasn't helped by the tall brick buildings that closed in on either side. The streets weren't laid out in any way that made sense. Most of them weren't even at right angles to each other. They were placed at odd angles that put me in mind of an occult sigil—the geometry was ever so slightly *wrong*.

Everything about the town looked faded—the sides of the brick walls with their worn-away painted advertisements, the broken chain-link fences. The closing off of Faerie from the human world hadn't been kind to Hawthorne. Its wild swings of luck seemed to have gotten stuck at the low end somewhere along the line.

“Where shall we start?” asked Vicantha, after we had walked silently for a few blocks.

“I'm still getting the lay of the land.” I couldn't admit that I didn't have the first clue where to start. I didn't know what her reaction would be if she found out I had exaggerated my ability to help, but I didn't think she was likely to release me from my promise and send me on my way.

But although I didn't know how to track down someone who had gone missing—let alone someone who didn't belong in this world in the first place—I did have experience starting over in a new place. I had taken on many identities over the centuries, and a good portion of those had been hastily cobbled together from nothing after my previous self's supposed sudden demise. Maybe I could use that knowledge to retrace the steps of the missing fae agents.

“Let's assume they came voluntarily,” I said, thinking aloud.

“That's a significant assumption. Loyal agents of Mab would not have broken the ban. And if they were disloyal, Mab would have washed her hands of them, rather than send me after them.”

If she wasn't going to bring up the possibility that Mab had sent them to the human world and neglected to tell her, I doubted it was because she didn't remember me raising that suggestion yesterday. So I didn't bring it up again. “Let's assume they came voluntarily,” I repeated instead. “They would need to fit in as quickly as possible. To start, at minimum, they would need clothing, currency, and a place to live.”

Vicantha tilted her head, listening rapidly, her gaze fixed so intently on me that I wouldn't have been surprised if she tripped over a curb. She thought I was dispensing genuine wisdom. Who knew, maybe I was. The more I thought about

it, the more convinced I became that this was the right place to start. “Tracking down where they were living won’t work. Rental records aren’t that easy to access. Asking around at clothing stores is an option, but isn’t likely to get us very far—an employee isn’t likely to remember a single customer, especially from months ago. Employment—that’s where we should look first. Unless they were paying their way in fairy gold—”

“A myth,” Vicantha interrupted. “Something we once found it useful to promise certain humans, in exchange for their cooperation. Usually those deals never reached the point where we would have been obligated to make good on our promise.”

“They would need money,” I said. “And with no work experience, the options available to them would have been limited.” My steps sped up. For the first time since I had spotted Vicantha at the beach, I felt a flicker of optimism. “Let’s see who’s hiring.”

Our first stop was Lydia’s, a small pizza place sandwiched between a sign maker and a shuttered office for a defunct political campaign. There was a *Now Hiring* sign in the window, and from the look of it, it had been there for a while. The door chimed as we stepped inside. I discreetly scanned the cramped room—only big enough for three tables and a soda machine—for anyone with pointed ears or the subtly alien angular slenderness of the fae. But the woman behind the counter had a pear-shaped human build, and her gray-streaked hair was pulled back into a braid, revealing the rounded slopes of human ears. There was no one else in the restaurant.

Which, after I got a look at the menu, didn’t surprise me. If I was reading the chalkboard behind her head correctly, this place only sold one type of pizza, and it was... probably an acquired taste, to put it charitably. I had long since learned to enjoy the ever-controversial pineapple pizza, but I drew the line at... I squinted to make sure I was reading it correctly... Fruity Puffs and cream cheese.

“You going to order?” the woman at the counter prompted after a few seconds, when neither of us moved or spoke.

Vicantha strode up to the counter and slammed both hands down. “We need to know who you’ve employed or spoken to about potential employment for the past six months. Let us examine your records. Photos would be preferable.”

I could feel the chill as the woman shut down. She crossed her arms over her chest. “Let me guess. Immigration.”

If Vicantha ruined this, it would make it that much less likely for me to get her the information she needed before my clock ran out. I positioned myself between Vicantha and the counter before either she or the woman could say

anything else. “We’re looking for her sister,” I said, with what I hoped was a convincing smile. If I remembered correctly, three of the missing fae had been women, which meant saying we were looking for a woman gave a slightly better odds. “She ran away from home about six months ago. She’s been living under a fake name. But the two of them look alike. Well, as much as sisters ever do.” I shot Vicantha a questioning look. Most Winter fae tended to come from roughly the same mold, but there was still enough variation that I didn’t know whether I was giving the woman useful information.

“I wasn’t told what they look like,” Vicantha murmured to me in answer.

Well, it was still a decent place to start. I turned back to the human woman, hoping she hadn’t heard Vicantha’s aside. “She might have acted... odd,” I continued. “She’s... not used to being on her own.”

At that, the woman softened a little. She dropped her arms back to her sides. “I hear you. I’ve got a cousin like that. I wish I could help, I really do, but I haven’t hired anyone in the past six months but two high school students. Not many people come to Hawthorne looking for a job these days.”

“No one else came looking?” Vicantha pressed. “No one at all?”

The woman shrugged. “Not that I can remember, anyway. I can’t tell you for sure.”

Vicantha leaned in, slow and sinuous. “Let me refresh your memory.”

The woman stepped back, alarm rising in her eyes. I grabbed Vicantha’s arm before she could do whatever she was planning. As my fingers tightened around her bicep, I felt a tingling in my veins. I was getting too close to breaking the promise I had made not to harm her. If I kept this up, the tingling would turn to burning, like I had peeled back my skin and rubbed hot sauce underneath. I let her go.

The woman eyed Vicantha warily. She could sense the danger, I knew, even if she didn’t understand the extent of it. “I hope you find her. Leave me your phone number, and I’ll call you if I hear anything.” She took another step back as Vicantha’s gaze burned into her. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

I drew in a long, steady breath, not daring to take my eyes from Vicantha. “You could explain this menu,” I said lightly, trying to clear the tension from the air. “Is this a Massachusetts thing?”

The woman laughed, although she still sounded far from relaxed. “No, this is a me thing. Or a Hawthorne thing. When I got the money to open my restaurant, I came to Hawthorne because it was the only place the rent was low enough. The night before we were set to open, I went to sleep, dreamed all night, and woke up with an idea for peanut butter and hot pepper pizza. Sounds terrible, right? So I ignored it.”

I wrinkled my nose involuntarily at the thought. “I won’t disagree with you there.”

“Well, the grand opening was a flop. The pepperoni pizza burned to a crisp. The plain cheese was too soggy. Tried to make a triple meat, and the meat spoiled. And all day long, I couldn’t get that dream out of my head. Finally, with half the day to go and nothing left to lose, I drove out to get the ingredients and I cooked it up. And it was perfect. The crust was just the right mix of crispy and puffy. The cheese melted like a dream. And the way the flavors worked together...” She shook her head. “Best thing I’ve ever eaten. I couldn’t sell it, of course—who would buy it?—so I gave it away.

“The next day, I had a line out the door. By then, of course, I couldn’t make it cook right anymore. The hot peppers lost their flavor, the cheese went rancid, the works. But by then, I’d had another dream—marshmallow cherry. That’s how I do it every day, since then. I go to sleep, I have a dream, I wake up and cook whatever I dreamed. And it’s always perfect.”

“Is this... normal in this world?” Vicantha murmured in my ear.

The woman—Lydia, I was guessing—overheard, and laughed again. “Normal for Hawthorne.”

“I’ll try a slice,” I said. “Why not?” I had to admit, at that point I was dying of curiosity. Besides, Vicantha had deprived me of my breakfast.

Lydia handed over a slice of pizza on a paper plate in exchange for a few bucks. I stared it down for a few seconds, unwilling to take the plunge.

“Go ahead,” Lydia urged. She seemed to have forgotten most of her fear. “It won’t bite.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. But I took the tiniest nibble off the bottom of the triangle.

If someone had placed a sword of pure iron at the back of my neck and asked me to describe the flavor, I wouldn’t have been able to do it. It was sweet, tangy, cheesy... and all those things worked together, in a perfect symphony, even though my brain was screaming at me that it should have been horrible. I jammed half the slice in my mouth before I realized I was doing it.

“Another satisfied customer, I see.” Lydia looked plenty satisfied herself, watching me enjoy her creation. Enough of her tension had dissolved that she was willing to take her gaze off Vicantha long enough to look at me.

That made this as good a time as any to leave. “You’re sure you don’t remember anything?” I asked, without much hope.

She shook her head. “Like I said, I wish I did. I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Thank you anyway.” I motioned to Vicantha. “Let’s try the next place.”

I was halfway out the door before I realized she wasn’t following me.

I turned to see her staring at Lydia like a snake stares at a mouse.

I edged back into the restaurant, trying to put myself between Vicantha and Lydia without making either of them unduly nervous. “She doesn’t know anything.”

“Her first response to my question was hostile,” said Vicantha. “She may be hiding something.”

I ran through my options for getting a fae bent on violence to retreat without engaging in any violence myself. It was a short list. “We’re wasting time here. We have other places to check, and a limited amount of time to do it.”

Lydia had gone still, watching Vicantha as if the fae woman were a rabid animal. “I told you, I don’t—”

Vicantha pounced.

She leapt over the counter in a seemingly effortless motion. She landed on top of Lydia, toppling her to the floor. When they landed, Vicantha was straddling her chest, with one dagger at her neck. The tip of the other grazed the woman’s chest.

“What are you hiding?” Vicantha snarled.

“Nothing!” Lydia stared up at Vicantha with wide, terrified eyes.

“Why did you react to my initial question with hostility?”

“I don’t like people poking around in my business when it comes to who I hire, that’s all.” She tried to squirm away, then thought better of it as both daggers pressed deeper. “I swear, I’ve never seen your sister.”

“If they aren’t here, where would they be?”

Lydia frowned, confusion briefly overtaking her fear. “They?”

The lower dagger ripped through Lydia’s shirt.

“I don’t know!” Lydia answered in a sob. “I don’t know where your sister is. Or sisters. Whoever you’re looking for. I don’t know, I swear to you, I don’t know.”

I circled around the edge of the counter and tried to pull Vicantha back. She didn’t stop me. She didn’t need to. The sudden screaming in my veins did that all by itself.

I let go, and tried to breathe. “This won’t help you get the information you’re looking for.”

“And you think what you’re doing will? Sharing stories about pizza while my people are in danger? If they’re even still alive.” She looked up at me, teeth bared. “If you weren’t the one who took them after all.”

I glanced down at Lydia, to see if she was taking any of this in. I might as well not have worried. All I saw in her was animal fear. She was too far gone to even be confused anymore.

“Look at her,” I said. “If she knew anything, don’t you think she would have told you by now?”

“If she knows nothing,” said Vicantha, “then we leave her body outside as a warning to the other inhabitants of this town, so they know what we’re capable of. Then they’ll answer our questions when we come to their doors.”

I took a deep breath. “You said you trained in infiltration. If that’s true, you must know the importance of secrecy.”

“I’m trained to operate unseen in the parts of Faerie that are hostile to Mab. I’m unconvinced that those rules should apply to this world. Especially when the humans lie so easily, and speak with such open disrespect.” The tear in Lydia’s shirt grew a little wider. “We used to operate openly among humans. The world was better then. Clearer. Humans knew their place.”

“That’s not the world we live in now,” I reminded her.

“No. You live in a world where everything is poison to us. There is iron worked into the bones of this building. Iron in the bones of the apartment whose furnishings you praised so lavishly last night. Iron in every car that passes outside. And five of my people are lost in this poisonous place.”

“If you hurt her,” I said, “they’ll put you in prison. In an iron cage. You’ve seen prisons on TV, haven’t you?”

I knew she understood what I was talking about, because a shudder ran through her at the words.

“You wanted my help in this,” I reminded her. “You forced me to risk my own life to give it to you. That means we do this my way.”

She paused, eyes glazed. I was guessing visions of human prisons were still running through her head. After a few seconds, she pulled the daggers back. “Your way,” she agreed. “For three days.” She looked up at the single-page calendar on Lydia’s wall and shook her head. “Two now.”

She stood and tucked her weapons away. Lydia, shaking and staring up at the ceiling, didn’t seem to notice.

I looked from Lydia to Vicantha. “Wait outside,” I ordered Vicantha.

Vicantha looked at me as if I had suggested she go stand in the middle of the street. “I told you yesterday, I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

I barely suppressed an audible sigh. “If I were willing to set off the consequences of breaking my promise,” I said, my voice exaggeratedly slow with artificial patience, “I would have pulled you off her before now. If I’m not willing to break my promise in order to save a human life, I’m not going to run away before getting you your information. Now go wait outside.”

Vicantha stared at me. “You considered risking death to save the life of a human stranger?” She blinked at me, and blinked again. “The stories are true.

You do share your father's sickness."

I looked away, gritting my teeth. "I didn't want you to bring the police down on us."

The look on Vicantha's face told me how little she believed my explanation. But before I could say anything else, she walked out the door, leaving me alone with Lydia.

As soon as the door chimed shut behind her, I held out a hand to the human woman.

It took Lydia another moment to refocus her eyes, let alone notice me standing above her. I waited, not saying anything, sensing that she needed to come out of her fear on her own. Any words from me would only remind her of what had just happened, and possibly throw her back into full-blown panic. Finally, her gaze focused on me. She looked at my hand like she wasn't sure whether to take it.

Rather than force her to decide whether to trust me, I lowered my hand, then myself. I sat cross-legged on the floor next to her.

"She has problems like her sister," I said, low and steady. "I'm helping her." *It's handled*, was the subtext. *Don't call the police*. I could imagine an iron cage as well as Vicantha could. Maybe better, since I had spent my fair share of time in them. In my mind, I saw humans advancing on me. Even now, I thought I could hear the pounding of their horses' hoofbeats in the distance.

Hoofbeats? No. Those were memories of a bygone time. If they were coming for me here and now, I would hear sirens splitting the air. At the thought, my ear caught the echo of a rhythmic wail.

My imagination. That was all.

Lydia stared up at me, blinking too fast. "Her eyes," she said in a rough whisper, like she couldn't force her voice any louder. "Her *ears*."

She had seen. I had to force myself not to clamp my hands down over my own ears, safely hidden by my hair, as a sudden burst of adrenaline cascaded through me. My vision narrowed, until all I could see was her. I couldn't hear the cars outside anymore, or the low hum of the oven. All I could hear was the imagined sirens in the distance.

I pushed myself to my feet. I had no thought of the missing agents, no thought of the way my magic would consume me from within if I failed to provide Vicantha her lead. All I knew was that I needed to run.

Only one thing ever happened after a human saw the truth.

And like a fool, I had stayed behind to help her. The way I had always helped them.

I had thought I had learned by now.

With a gust of breath, Lydia shoved herself up to a sitting position. “She’s one of those ones, isn’t she?” She stared toward the door. Her voice was a little louder now, a little steadier. “They used to call them the Fair Folk, didn’t they?”

“You didn’t see anything.” But what I said wouldn’t matter. I could already feel the fire blistering my skin, the knife sliding into my heart.

Lydia started to stand, then thought better of it and sat heavily back down on the dirty tile. “We see them in town every so often. Everyone knows better than to talk about it. This is Hawthorne—everyone who’s been here longer than a week has seen things that are better left unspoken.” She kept watching the door, but her stare grew less fearful and more thoughtful. “She doesn’t have a sister, does she? She’s here on *their* business.”

I knew what thoughts had to be running through her head. And if she was losing her fear, that could only be bad for us. I saw that now, with the clarity only adrenaline could bring. I had made a mistake, staying behind to help her. I should have run when I’d had the chance. I should have let Vicantha do whatever she wanted with her.

I loomed over her, letting the overhead lights help me cast a shadow over her face. “If you say anything about what you’ve seen...” But the second half of the threat wouldn’t come. I had never been much good at threats. Maybe that was part of the sickness Vicantha had talked about.

“She’s hurting, isn’t she?” Lydia asked softly. “She may not have lost a sister, but she’s lost somebody. Probably family. I’ve been there. Might have thrown a few people around myself if I’d had the temperament for it, after I lost my husband.” If I hadn’t known better, I would have thought that was sympathy I heard in her voice.

I didn’t say anything. Couldn’t move, couldn’t speak. Couldn’t run. The energy surging through me locked my lips shut and glued my feet to the floor, even as it urged me to move, move, move.

Lydia grabbed the counter and pulled herself upright. She let go, and tested her weight on her feet. She wobbled, but stayed standing. “Talk to Jimmy down at the Drunken Scarecrow,” she advised. “That’s where they always seem to end up. Best place for them—they blend right in.”

I rearranged her words in my mind, trying to get them to make sense. Where was the knife, the fire, the snapping of bone? Where were the sirens in the distance?

“What are you waiting for? Get going.” She took a deep breath and brushed the dirt off her apron. “Go on, get out of here before any customers show up. I do have a business to run, you know.”

I didn’t begrudge her the harshness of her tone as she tried to reclaim her

dignity. But that was the only part of this conversation I understood. She had seen the truth. Why wasn't she doing anything about it?

"Thank you," I finally managed. I turned and bolted out the door, leaving my own dignity behind on Lydia's dingy tile floor.

Vicantha was waiting in the middle of the sidewalk, facing the door with her arms crossed in front of her chest. "What did she say to you?" she demanded as soon as she saw me. "You looked terrified."

I was the one to grab hold of her wrist this time, stopping just short of a grip hard enough to make my magic remind me of my promise not to harm her. I dragged her down the sidewalk behind me, at a pace that would have been punishing for a human. "You need to be more careful," I snapped. "She saw your ears. Although keeping them hidden might not have helped. The attack itself, and those daggers, were conspicuous enough."

Vicantha pulled her arm free, but kept up my pace. "We'll never get what we want if we don't show our strength."

"You don't know what happens to fae here. You'll never find your missing agents if you don't make it out of this world alive."

Vicantha adjusted her hair around her ears, but her face didn't show any fear. She didn't understand what I was telling her. Not really.

Two more days. Two days, and I would be gone from this place. Three days, counting the flight home, until I could step back into my sanctuary, lock the doors behind me, and drink until I couldn't see.

Or maybe sooner—if the information Lydia had given me panned out.

"I have a tip," I said. "It may be the lead you're looking for. We need to find a place called the Drunken Scarecrow."

Chapter 5

What I had seen of Hawthorne so far bore out what I had read online. For the most part, the residents of this place wanted to pretend the less-explainable aspects of the town simply didn't exist. Like Lydia had said, they all knew better. It had been there in the private groups I had browsed last night, with newcomers to the town complaining about whispering voices at night and strange shapes floating past their windows. It was here in the streets, with newly-constructed office buildings—the kind with money poured into the gleaming walls, as plainly visible as the glass and chrome—dotted between the faded brick structures, as out of place as a ball gown on a battlefield. It was here in the skeletons of those same office buildings, hastily abandoned with a halfhearted *For Rent* sign placed in the window, sometimes before construction had even finished. But none of the posts in the groups had come out and said the place was haunted, and nothing advertised that Hawthorne was a perfect place to open a business—or a perfect place to lose your fortune.

Hawthorne was a town in denial—everywhere except the Drunken Scarecrow.

There was an actual scarecrow sitting outside the bar, with two plastic ravens perched on its shoulders. The sign above the door spelled out the bar's name in a garish orange, with letters that dripped like blood. Vicantha hung back to gingerly prod one of the ravens, then the other, as I pushed the door open.

The place smelled thickly of beer. Most of the long, skinny room was taken up by the bar counter, although there were a few booths crowded against the opposite wall. The walls were the same orange as the sign, with painted ravens flying across the pumpkin sky. Ghostly howls and witches' cackles were playing on a loop. Someone had even hung a couple of oversized plastic bats from the ceiling.

There were no customers to be seen. A youngish man with an untidy mop of blond hair was lazily wiping down the bar. A second employee, draped in a white sheet with two eyeholes cut out and "Boo!" written across the front, glided across the floor, sweeping up the previous day's crumbs.

"We don't start serving alcohol until five," the man from behind the counter called without pausing his work. "And nobody comes here for our lunch menu. If you're new in town, here's your first tip: come back once the sun goes down."

Vicantha pushed in after me and strode toward the counter. I tried to catch her eye long enough to shoot her a warning look. If she was going to repeat her

performance from Lydia's, I had no way to stop her.

When she didn't stop moving, I ducked past to lean across the counter, positioning myself between the man and Vicantha. "I don't suppose you're Jimmy."

He shook his head. "Jimmy's in the back."

I waited. He didn't volunteer anything else. But at least Vicantha had paused to let me work. Her eyes flashed with impatience, but she didn't get any closer to the counter. As the silence dragged on, she reached one hand toward her waistband, shooting me a questioning look. I shook my head.

"What do you need?" the man finally asked. He sounded like he wanted to ask the question about as much as he wanted to serve the two of us lunch.

I couldn't bring myself to say the word "fae" out loud, whatever Lydia had said. "It's a private matter."

The man's lips thinned. "Jimmy doesn't talk to just anyone."

The ghost stopped sweeping. The man hit a button, and the spooky sounds stopped. Even the painted ravens seemed to be watching us.

Vicantha shoved me aside, reaching for her weapons. "Not yet," I snapped.

But the man didn't look like he was going to give us anything else. Not unless I told him why I was here and what I was looking for.

Hoofbeats thundered in the distance. Sirens wailed. I couldn't say it.

The man waited another moment for me to elaborate. When I didn't, he shrugged. "All right, then. I'll tell him you stopped by." I didn't think there was a way he could have made that sentence sound less sincere. With that, he looked away, and started wiping down the bar again.

Vicantha pulled the daggers from her waistband.

"Wait," I snapped. I didn't know whether I was talking to her or the man behind the bar. Or both.

"You going to order lunch?" the man asked. "Or are you going to waste my time? Because I can tell you right now, Jimmy won't see you unless he's sure you're worth the effort."

The skin under my fingernails turned white as I gripped the edge of the bar. "I hear he's the person to go to if you have questions about... unusual matters."

That caught his attention. He let the cloth rest on the counter, studying me with a slight tilt to his head. Trying to figure out what I was, I realized. I forced myself to breathe.

"Unusual how?" he finally asked. He must not have been able to figure it out by sight. My next breath came a little easier.

But I was still going to have to answer his question. "People who aren't from around here, let's say."

“We don’t get a lot of tourists. Anyone wants the spooky stuff, they go to Salem. They want a regular old good time, they go... well, just about anywhere else.” He picked up the cloth again. I was losing him.

I lowered my voice almost to a whisper. “How about the ones with pointed ears?”

He didn’t answer. But he didn’t start up with the cloth again, either. He just looked at me, silent, like he was waiting for me to continue. Or to give him some kind of signal. When I didn’t give him whatever he was looking for, he shook his head. “Sorry. Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You have one more chance to get answers from him your way,” Vicantha murmured in my ear. “After that, I take over.”

“You promised me two days,” I reminded her.

“That was before the human woman told you this ‘Jimmy’ had information. If we leave now, we’ll be giving him the chance to flee. I can’t allow that.”

My heartbeat pounding in my ears like hoofbeats, I leaned closer over the counter. With fingers that had gone numb, I brushed my hair aside and showed the man the tip of my ear. Only for a fraction of a second, before I pulled the dark strands back into place again.

The man didn’t lunge for me. He didn’t grab a weapon from underneath the counter. He gave me a single nod and said, “I’ll get him for you.”

As he ambled toward the door at the back of the bar, Vicantha glared. “You demanded secrecy from me. Why do you not hold yourself to the same restrictions?”

“I had to take a gamble.” I kept my eyes fixed on the door as the man disappeared inside. “And you had better hope, for both our sakes, that this town’s luck swings our way and the gamble pays off. I have too much experience with what will happen if it doesn’t.”

Something in my tone must have gotten through to her. She kept her hands close to her waistband, although she didn’t pull her weapons free again. She watched the door alongside me, and didn’t say anything else.

After several long moments, the man walked back out. He motioned us toward him. “Come on, then. He won’t wait around all day.”

The last thing I wanted was to step into a back room with someone who had just seen physical evidence of what I was. I walked slowly and warily, glancing behind me every few seconds to make sure the exit was still clear. My inner awareness expanded outward, showing me the rough location of every bit of iron in the place. I felt the usual metal bones in the building’s construction, but nothing that would indicate a trap. At least I didn’t think so.

Vicantha, on the other hand, showed no such hesitation. She strode past me

and toward the inner door like a valkyrie marching into battle. The man had to dodge aside before she barreled over him on her way through.

The back room was half the size of my bathroom back home. The floor was piled with old paperwork. I caught a glimpse of an invoice, and a notice of a late rent payment. A scruffy man in a stained shirt sat behind a metal desk, which was piled with yet more papers, with a laptop perched precariously at the corner edge. He looked up as we entered, and studied us expressionlessly. As sloppy as his appearance was, there was nothing casual or careless about the canny look in his eyes.

“Close the door,” he ordered. I thought he was talking to the man who had brought us here. But when I looked over my shoulder, the man in question had already gone back to his work as if nothing had happened.

I didn’t close the door. I was reluctant to do anything that would make my retreat that much slower if it became necessary. But Vicantha kicked it shut—neatly avoiding having to touch the metal handle. At the click of the latch, a smile that was much more satisfied than it was friendly spread across her face. As she approached the desk, I was put in mind of a tiger in a cage with a human who had just jumped in to give it a scratch behind the ears.

Vicantha clearly saw herself as the tiger in this scenario. I hoped she was right.

When Jimmy had finished his silent appraisal, he spoke. “I hear you need work done. The usual?”

Vicantha loomed over the desk—at least as much as she could without brushing against the metal. “What do you know about—”

I stomped on her foot. A second later, fire swept through my veins. I gritted my teeth and waited for it to pass, and took some small satisfaction in the fact that I had stopped Vicantha before she could lay all our cards on the table. “Yes,” I ground out through the pain. “The usual.”

But Vicantha’s interrupted question had clearly caught Jimmy’s attention. He gave her a smile that mirrored her own, ignoring me. “What do I know about your kind? Is that what you were going to ask me? Enough to have a mutually beneficial arrangement going, and no more. I won’t ask questions if you don’t.” He brushed his hands together briskly. “Now, I imagine you don’t have cash, so I’ll be expecting the usual payment. In case whoever sent you here didn’t tell you, that means renewing the illusion on our health inspection certificate and liquor license. Another six months should do it. And if you can magic up some spooky lighting effects like the last one did, I’ll throw in a passport for one of you. The customers love that shit.”

“Who was the last one?” Vicantha demanded, before I could stop her.

Jimmy's smile became a frown. "I thought I wasn't supposed to talk about any of this. Even with others of your kind. That's what all the rest of you wanted, anyway."

I cut in before the suspicion in his eyes could grow. "When can we expect it to be done?"

"I'll have the IDs for you by the end of the day," said Jimmy. "I work fast. If you want a job until you get yourselves on your feet, show up here tomorrow at nine. That's when we open. Breakfast time, in theory. In practice, no one shows up until the sun goes down and we start pouring drinks. You'll get paid regardless, of course. Easy money."

"The other fae who work here. They'll be here then?" Vicantha started to lean down on the desk, and yanked her hand away just in time, a second before her fingers touched metal. The close call didn't seem to faze her. Her tiger's smile had turned into something more eager, and more vulnerable.

Jimmy drew back. I could see his hackles go up, although I didn't know why. Unless he could simply sense that something was off about Vicantha. Which, granted, wouldn't have been difficult. "Your kind comes and goes as you want to," he said. "It's not my job to keep track of you."

His eyes slid away from Vicantha. Fear flickered across his face, almost too fast for me to catch.

Better not to let on that I had seen. The more clever he thought I was, the harder he would work to hide whatever it was he had to hide. More to the point, it was safer not to hint to Vicantha that he might be hiding something. The second she knew, I would lose control of her. Then we would end up with blood on the floor, the police after us, and probably no more information than we could get by being more circumspect.

"We'll be here tomorrow morning," I promised. That was still within the deadline, and if we were smart about this, we could use that time to figure out what Jimmy was hiding. Because assuming I had read him right, I had a feeling that whatever had happened to Mab's missing agents, Jimmy knew something about it.

He was the lead I was looking for. I was almost certain of it. Now all that remained was to prove it to Vicantha—without letting her take him apart before we were sure.

After I was free from my promise, and safely back home where the police wouldn't think to look for Vicantha's accomplice, she could do whatever she wanted.

I held out my hand to Jimmy—a handshake to seal the deal. Jimmy reached for it... but halfway through the motion, he froze. His eyes were locked not on

my outstretched right hand, but the left, still hanging at my side.

Instead of shaking my hand, he bent and drew open a rattly drawer. When his hand came back up, it was clutching a pistol.

There was no smile on his face anymore, not even an unfriendly one. “I told you people I’d be ready if you came back,” he said, in a completely different voice than he had used on us a moment ago. The canny businessman was gone. In his place was a cornered animal—the tiger I had sensed, backed snarling against a wall.

As I took in the sight of the weapon, the first thing I felt was hollow resignation. On some level, I had known as soon as I left with Vicantha that once I left my life of luxury behind, it was only a matter of time before the humans’ weapons started coming out. Confusion followed half a step behind. “You people,” I repeated. “Who exactly do you think we are?”

“You’re not who you say you are, that’s for sure.” He jabbed the gun in the direction of my watch. “That’s solid steel. You know what steel is made with? Iron. What did you do, pull on a pair of fake ears to fool Toby out front?”

“The watch... is a long story,” I said. “But we aren’t who you think we are.” I gave a significant pause. “Whoever that is.”

“Look,” said Jimmy, “it’s not like I’ve got any attachment to the fae. Like I said, this is a business arrangement. But I value my business relationships. If I break someone’s trust, word gets around, and that means no more repeat business. I don’t care how much money you’re throwing around, no price is worth losing what I’ve built here.”

I kept my eyes on the gun. It wouldn’t do permanent damage—not unless he had steel-jacketed rounds in there—but it would hurt a lot in the meantime. I still had nightmares about the last time I had been shot, three quarters of a century ago. I had no desire to repeat the experience. “We’re not going to get anywhere,” I said, “until you tell us what you’re talking about.”

“The thing is,” said Jimmy, as if I hadn’t spoken, “you didn’t get all of them. I’ve still got fae working for me, which means I’ve got magic working for me. And magic can go a long way toward hiding a body. So I think you should walk out of here right now, nice and slow.”

“We aren’t going anywhere.” Vicantha reached for her weapons. But halfway through the motion, she hesitated, looking at me.

Apparently she had been listening to my warnings after all.

The thing was, I wasn’t entirely sure those warnings applied anymore. I didn’t want to set Vicantha on this man. And not only because he could bring the force of the human authorities down on us. I had gotten a firsthand look at what Vicantha was capable of. But the barrel of the gun seemed to grow with every

second, filling my vision, and Jimmy didn't look like he was any closer to putting it away.

I didn't want to die. Not again.

Technically speaking, I had never actually died. Not completely. But I had felt my body fail. I had felt my heart stop, my lungs go still. As far as I was concerned, the only difference between true death and what I had endured was that I hadn't gotten to escape my ruined body at the end of it.

I hadn't been shot all that many times, not compared to the other methods of death I had experienced. But I could still remember the feeling of my heart knitting back together. My chest clenched in memory as the gun's black circle yawned open in front of me.

I gritted my teeth. "Do it," I said to Vicantha.

Once I had given her the okay, she didn't hesitate. A blast of air slammed into Jimmy's hand. The magic was jerky and unfocused, no doubt from the presence of iron all around us, but it was enough to do the job. His fingers loosened. The gun hit the edge of the desk and fell to the floor. I tensed, but it didn't go off.

I called the weapon with my foot and dragged it toward me. I expected Jimmy to grab for it, but he was too busy gaping at me. "What the hell? You've got one of them working for you now?"

Vicantha's daggers were already in her hand. Now Jimmy was the one who couldn't take his eyes off the weapons. He stood and slowly backed up until he hit the wall.

Vicantha smiled. She hurled one of her daggers through the air. It spun as it flew, and landed at just the right angle to pin Jimmy's hand to the wall. I raised an eyebrow, impressed despite myself even as my stomach lurched at the sight of the blood leaking slowly from the wound at the center of his palm.

Jimmy's mouth gaped in a silent scream. Vicantha didn't wait for him to find his voice again. She circled around the desk, careful not to brush against it, and slammed her hand down over his mouth. She traced the other dagger lightly along the line of his jaw. "Why are you threatening us?"

She loosened her hand so he could answer. I waited for his scream, but it didn't come. He trembled.

More blood leaked from his wound. I tried to look away, and couldn't. I didn't know why the sight bothered me so much. It wasn't as if I hadn't seen far worse in my time. Maybe I had simply grown out of practice with violence, during my years lazing around on the beach. Or maybe it was the fact that Vicantha had done it on my orders, to someone who was almost certainly hiding something but had not yet proven himself a villain.

"That wasn't necessary," I said to her.

Vicantha spared me an irritated glance. “You told me to do this my way. I’m doing it my way.” She turned her attention back to Jimmy. “Why,” she repeated, lowering the second dagger to run her fingers down the hilt of the one still embedded in his palm, “are you threatening us?”

Jimmy sagged against the wall, already defeated. “Take the files, all right? Just take them. They won’t do you much good—only one has come through since last time. The rest probably got wind of whatever you’re doing, and stopped crossing over.”

“As I tried to tell you,” I said, “you’ve mistaken us for somebody else. We’re here looking for several fae who have disappeared. I’m guessing you have some idea of who made them disappear.”

Jimmy stared at me, his eyes hazy with pain, as he struggled to extend his awareness past his own body enough to take in what I had said. Then he looked at Vicantha. “You say it. Your kind can’t lie.”

“He’s telling the truth,” said Vicantha. “We are not whoever you think we are. We are hunting for five missing fae from the Winter Court. And if you are responsible for their disappearances, I will—”

“Give you a sizable reward, as long as you cooperate,” I interrupted, before Vicantha could finish the sentence. Even through the pain, Jimmy had to have some sense of self-preservation, and I doubted whatever threat Vicantha had been about to offer would have inspired him to tell us the truth.

But Jimmy shook his head. His face was sad, but strangely, a lot of the fear was gone. “You’re here to kill me, aren’t you?”

“No,” I said, at the same time as Vicantha said, “Maybe.”

Jimmy gave a soft, broken laugh. “At least I know which of you to believe. Only one of you is wearing iron—which means only one of you can lie.”

“What do you know?” asked Vicantha.

“I’ll tell you everything,” said Jimmy. “But first, can you...” His face creased with another wave of pain. “My hand. Please.”

“Information first.” Vicantha’s eyes were twin spikes, drilling into him.

I wanted to object. But I wanted to live more. And despite Jimmy’s appearance of defeat, I couldn’t be certain he didn’t have a backup plan.

Jimmy didn’t argue, either. “I didn’t expect the fae to start coming here, at first,” he said, keeping his eyes fixed on an invisible point across the room—to keep from looking at his hand, most likely. “I opened up a bar, but couldn’t bring in any customers to save my life—everyone wanted to go to the places they already knew. The few people who did come in were new in town, and didn’t know where the popular spots were yet. And I noticed one thing the new people had in common—they kept talking about the freaky stuff. The stuff no one else

brings up.

“I didn’t know what to do with it yet. But in the back of my mind, I kept worrying at it, like a loose tooth. It came to me one day, when I was pouring a rum and Coke, same as any other rum and Coke you could get at any other bar. What those people had given me, in the conversations they hadn’t meant for me to overhear, was a way to stand out. All these new people, they were looking for some way to deal with the strangeness of this place. And I gave it to them. Now, when they come here, all that stuff is right out in the open. And here, it’s not scary. It’s fake, and fun, and over-the-top.”

“How is any of this relevant to Mab’s missing agents?” Vicantha snapped.

“You wanted the story,” said Jimmy, with a faint, tired trace of defiance. “Let me tell it my way.”

“Don’t try my patience,” Vicantha warned. But she didn’t drive the dagger in any deeper, which Jimmy must have taken as an invitation to continue, because he kept going.

“My instincts were right,” he said. “The place took off overnight. We don’t really have regulars around here—not like the other places do. After a while, people either get used to Hawthorne being what it is and stop needing a place like this, or else they leave for greener, safer pastures. But there are always a few more new people around to come through the doors, even if the town isn’t what it used to be. What I didn’t expect, though, was that a place like this would also be good camouflage for the genuinely strange. See, the strangeness here is all an illusion, and everyone knows it. Which makes it a good place for your kind to hide in plain sight.” Another flash of that fear I had seen earlier crossed his face. No, I realized as I watched him more closely. That wasn’t fear. It was guilt. “At least in theory.”

“You’re stalling,” I said. “This isn’t about telling the story the way you want to tell it. Whatever happened, you don’t want to tell us about it.”

Jimmy didn’t nod. But he didn’t deny it, either. He had to glance down at his hand to get himself to start talking again. “Six months ago, a couple of men in suits came around. They were asking too many questions about the kind of thing no one asks questions about around here. I laughed it off, of course. Then they offered me... well, let’s just say I’ve never seen that many zeroes attached to a dollar amount in my life. All I had to do was hand over my employee files.”

“You sold them out,” said Vicantha flatly.

“No!” Jimmy actually looked offended at the thought. “I told them to get stuffed.”

“But that wasn’t the end of it,” I guessed.

“Someone broke in. Put a gun to my head and told me to open up my office

and give him the files. I did it.” Another hint of defiance in his voice, as he dared us to tell him he had made the wrong decision. “What else could I do?”

In answer, Vicantha twisted the dagger in his palm, just a little. Just enough to draw a strangled noise from his throat.

“Would you have done any different?” he gasped out, locking eyes with her. “They would’ve killed me. I didn’t have a choice.”

Vicantha moved to twist the dagger again. “Let him talk,” I said.

Jimmy shot me a grateful look. “That’s when they started disappearing,” he said. “I didn’t realize the connection at first, even though, looking back, it should’ve been obvious. It’s not like it was unusual for one of the fae to leave without warning. They always come and go when it suits them. After I realized what was happening, I warned the rest to go to ground. I never saw them again after that.” He looked down at the floor. “It didn’t work, though. Last I heard, they had all disappeared anyway.”

“You heard?” Vicantha pounced on the words. “Does that mean you have contact with one of us?”

Jimmy hesitated a second too long. “No, I just... heard around town. No one else has seen them lately.”

“You’re lying. You said no one in this town talks about that sort of thing.”

Her fingers brushed the dagger. He tensed. “All right. One of them is still safe. He passes me information, when he hears anything. But I don’t care what you do to me, I’m not giving him to you. I don’t know how he escaped whatever happened to the others, but as long as he’s safe, I’ll do whatever I can to help him stay that way. It’s the least I can do.”

“Then do this,” said Vicantha. “The next time you see him, tell him Vicantha, right hand of Mab, is looking for him.” Her hand tightened on the dagger again, just for a second. “And ensure that your next conversation with him happens soon.”

Jimmy’s eyes widened. “Mab—she’s a big deal, isn’t she? From Shakespeare and shit.”

“Tell him,” Vicantha repeated. “This is where he can find me.” She stepped away from him long enough to pick up a pen from one of the stacks of paper on the floor, and scrawled out the apartment’s address on top of the receipt from an old alcohol bulk order. I couldn’t suppress a slight twitch as she pressed the paper into his uninjured hand. Now at least one human knew where to find the place where we slept.

But I wouldn’t be spending another night there, I reminded myself. This had to qualify as a lead—which meant that as soon as we got back to the apartment, I was buying the first ticket back to Hawaii, and putting this strange and

uncomfortable break in my routine behind me.

“I will,” said Jimmy. “I promise. Now will you let me go?”

In answer, Vicantha yanked the dagger out, and not gently. But Jimmy didn’t howl in pain the way I expected. And when I looked at his hand again, the injury didn’t look nearly as bad as it should have. He flexed all five fingers easily, although his jaw clenched and his face went white when he did. I had been impressed by the precision of Vicantha’s throw before—now I was doubly so.

Jimmy closed his other hand around the wounded one, and rubbed softly. “It’s time for you to go,” he said, trying for authority and not quite landing it. “Flip the sign to closed on your way out, will you? We’re closing early today.”

But I didn’t move toward the door. If I was going to free myself from my promise, I had to wring as much information out of him as possible. I needed to be sure this was something Vicantha could use to get closer to her missing people. “These people who tried to buy your files from you,” I said. “Did they give you any way to contact them?”

“I never used it, if that’s what you’re thinking,” said Jimmy, with a wary glance toward Vicantha. “Never planned to, either.”

Another drawer rattled as he pulled it open. He dug around and pulled out a business card.

“I only kept it so I could show it around to the fae, and warn them to stay away. I swear. I take care of them. That’s the deal.” Despite his appearance, despite the shady operation he was running in here, something in his voice made me want to trust him. I might actually have believed him, if he hadn’t been human.

But his trustworthiness, or lack thereof, wasn’t my concern. Not as long as he gave us useful information. I plucked the card from his fingers. It was flat white, with simple black text. No name, no job title. Just a phone number, and above it, a single word. *Arkanica*.

Chapter 6

I had expected something top-secret. But when I opened up my laptop, Arkanica was right there at the top of the search results. *Arkanica, Inc.*, their homepage proclaimed in crisp, spare type, underneath a logo of a stylized lightbulb. *Building a brighter future.* There was nothing else on the site. No other pages, no contact information, no explanation of who Arkanica was or what they were doing. Just a slideshow of open fields and endless forests.

But at the bottom, it listed their address. A street in—where else?—Hawthorne, Massachusetts.

My brief few moments of encouragement ended as soon as I went back to the search results, though. Because that was where the trail ended. There was no other information about them online. No business listings, no press releases, not even a single comment on social media. Either no one knew this company existed, or the ones who did know weren't talking.

Either way, it didn't matter to me. Because it wasn't my business anymore.

I closed the laptop, slid it across the kitchen table toward Vicantha, and stood up. "There you are. One lead, and ahead of schedule. Whatever this Arkanica is, that's where you need to look. Their address is right there on their website."

"Thank you," she said as she pulled the laptop to her like a life preserver.

I blinked. I hadn't expected her thanks to sound quite so... sincere.

"Don't mention it," I said brusquely. "Good luck." I grabbed one of my premixed White Russians from the fridge. My assistant had stocked them for me without my even having to ask. Alcohol didn't do as much for me as I sometimes wished, considering my metabolism was only half-human, but if I combined it with dairy—which, just like the stories said, was in fact capable of getting the fae tipsy—it became a potent recipe for relaxation. These weren't as good as the real thing—I preferred to make mine stronger, for one—but they were good for the flavor, if nothing else.

But when I opened the apartment door, the bottle halfway to my lips, Vicantha sprang up and slammed it closed again.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

Had she forgotten the terms of our deal? "Home. Where else?"

"We're not done."

"I am. I've done what I promised." I already felt lighter—I had felt it as soon as we had stepped out of the Drunken Scarecrow. And when I had opened the apartment door, I hadn't gotten the slightest tingle in my veins. As far as my

magic was concerned, I had fulfilled the terms of our contract.

“And in the process, you’ve proven yourself useful. More useful than I expected a half-fae to be. Your abilities border on genuine competence.” She looked at me like she was expecting a thank-you in response.

The skin on the back of my neck prickled. My danger sense was well-honed by now, and it had been sending off an alarm since Vicantha had stood up from her chair. “I promised you a lead. And that’s what I gave you.” I reached past her for the doorknob, more purposefully this time.

Vicantha leaned against the door, holding it closed. “I can’t let you leave yet. You’re too useful. You understand this world—its rules and its threats. And you can touch iron.” She shut the doorknob a resentful glare. “There’s iron everywhere in this world. I understand now why we sealed ourselves off from it.”

“You don’t get to make that choice. We had a deal. I fulfilled that deal. Now I’m leaving.”

“They’re still in danger. And I’ll do anything I can to save them. I know you understand.” Her eyes pleaded with me, even as they flashed a threat.

Hot rage boiled up from my belly. No. I didn’t understand. Not anymore. I was done saving people. Done hurling myself against the iron spikes of yet another doomed cause.

“Stand aside,” I said, my voice low.

She didn’t move.

I fingered the clasp of my watch. My thumb brushed the ropy scars underneath. “Stand aside,” I repeated.

Vicantha glanced down at my fingers. She reached for her waistband.

“I don’t think you want a fight,” I said.

“Only because it will be easier for both of us if I have your willing cooperation. But I will have your corporation, one way or the other. Your uncontrolled magic against my centuries of training—who do you think will win?”

“Ask the assassins the Courts have sent after me,” I said. “If you can find them. You have elemental magic. I have something older. Plenty of your people have discovered that raw power can more than make up for lack of control. And remember, I only promised not to harm you until I found you a lead.”

My voice was smooth, controlled. Inside, I felt anything but. I wanted to tear the place apart with my bare hands, brick by brick, if that was what it took to get free. But not because of her threat. It was the rest of what she had said—that mention of the danger her people were in, that plea for me to understand.

She didn’t know, couldn’t know, the memories her words had evoked. If she

had, she would never have thought those words would make me do anything but kick and claw and bite my way free, chew my own leg out of her trap if I had to. Anything to avoid stepping into danger on someone else's behalf again. Anything to keep from becoming the person I had worked so hard to leave behind.

"There are humans in this building. If you unleash your magic, you could damage them." She said it with a smug smile, like she was revealing the ace up her sleeve.

I met her words with a light shrug. "Not my problem."

She made a sharp, skeptical noise. "You're not fooling anyone. I know your reputation. Everyone does."

"Anyone in this building would do their best to end my life if they knew what I was," I said. "Why should I care whether I hurt them?"

"Because it's in your blood. You are your father's son. Noble Oberon, who sees good in everyone—whether it exists or not—and will fight to the death for those illusions. Your father could never leave an innocent in danger—and he thinks everyone is innocent." She sneered. "A weakness that would have brought down the Summer Court long ago, if he didn't have his queen to keep him in check."

Her description made me want to slip the watch off my wrist here and now, and test her theory about my raw power versus her control. Maybe because of how familiar it sounded. I tried to take a deep breath. "Maybe I did share his sickness, once," I acknowledged. "But I got better."

"The missing fae are innocent." She flung the words at me like a challenge. "And they're in danger."

I met her cold stare with one of my own. "They're Mab's agents. They can't possibly be innocent. What were they doing in this world in the first place? Not helping widows and orphans, I'm sure."

"I may not know what they were doing here," said Vicantha, "but I know someone was willing to trade human money for their lives. I know they didn't go to this 'Arkanica' willingly."

"And I know what anyone of them would do to me as soon as I got done saving them. The Courts don't let people like me live. They don't make exceptions."

"Have the humans treated you any more kindly?" asked Vicantha. The look in her eyes told me she already knew the answer. "That's never stopped you from saving them."

"It's stopped me for seventy-five years," I corrected. "And I notice you're not denying that your missing agents would kill me." I played with the clasp of the

watch again. "Or at least try."

Vicantha scoffed. "Seventy-five years out of seven hundred. You can't kill old habits that easily. And you can't change what's in your blood."

"Let me go, or find out firsthand how much I've changed." I unclasped the watch, but didn't slip it from my wrist. Not yet.

Vicantha's muscles tensed as she shifted into a battle stance. Between one blink and the next, one of her daggers appeared in her hand. She held the other hand out, preparing to use her magic against me.

I took a ragged breath, and got ready to let the watch fall. But I kept my fingers curled around it, holding it in place on my wrist. "I have one question. Even if you win this fight, how will you convince me to cooperate?"

"That's not how this will end." The corners of Vicantha's lips turned up. "You'll cooperate to avoid the fight. And the humans who could be harmed as a result."

Another burst of rage boiled up from the cauldron inside me. This time, I let it build. "Step away from the door in the next five seconds," I said, no longer concerned with keeping my voice even, "or you'll find out how wrong you are." I let the watch drop lower. Lower. "After centuries of senseless suffering, I've finally freed myself from my own worst impulses. I won't give up that freedom and accept a fae's leash in its place."

Five seconds. The watch drifted down another fraction of an inch. Four. Three.

Vicantha lowered her weapon and her hand. "Wait."

I stopped the watch before it could fall any further.

Vicantha kept her muscles tense, ready to strike, as she spoke. "What if I could make sure the Winter Court never sent another assassin after you, for the rest of your life?"

"That's a long time." While I didn't know whether I had full fae immortality, the past seven hundred years hadn't brought any consequences of aging with them. I wouldn't have been surprised if I had another seven hundred in me, minimum.

Vicantha just nodded.

"Do you have that kind of power?" I asked.

"Not to make the decision on my own," she conceded. "But I do have considerable influence in the Winter Court. As well as the ear of Mab herself."

It sounded too good to be true to me. Especially since she conveniently didn't have enough power to make any concrete promises. And there was another problem with her offer. "Most of the assassins so far have come from Summer. I think since I'm their blood, they saw me as their responsibility."

“I can’t do anything about Summer,” said Vicantha. “But Winter has sent its share of people after you.” She tilted her chin up. “Besides, our assassins are more dangerous by far.”

“Try telling Tristra that.” She had been Summer’s last attempt, and the one who had come the closest to fulfilling her mission.

Vicantha responded to the name with a contemptuous sneer. “She failed in her mission. Worse than failed. She had weakness in her heart. Mab would have spotted it and fed her to her dogs before ever entrusting her with a mission of any importance.”

“Will there even be any more attempts?” I asked. “As you’re so fond of reminding me, you people closed yourselves off from this world.”

“And as you are so fond of reminding *me*, clearly some of us are still coming through. Eventually, one of them will be someone sent to kill you. So will you take my offer? Or will you insist on a fight, and help me in the end anyway?”

If I helped Vicantha, whatever my reason for doing so, I knew how that story would end. It was a story I had played out a dozen times before. I would take up a doomed cause to save someone in trouble. I would throw myself into danger for them, fight for them, bleed for them. In the end, I would save them. And once I stood between them and danger using powers no human possessed, they would see me for what I was.

And then I would die. Again. And my magic would knit me back together, just in time for my next doomed cause to find me.

All I wanted was my mansion, and my beach, and the life I had so carefully crafted for myself. And to finish my damned drink. I raised the bottle to my lips and gulped half the liquid down. It was cold, but not a punishing cold, like Hawthorne’s winter. For a second, I closed my eyes, and blocked out all thoughts of Vicantha and her mission. I took in only the smoky bitterness of the coffee, and the bite of the alcohol, and the heady richness of the cream. The burn as it hit my throat was weak, but pleasant.

If I was going to live as long as I suspected I would, I had many years—many centuries—of assassin attempts ahead of me. If Faerie opened up again, they would start coming again before long, and they wouldn’t stop. And that would put as much of a damper on my beach-bum ambitions as anything I did for Vicantha.

At least if I died by a human’s hands, I would more than likely come back from it.

“I want a promise,” I said.

Vicantha drew in a sharp breath. “Then you agree?” I hadn’t realized until then that she hadn’t expected me to say yes.

“As long as you say it. Make it binding.”

“I told you, I don’t have the influence to make the decision on my own.”

“Then tell me what you *can* do.” I let my watch slide back and forth on my wrist, just enough to draw Vicantha’s attention to it. “Or there won’t be a deal.”

Vicantha took a deep breath. The cadence of her voice changed subtly, becoming more rhythmic, more formal. “If you offer me assistance in learning the whereabouts of the five missing agents of the Winter Court, and do not withdraw your assistance until they are found or their deaths are confirmed, I will use my influence in the Winter Court, to the best of my ability, to prevent the Court from making or acting on plans to end your life.”

I ran over the words in my head, and couldn’t find any loopholes. I redid the clasp to my watch, trying not to let Vicantha see my relief.

Vicantha waited a moment before tucking away her dagger. As soon as she did, she glanced toward the door. “Where to next?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll need time to think.”

Vicantha scowled. “You agreed to help.”

“And I will.” I sat down at the table, and took another sip of my drink. “I don’t involve myself much with human society, these days, except to enjoy the entertainments it provides. But money does open doors, and I happen to know where a few of those doors can be found.” I opened my laptop back up. “Let me get in touch with my contacts. I’ll see what they can dig up on Arkanica. That should give us a good start.”

I tried to ignore the phantom clang as an imagined iron cage slammed shut around me.

Chapter 7

“I don’t see why we’re bothering to learn their faces,” said Vicantha, “if you won’t even let me try to get information from one of them.”

We were sitting in a Dunkin’ Donuts across from Arkanica headquarters. Dunkin’ Donuts appeared to be the state religion of Massachusetts; if there wasn’t one on every block, it wasn’t for lack of trying. I picked at my bagel as I watched out the window, missing my personal chef more with every bite. Vicantha alternated mechanically between her plain bagel and black coffee, her eyes fixed on the building outside.

Arkanica hadn’t built themselves a fancy new office like the ones we had walked past yesterday. The old mill building looked like it had been here as long as the town. A tall sign outside the building looked like it used to hold an array of business names; now all the slots were empty. Arkanica hadn’t even put their own sign in. But this was the address on the website. This was Arkanica’s building now; they had bought up the whole thing. Bought it outright, not even rented the space like the companies before them had done. I had found a record of the sale in an obscure section of the Hawthorne municipal website.

“This isn’t about learning their faces,” I answered Vicantha. “It’s about picking up whatever small bits of information we can. We won’t even know what there is to learn until we watch.”

Vicantha’s dark expression didn’t lighten. She glared at the people who had started to straggle through the doors of the Arkanica building. “We could learn a lot more if you let me bring one of them back to the apartment.”

I pictured Jimmy’s hand, and the wounds on my chest that had finally stopped aching. “Better not to tip our hand just yet.”

“I should have only agreed to help stop the assassins if we found the missing fae alive. Then you would have had more incentive to work quickly.” She glanced at my watch, as if one second more or less could make the difference for them. “Aren’t your contacts supposed to be finding information for us? Why haven’t you heard back from them yet?”

“It will take time.”

The air around us seemed to cool a few degrees—although sitting with only a thin pane of glass between us and below-freezing weather, who could tell?—as her glare grew even darker.

A few more people filed into the Arkanica building. Although I had no plans to let Vicantha bring any of them home with us, she did have a point. From this

vantage point, we could barely even see their faces, let alone anything else. I pushed the rest of my bagel aside. “Let’s get closer.”

Vicantha stood and surged toward the door, like she was a racehorse and my words had been the starting shot. I clasped her hand and pulled her back from the door. “We don’t engage,” I told her. “We stay invisible. We watch—nothing more.”

She raked her nails down my wrist as she twisted her hand away. “I also should have made you renew your promise not to harm me. Don’t hold me back again.” She pushed the door open with an elbow, wincing as she did, and hurried out onto the sidewalk.

I hurried after her. “Don’t move so quickly. Stay inconspicuous. You don’t want them to know we’re following them.” I maneuvered in front of her a second before she could step off the curb. “Also, stay out of traffic.” I pointed toward the crosswalk a few feet away.

She followed me to the crosswalk, and watched, brow furrowed, as the traffic stopped to let us cross. “Is that what those lines are for? I had wondered. In our world, we consider them tests of attention. If you’re lost in thought as you travel, and ride your horse over the lines without stopping to count them, bad luck will follow you for as many years as there are lines.”

I would have remarked on the surprising fact that the fae had superstitions just like humans, but that hadn’t been the strangest part of what she had said. “Your world has crosswalks? And no reason for them?”

“I told you,” said Vicantha with a hint of impatience, as we stepped up onto the sidewalk, “your world echoes in ours. Where there are important or well-traveled roads in your world, those roads appear in Faerie.”

I wanted to ask more questions, but we were getting closer to the building. I put a finger to my lips. My senses were on high alert, as I watched for anyone who might be looking at us too closely. But no one seemed to think anything of us as we strolled, with forced casualness, closer to the building.

I nudged Vicantha to get her attention, then made a tiny gesture toward a pair of men in front of me. “Those two are both wearing hats,” I murmured. “They could be hiding fae ears.” One of them reached for the door, and I revised my assessment. “No, that one is wearing a metal watch. That means at least one of them is human. Can you see whether the other is wearing any jewelry?”

Vicantha shook her head. A second later, they both disappeared into the building.

“This is a pointless exercise,” said Vicantha—remembering, I noted gratefully, to keep her voice down. “It doesn’t matter what they’re wearing on their heads. They’re all human. The fae would never work alongside humans.

Especially not to abduct other fae.”

“It was one of the fae who stabbed you in the airport, trying to get you to blame it on me,” I reminded her. “Otherwise, they would have used an iron weapon.”

Vicantha scowled, but didn’t answer.

A few more people strolled up to the front door from the parking garage out back. I saw another wearing a watch, and one wearing a belt with a thick metal clasp. Much closer to the door, and people would start to wonder why we were blocking their way. But I risked another couple of steps, trying to get close enough to overhear the conversations.

One cluster of people was talking about the weather—something about an office betting pool on how much snow Hawthorne would get by the end of the year. A pair of women coming in from the other side seemed to be having a more promising discussion—something about putting in an application for government funding? But they disappeared through the front door before I could hear anything useful.

“We need to do more,” said Vicantha.

I didn’t want to admit that I had been thinking the same thing. Especially since I had a good idea of what her next suggestion would be. “I’m not letting you question anyone.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She didn’t bother trying to hide her impatience. “If you want to overhear their conversations, and see if they’re wearing iron and what they have underneath their hats, we need to get inside.” She grabbed my hand and pulled me forward. “They aren’t looking at us. We can blend in with the crowd.”

I hung back, feet rooted to the sidewalk. It was too dangerous. If those doors closed behind us, escape would become that much more difficult. And standing outside the building was one thing, but inside, it was a lot more likely that someone would recognize that we didn’t belong.

But she was right. We weren’t getting anything like this.

Reluctantly, I nodded. In another of those abrupt surges of motion, she took a deep breath and all but flung herself at the door. But as her hand met the handle, she paused, eyes widening.

I didn’t need to ask what had made her stop. It was plain enough by the fact that no blisters were rising on her skin. And as soon as I brushed my own fingertips against the handle, I felt it myself. Or rather, didn’t feel it. The material might have looked like metal, but it hadn’t absorbed the cold of the air, the way metal should have. And more importantly, it didn’t send that familiar ache through my bones. There was no iron in it.

Behind us, someone ostentatiously cleared his throat. I pushed the door open the rest of the way, and forced my legs to carry me through behind Vicantha.

The reception area was taken up by a long, curved wooden desk, with a line to either side. At the front of each line, someone sitting at the desk checked IDs and fingerprints. Above the desk, I could still see the outlines of the letters where the former company's name had hung. Arkanica hadn't put anything there to replace it.

I hung back. I swept my gaze over the room, right to left, left to right. No one was looking at us. Still, I kept myself ready to run, with one eye on the exit.

"Why are you afraid?" Vicantha murmured in my ear. "Between your magic and mine, we could outfight all these people."

That was true in theory—at least if all of them were human, as Vicantha seemed intent on assuming—but it often didn't work like that in practice. All a human needed to do was incapacitate me for just long enough. Often, it was easier to fight the fae, because they were hampered by their own arrogant belief that I was too far beneath them to be a threat. Humans understood the danger I represented, and so they were more careful.

But I didn't say all that. "I'm not afraid," I said instead. I didn't know why. It wasn't as if I had anything to prove to her.

Vicantha made a small noise of disbelief. "I've fought in enough battles to recognize the smell of fear on my enemies."

At that, a man in front of us cast a curious glance over his shoulder. I shot another look toward the exit, reassuring myself that it was only steps away. "Not so loud," I hissed.

But Vicantha wasn't listening. She was sweeping her own eyes over the room—the floor, the walls, the ceiling. "Something is wrong with this building."

She was right. Only I wouldn't have called it *wrong*, exactly. If anything, it was the opposite. This place felt comfortable, in a way few large buildings did. Even so, something was missing. Despite the heat, and the obvious fact of the walls around me, my brain kept trying to convince me I was still standing outside.

It took me only a couple of seconds to land on the answer. "There's no iron in this building."

"Yes, there is," said Vicantha, her brow furrowed in concentration. "Not as much as there should be. And... not *where* it should be. The bones of the building are free of it. But it's still there."

That explained why Arkanica had bought the building instead of renting an office. I couldn't imagine what it must have cost them, to dig all the iron out of the building piece by piece while ensuring it would still stand. It also answered

the question of whether any fae were working here, no matter what Vicantha wanted to believe. I risked closing my eyes, trying to sense what she was sensing. After a moment, I shook my head. "I can't feel it."

"It's underground," said Vicantha. "Buried deep."

"If they worked so hard to remove all the iron from the building," I said, making sure to keep my voice low, "why leave it in place that far down?"

"I can think of a reason." Her voice wasn't hazy with distraction anymore. It was sharp and angry. I didn't realize she was moving forward, into one of the lines, until I caught a glimpse of fluorescent light gleaming off a bone dagger.

I tried to snatch the dagger from her hand, and nearly got a gash across my palm for my trouble. I positioned myself between the weapon and the rest of the room, doing my best to block everyone else's view. "It might not be what you're thinking. There may be other reasons they couldn't eliminate all the iron from the building. Maybe they need to operate machinery of some sort, and so they put it all so deep underground that it wouldn't bother the fae working here."

Vicantha shook her head. "They've been abducting fae. *Buying* them. What else could it be but a cage?"

The man ahead of us in line shrugged off his coat and tucked his hat under his arm. He didn't seem to have noticed our conversation. "I hate these outer layers," he remarked to someone in front of him. "I wish we had set up in a warmer climate."

Pointed ears poked up from under his blond hair.

Beside me, Vicantha tensed. She had seen it too.

"You know how hard it is to find a natural portal outside Europe," answered someone I couldn't see. "Especially one this size. The veil isn't thin enough in most of the world, and creating a new portal would draw too much attention back home. We're lucky we found this one."

"Why not Europe, then?" the man in front of us griped. "There must be some places across the Atlantic where it's not this cold."

"Because over there, they still remember how to fear us." I still couldn't see the other speaker, but I could hear his feral smile. "Besides, haven't you heard? America is the future of business."

"You're behind the times, like all fae," said someone from behind us. "China is the future of business."

"Well, when you find a portal that opens onto China, you let me know. Until then, get a warmer coat."

Vicantha gripped her weapon tighter. Behind us, someone breathed on our necks, trying to move the line forward. Vicantha didn't move.

"They're working together." Her voice was more breath than sound. "The fae,

working with humans. *Traitors.*” The last word left her mouth in a venomous hiss.

“Quiet,” I snapped in her ear. Probably no one could hear her, but some things shouldn’t be said at any volume. I tried to tug her out of line. Instead, she strode forward, dagger clenched in white-knuckled fingers. She eyed the fae man in front of her as if he were a target-practice dummy.

“Why should I be?” asked Vicantha—although thankfully, she still kept her voice low. “Why shouldn’t I kill them where they stand? The humans took this world from us. They spread their poison and drove us away. For two hundred years, we’ve been exiled to a cheap echo of our home. And now some of us are working side by side with them?”

Faerie might be nothing more than an echo of the human world, but it was still the world that had given rise to the fae, and the humans had far more right to call this world their home than the fae did. But this wasn’t the time to split hairs. “We won’t learn anything else here today.” And if she kept talking, we were going to get caught. Although from the way she was eyeing the man in front of us, I would be lucky if talking was all she did. “Let’s go back to the apartment. Regroup. Make a plan. I’ll check in with my contacts.”

The line lurched forward. The man ahead of us stepped up. Vicantha followed. So did I—I had no choice.

The fae man placed his index finger on the fingerprint reader the man at the desk was holding out to him. A green light flashed, and he drew his hand back in what looked like pain. “I’m never going to get used to that,” he muttered.

He blotted at his finger with a handkerchief. A small blue circle dotted the fabric.

Whatever that piece of equipment had been, it hadn’t been a fingerprint reader. It had pricked his finger, made him bleed.

To see if he was fae? But on the other side of the room, the man wearing a metal belt was going through the same process, and the light flashed green for him, too.

The fae flashed an ID card at the man behind the desk, who gave him a nod in return. The fae tucked the ID away and disappeared through the inner door. Vicantha stared after him hungrily.

The man at the desk gave us an impatient wave forward. “You going in?”

Vicantha didn’t answer. I wasn’t sure she had even heard him. Her unblinking gaze was fixed on the door the fae had disappeared through.

The man at the desk frowned. He gave her a second look. In a second, he would notice the weapon she was holding.

I tugged at her wrist, not caring what she might do to me in response. “Sorry,”

I said, flashing the man an insincere smile. “I think we left something in the car.” A flimsy excuse, but if it got us out the door, it would be enough. I pulled harder at Vicantha’s arm.

She shook her head, and seemed to snap out of the daze she had been in. Her eyes landed on the man at the desk, and the small black rectangle I had mistaken for a fingerprint reader, and finally on me. She didn’t let go of her weapon, but she did let me pull her out the door.

I didn’t breathe again until we were standing on the sidewalk. Then I only managed half a breath before the first bite of cold wind stole it away. Even after only a few minutes in the warm building, whatever mental armor I had built up against the winter chill had evaporated. As I hurried down the sidewalk, Vicantha in tow, I realized for the first time just how comfortable that building had felt—and not just because of the lack of iron. I wasn’t the only one in this town who liked to turn the thermostat up to Hawaiian-beach levels.

I didn’t slow down until we had put the building two full blocks behind us. If “blocks” was a meaningful distinction in a city whose layout was a signature on a prescription pad. Even then, I glanced over my shoulder to make sure we weren’t being followed as I reached into my coat pocket for my gloves.

I didn’t see anyone behind us. But instead of the woolen gloves, my fingers brushed the sharp edges of a folded scrap of paper. I knew I hadn’t put that there. I hadn’t made notes on paper since the advent of the smartphone. With centuries’ worth of practice wearing iron to keep my magic in check, adding one more bit of metal was a small price to pay for convenience.

I unfolded the paper. As I took in the few words printed in small square capital letters, I shot another look behind me, this one sharper. I sped up, even though I couldn’t see anyone back there but a man carrying a toddler on his shoulders and an old woman walking her dog.

“What is it?” asked Vicantha, craning her neck to see.

“We have a problem.” I handed her the note. Without breaking my stride, I read it over again along with her.

If Vicantha won’t stop you for us, we will. Leave Arkanica be, son of Oberon. Ensure that Mab’s right hand does the same. If we see either one of you again, all three of you will pay the price.

Below that was an address. An address I knew very well.

Vicantha stopped short in the middle of the sidewalk. With another glance behind us, I motioned her forward.

She looked over her shoulder, murdering her eyes. “Who did this?”

“I have no idea. They must have slipped it into my pocket while we were in the building.” Which meant at least one of the people inside had known we were

there all along. The chill I felt had nothing to do with the wind. “But it looks like they’ve given up on trying to get you to believe I’m responsible. Seeing us working together must have put a stop to that.”

“I should have placed an illusion over us before we went into the building,” said Vicantha, shaking her head at herself. “It used to be standard practice outside of Faerie. Everyone knew how to form a basic glamour. Now those who aren’t adept with illusion have lost the skill—did you see the man in there wearing a *hat* to hide his ears?—and those of us who still have the skill have lost the habit. We’re no longer used to having to hide our nature.” A second later, she frowned. “Wait. What do they mean, the three of us? And what is that address?”

I didn’t need the gloves anymore. My hands were clenched so tightly into fists that they were keeping themselves warm. “It’s the reason we’re done with all this,” I answered.

Vicantha turned her murderous glare on me. “You aren’t walking away. Not after what I sensed in there. I felt the iron in that building. Mab’s people are in there somewhere.”

Whether I continued helping her or not, Vicantha wasn’t going to give up. I would have known that even if she hadn’t said anything. Which meant I had no way to keep Arkanica from carrying out their threat.

Unless I stopped Vicantha myself.

It wouldn’t be the first time I had killed to protect a human. Or the first time I had killed one of the fae. But as I met her cold eyes, I already knew I couldn’t do it.

It wasn’t that I had qualms about killing in cold blood. I had left all that behind a long time ago, in the mud where it belonged. I had no illusions about what I was—not anymore. Humanity was rotten to the core, the fae were cruel and vicious, and I had the blood of both in my veins.

But killing Mab’s right hand would bring the wrath of the Winter Court down on me, ban or no ban. And that was something I couldn’t afford.

I broke our gaze and pulled out my phone. “In that case, I need to make arrangements.”

Chapter 8

“You’re sure this will work?” I asked Vicantha. I couldn’t keep the skepticism out of my voice. The apartment door didn’t look any different to me than it had before she had put her illusions into place. Maybe a tiny bit shabbier, with a few curls of peeling paint where none had been before. And I saw a silver shimmer that spoke of illusion magic at work. But that was it.

“On full humans, yes,” said Vicantha. “They’ll see the door as broken down, with rats scurrying across the floor beyond. As for the fae, I’m not sure. It won’t work if they’re actively trying to see through the illusion. I could strengthen it enough for it to work against them, but it would take more energy than I would prefer to spend. Illusion is far from my strongest skill, and I need to hold some strength in reserve in case the enemy finds us.” She glanced toward the stairwell. It felt like we had both been doing nothing but looking over our shoulders since our visit to the Arkanica building yesterday.

“If Arkanica comes sniffing around, we don’t know whether they’ll send humans or fae,” I said. “And now we know for sure now that they have fae working for them.”

Vicantha nodded reluctantly. Her eyes darkened at the mention of the fae working for Arkanica. For a second, I thought she was going to go off on another rant, but all she said was, “I’ll strengthen the illusion.” Then she paused. “You still haven’t told me on whose behalf I’m undertaking this effort.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “All that matters is that if Arkanica comes looking for her, they won’t find her.”

“It matters if I’ll be sharing an apartment with her.”

“You’ll hardly see her,” I assured her. “I’m giving her my bedroom—I’ll take the couch. And I’ll take responsibility for making sure she’s protected. All I need from you is the illusion. You won’t need to maintain it for long—we’ll be done here quickly enough, once my sources get back to me and give us enough information to let us formulate a plan of attack.” We had to end this soon, now that Arkanica had raised the stakes on me. One way or another, I would make sure of it.

Vicantha’s lips quirked up in amusement. “And here I thought you didn’t care about any humans. Isn’t that what you were trying to convince me of the other day?”

I didn’t return her smile. “Don’t make a joke of this,” I said, my voice carefully controlled. “You brought me into this situation. Which means that

because of you, someone who never should have been involved is in danger.”

“And yet you’re choosing to bring this person into the heart of that danger.”

Her aim was as precise with her words as with her daggers. In one sentence, she had gotten at the doubt that had been gnawing at me since I had contacted my assistant and told him to make the necessary arrangements. “I don’t trust anyone else to protect her against a threat,” I said, the words as much a reminder to me as an explanation for her. “I need her where I can see her.”

“If you let Arkanica kill the hostage, you remove their leverage,” said Vicantha. “An easy victory, one that requires no effort on your part.”

“Not an option.” I had to fight to keep the words from coming out as a growl. I hadn’t quite reached the point of regretting my decision not to remove Vicantha from the equation. Not yet. But the idea of seeing the back of her was another powerful motivation for ending this conflict quickly.

“Who is this woman you’re so intent on protecting?” Vicantha asked. “Is she your lover?”

My face twisted at the thought. “Not even close. And she’s not a woman. Not by modern standards, at any rate. She’s...” I paused, trying to figure out how to explain Skye Summerfield.

But before I could continue, I heard the whir-thunk of someone dragging a rolling suitcase up a flight of stairs. Behind me, a hesitant voice said, “Um... I’m looking for 25 Grove Street?”

I turned. The girl with the suitcase didn’t look familiar. But then, I hadn’t expected her to. I intentionally hadn’t asked my people to send me pictures over the years. I had done my part for her when I had set up the fund to keep her taken care of until age 18. Occasionally, I checked in for updates about her life and education, to make sure she was still being adequately cared for, and I always made sure I knew where her nomadic family was currently living. But I didn’t want any more of a connection to her life than that.

So my mental image of her came from five years ago, the first and last time I had ever seen her. The wild red hair was the same. But the ten-year-old girl drowning in her grandfather’s too-big shirt was gone. In her place was a petite teenager in a long patchwork skirt, and a denim jacket with decals of cats and planets sewn onto the denim. Her nails were painted blue, and sparkled with tiny silver galaxies. And her face...

Her face was Ernest’s face. I could only look at her for a couple of seconds before I had to turn away. I swallowed past the sudden lump in my throat. Ancient history, I reminded myself. The stuff of graveyards and museums. Ernest was dead, and so was the Kieran he had known.

Skye must have mistaken my reaction for confusion, because she looked

down at the ground, abashed, and said, "Sorry, I must be in the wrong place."

"No," I managed, although I still couldn't look at her. "This is the right place."

Vicantha looked from me to Skye and back again. "You brought a human child here," she said flatly.

"Quiet," I snapped, tensing at her easy use of the word "human" in front of one of them. Of all the things her TV shows had taught her, a survival instinct apparently wasn't one of them.

"Is she yours?" Vicantha asked.

"No." The word came out harsher than I meant it. But that was the one thing I had always been careful about, even before I had learned not to be reckless with my life. I could protect myself against the assassins, but I didn't intend to throw another part-fae into their path. Especially one whose magic would be diluted, and with it, their ability to defend themselves. There was a reason I had chosen more male than female companions, over the centuries.

Skye looked between the two of us, uncertainty growing on her face. "I'm... going to go. Someone must have written the address down wrong." She grabbed the handle of the suitcase and turned around.

"My name is Kieran Thorne," I said to her retreating back. "I brought you here. Come inside, and I'll explain everything."

Skye looked over her shoulder at the apartment door, disbelief naked on her face—along with a healthy helping of disgust. "In there?"

I had forgotten about Vicantha's illusion. "The place can look a little shabby at first," I said. "But it's just an *illusion*." I emphasized the last word, shooting Vicantha a significant look.

It took her a second to figure out what I wanted. But then the peeling paint vanished, along with the silver shimmer. Vicantha still didn't look at all happy about the situation. But at least now Skye wouldn't think I had brought her to a condemned apartment crawling with rats.

Skye blinked, and studied the door again. She didn't look any less hesitant than she had a moment ago.

She turned that hesitant look on me. "Then you... run the Kieran Thorne Scholarship for Gifted Children of Veterans?" She didn't bother to hide her skepticism.

I looked down at myself, to make sure I hadn't spilled anything on my shirt. I was wearing a pair of jeans identical to yesterday's, and a soft gray button-down shirt. Casual, yes, but nothing that should have inspired that reaction.

But I suppose the best clothes in the world couldn't overcome the oddness of showing up for a scholarship competition and finding oneself in a shabby

hallway above a convenience store in the middle of nowhere, staring at an apartment full of disappearing rats.

“My parents weren’t actually veterans, you know,” she said, as if she were hoping I would realize my mistake and send her home.

“But your grandfather was,” I said. “He fought in World War II. The scholarship extends to grandchildren. It’s all in the paperwork.” Paperwork she already had in her hands, if my people had done their job correctly.

“And... this is where I’m supposed to come to compete for the scholarship?” She looked down the short hallway, which didn’t lead anywhere except to a closed-off balcony. Then she glanced over her shoulder toward the stairwell, like she was thinking of making a run for it. “Where are all the other competitors?”

“Why don’t we go inside?” I offered. “Then I can explain everything.”

Skye looked at me like I had suggested she jump fully-clothed into the half-frozen river that ran along the east side of town. “Not a chance.” She crossed her arms. “The man I spoke to on the phone said this was a highly competitive opportunity. He said the committee had found out about me at the last minute, and they were only willing to open up an extra slot for me because they were so impressed with what I did with the data from Reggiani Chemical’s servers. ‘We’re seeking students with both technical expertise and the desire to be a force for good in the world,’ and so on. I don’t even know how he found out about that—*no one* should have been able to find out about that—but for a chance at a six-figure scholarship, I wasn’t going to ask questions.”

I fought to keep my face neutral, and to stop myself from asking questions of my own. My people had done the research, apparently. More research than I had done, over the years. I didn’t know what Reggiani Chemical was, or what Skye had done with their data, but all of a sudden, I wanted nothing more than to sit down in a comfortable chair and hear the story. When I realized I was imagining sitting across from Ernest, listening to him tell me the story in his soft voice, I tightened my watch around my wrist, and took comfort in the way the ache focused my attention.

“And now I show up,” Skye continued, “and I’m at some random apartment, and there’s no one else here. And I think I saw something moving in there a second ago.” She shot another confused glance at the door, which was now firmly closed, and not broken down like it must have appeared a moment ago.

I looked around. The stairwell was empty. I could give her my explanation here as easily as in the apartment. “I’m sorry for the confusion. I brought you here because—”

“Oh, I can guess why you brought me here,” she interrupted. “I should have known the whole scholarship thing was too good to be true. Whatever you want

me to do for that money, I'm not interested."

It took me a moment to follow her meaning. I had kept my distance from the human world for too long—long enough that I hadn't immediately realized how suspicious this would look. In retrospect, I didn't know how I had missed it. I should at least have remembered the threats to children that existed in this world, considering the threat I had saved Skye from five years ago.

Skye turned around again, head and shoulders forward like she was leaning into the wind. Everything about her demeanor screamed, *Don't say another word to me.*

I couldn't let her leave. Whoever had slipped me that note was out there watching. If I was lucky, they weren't watching the apartment. But I knew better than to count on that. If they saw her here, I wouldn't have brought her to safety. I would have led her straight into the arms of the people I was trying to protect her from.

I circled around her to block the stairwell. "You're in danger."

"Oh, believe me, I figured that part out already." She sped up, ducked under my arm, and practically threw herself down the first step.

Before she could get any further, I grabbed her arm, as lightly as I could while still holding her in place. "You can't—"

She dug something out of her pocket and held it out in front of me. Before I could see what it was, my eyes burst into flames. At least that was how it felt. No, on second thought, it felt more as if I had dunked my head into an ocean of acid. My eyes watered uncontrollably, blurring my vision, as the burning went on and on. What I could see didn't make sense—the angles were all wrong. I had barely enough presence of mind to figure out that I was lying on the floor. How had I gotten there?

A blurry shape took off down the stairs. The suitcase clunk-clunk-clunked behind her. I tried to call out, but I was too busy clawing at my eyes.

But another figure rushed through the air, and slammed Skye against the stairwell wall. She screamed, but the sound was quickly muffled—Vicantha had probably clamped a hand over her mouth. My guess was confirmed when my vision cleared enough to see Skye bucking and writhing against Vicantha's iron grip. She raised something in her right hand—the canister of pepper spray, I was guessing—and twisted her wrist, trying to get a good angle.

Vicantha ripped the canister from her grip and tossed it down the stairs after the suitcase, which was lying half-open at the bottom.

Skye was fighting half-competently, I noted muzzily through the pain as Vicantha dragged her toward the apartment door. Now that the initial shock had passed, her kicks and jabs were practiced, not the panicked flailing of someone

who didn't know how to defend themselves. Against a human opponent, she probably would have gotten away.

But Vicantha wasn't human. She threw open the apartment door and lifted Skye bodily off the ground to carry her inside.

I clambered to my feet and followed them, closing the door behind me. The burning in my eyes was already subsiding. I was shaking it off faster than a human would have, as my magic worked to heal the damage.

I found my voice again. "Put her down," I told Vicantha, hoping it was the right decision. "She can't listen to what we have to say if she's fighting you at the same time."

Although now that I was face to face with Skye, I had my doubts as to whether my prepared explanation would convince her. My story about an enemy of her long-dead parents, freshly out of jail and seeking revenge, had sounded plausible enough when I had come up with it yesterday. But if I had neglected to notice the obvious threatening connotations of bringing her here in the first place, I suddenly wondered what else I had missed.

"If we restrain her, we don't need to bother giving her an explanation," said Vicantha. "And you won't need to give up your bedroom."

"She's not our prisoner," I said. "Put her down."

Vicantha's look told me what she thought of my directive. But she did as I asked. As soon as her hand left Skye's mouth, Skye let out a bloodcurdling scream. She took off toward the door the second her feet touched the ground.

I stood in front of the door, and locked it behind me. Across the room, Vicantha raised an eyebrow. "I thought she wasn't our prisoner."

"She's not," I snapped. I turned to Skye. "I don't want to hold you here against your will. But if you go out there, you'll be walking directly into danger. There have been threats against your life. A man your parents used to know—"

But Skye wasn't even looking at me anymore. As soon as I had blocked the door, she had turned back to Vicantha, of all people. I didn't understand what she was doing until she said, "Did he threaten you, too? You don't have to help him, you know. We can get out together."

Vicantha tilted her head. I had to admit, even through my fear and frustration, some small part of me was intensely curious as to how she would respond.

But she didn't respond in words. Instead, she swept her hair to one side, revealing the delicate point of an ear.

Chapter 9

Whatever I had expected from Vicantha, it wasn't that. "What are you doing?" My voice was equal parts confusion and alarm.

"It worked for you in the bar," Vicantha answered. "It made the man trust us. I thought you wanted this human to trust us."

At the look on my face, she let her hair fall back into place. Maybe, I thought, Skye had been too blinded by her fear to see—or understand—what Vicantha had shown her. But my hopes were dashed when I saw the way she had frozen in place. I ventured closer, and circled around to peer at her face. Her eyes were twin saucers, her mouth hanging slightly open.

"You're..." she said, when she found the breath to speak. "You're fairies."

"Fae," Vicantha corrected with a scowl.

My brain told me Skye wasn't a threat. The rest of me was already scanning the room for anything I could use as a weapon. "What do you know about the fae?" I asked.

Skye tore her gaze from Vicantha long enough to turn that same look of wonder on me. "Sheila—she's my cousin, but she's basically my mom—puts cream out in a saucer for the fairies every night. Well, when she can. We live in an RV, so it depends on where we spend the night. We don't want to attract bears."

She wasn't running for the door. Or reaching for a weapon—although I suspected the pepper spray had been her only one. In an instant, all the wariness had vanished from her face. There was no room in her expression for anything but pure awe, painful in its raw intensity.

"Cream in a saucer?" Vicantha muttered. "Does she think we're cats?"

"Magic is everywhere," Skye continued, as if she hadn't heard Vicantha's comment. "As long as you know where to look. Most people just don't take the natural world seriously. They're too busy with their corporate jobs to remember how to believe." She took a break from her stare of astonishment long enough for a brief roll of her eyes. "When I turned thirteen, I made a sacred vow that even though I was growing up, I would never lose my sense of wonder, and I would never stop believing. Just like Sheila and Randall didn't. People laughed at me when they found out I still believed in fairies, but now it looks like I was right, doesn't it?" She folded her arms across her chest.

Over Skye's head, Vicantha shot an eloquent look at me that said, more

clearly than any words could have, *Do you have any idea what she's talking about?*

Skye paused mid-thought, and frowned. "Wait. How do I know those ears are real?"

I considered suggesting that she pull on them and find out, but I didn't want to see her lose a hand today. But Vicantha, it seemed, already had an idea of her own. Before I could say anything, she extended a hand. A glass that had been sitting on the counter flew into the sink with such force that it shattered into a dozen pieces.

I hadn't thought it was possible for Skye's eyes to get any bigger. I had been wrong.

It took her another moment to find her words again. "So... not that I'm not glad to meet you and everything, but would you mind telling me why exactly I'm being kidnapped by fairies? Don't you normally take babies?"

"That's a myth," said Vicantha. "And you're not being kidnapped. You're in danger from a human corporation that has been kidnapping agents of the Winter Court. Your father, or lover—he wasn't clear as to which—is trying to stop them, and so they're targeting you in an attempt to discourage him. He values your life more than he cares to admit."

"I'm not her father," I interjected with a frown. "Or her... lover." I could barely say the word while standing in the same room with Skye. I didn't know which made me more comfortable, the fact that she was Ernest's granddaughter or that she was, for all intents and purposes, a child. I was so distracted by my discomfort, it took me a few seconds too long to remember that wasn't the part I needed to be complaining about. "You're explaining too much. The less information, the better. For her sake and ours."

"I don't want her using that weapon on me," said Vicantha. "I saw what it did to you." Her eyes took on a faraway, thoughtful look. "Although I would like to study it to see if I could find an application for the concept."

Meanwhile, Skye was still mulling over Vicantha's explanation. Abruptly, she sat down hard on the couch, and almost disappeared in its plush cushions.

"Fairies can't lie," she said faintly. "Unless that's another myth?"

"It's not," Vicantha and I said at the same moment.

"Then everything you just said is true. I really am in danger." Her already-pale skin lost another layer of color. "But... why would they go after me?" She looked up at me. "I don't know you. Why would anyone use me to get to you?"

I watched her in silence for a moment, trying to figure out how much to tell her. This wasn't the explanation I had planned on giving today, and I was unprepared. I hadn't counted on needing to think too hard about the history that

had led Skye to my doorstep, let alone say any of it out loud. “I knew your grandfather,” I finally said, settling on the barest facts. “We fought in the war together.”

Skye’s brow furrowed as she studied my face. I could see her calculating years and ages in her head.

“The fae live a long time,” I added.

“So you were in the army with my grandfather a long time ago,” said Skye. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Your grandfather was...” I paused another moment, before giving up on trying to explain the layers of history between us. “He meant a great deal to me. Which means, by extension, so do you. And somebody figured that out.”

“How?” Skye asked. “I’ve never met you before in my life.” She frowned, and returned to studying me deeply. “Have I?”

Only once. But I hoped she didn’t remember that. “I’ve been sending money to your cousins, for your care and education, since your grandfather’s death. They must have traced that back to me.” Which meant they had broken through the layers of protection I had put into place to make it look like the money was coming from a nonexistent charity.

“You mean the money from that Families of Veterans Fund thing? That’s all just... you?” She went stiff, like she was thinking of running again. I supposed no matter how much somebody wanted to believe in magical beings, the thought of one watching over their shoulder for a third of their life was more than a little unnerving.

I nodded. “It wasn’t a hardship. Living this long means money isn’t a problem. Speaking of which, I also have the money to give you the scholarship you were promised. I didn’t lure you here under entirely false pretenses.” I worded it that way on purpose, insinuating instead of promising her the money outright. But it was purely out of habit. I had no intention of cheating Ernest’s granddaughter out of an amount I could easily spare. “There’s no need to compete against anyone else for it, either. All you have to do is stay here until the danger has passed.”

Skye shook her head. “I don’t need the...” She stopped herself. “Okay, yes, I really do. But you have to admit, this is all intensely weird.” She gave another glance toward the door.

Vicantha caught her glance too. “I don’t intend to wrestle with a recalcitrant human for the remainder of our time here,” she said. “Convince her, or find an alternate solution. For now, I’m tired of this conversation. Let me know when the matter is decided, or when your contacts get around to providing us useful information.” She stalked out of the room, and slammed the door to her

bedroom.

Skye's gaze followed her. "Those kidnapped fairies she mentioned," she said, like it was a question.

I nodded. "Her family. Or something like it." I paused. "She's worried about them."

"And that's what they're trying to stop you from doing? Helping these other fairies?"

That was a massive oversimplification of whatever it was that lay between Vicantha and me. And I didn't want her to see me the way Vicantha did, as someone who would throw myself into danger for strangers who would likely reward me with a knife to the heart if I succeeded. But I had to—grudgingly—admit that what she had said was technically true. And if it would keep her in the apartment...

"Yes," I said, hoping she couldn't hear the reluctance in my voice.

She nodded slowly, like she was busy thinking. "I don't know who you are," she said, "and to say this isn't what I expected would be an understatement. But you're the good guys, fighting the good fight, and I don't want to do anything that will make that harder for you." She took a deep breath. "I'll call my cousins and let them know I made it to the competition okay." She narrowed her eyes at me. "But I'm getting my pepper spray back. And I'm sleeping with it under my pillow."

I tried not to flinch. But the part about the pepper spray wasn't the only thing she had said that bothered me. The conviction in her voice when she had said we were the good guys... it had made her sound so impossibly young. She wasn't wrong, exactly. If anyone was on the side of the angels in this, it was likely to be us—although I would reserve final judgment until I found out why Mab's agents had come here in the first place. But anyone who thought good and evil were so simple, and was willing to take the kind of risk she was taking just for the sake of someone else's noble cause, was hurtling on a collision course toward disappointment.

"Don't get me wrong," I said. "I'm glad you've chosen to stay. But what makes you so convinced we're fighting the good fight?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Do you have to ask? You're fairies! The literal embodiment of good magic. And you're fighting an evil corporation who's kidnapping your families. And probably polluting your groves while they're at it."

I fought the urge to bury my head in my hands. "Not all magic is good," I said, as gently as possible.

"You set up all this just to protect me. One person. Isn't that enough proof?"

Her eyes shone with wonder. It made my head hurt.

I turned away. “The bedroom is already set up for you. There’s nothing you need to do but stay there and relax until this is over.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Skye’s face fall. “Isn’t there anything I can do to help?”

“The best thing you can do for us is to keep yourself out of danger.”

She let out a soft sigh. “Well, I guess just being this close to magic is better than nothing.” She stood and trudged into what had been my bedroom. Before she closed the door, she cast a hopeful look over her shoulder, like she was waiting for me to change my mind. I pretended I didn’t see.

I waited in front of the bedroom door for a moment, making sure she wasn’t going to sneak out. Then I walked to the door, intending to go get her suitcase for her—and conveniently “lose” the pepper spray—but found myself staring at the doorknob, unable to open it. Our brief conversation had set me off balance. I walked to the fridge instead, and took out a drink. But I didn’t open it, suddenly reluctant to impair my faculties even a little.

This was the safest place for Skye. I had no doubt of that. But having her here also meant I had a major point of vulnerability right here in the apartment. The other day, I had been willing to blow the whole place to hell to get away from Vicantha. That wasn’t a risk I could take anymore.

I took out my phone and dialed my assistant. He had a name, but I preferred not to learn it. The fewer personal connections one maintained in one’s life, the safer one was. Our relationship was purely transactional, which, as far as I was concerned, made it ideal.

“Where’s that information I asked for?” I asked when he picked up. “Shouldn’t somebody have been able to find something by now?”

I didn’t like the long pause that followed my question. Finally, my assistant cleared his throat. “I’ve heard back from everyone I reached out to. No one has been able to find anything. They’ve gone through every back channel they have access to, and no one has even been able to learn what industry this company is in. One of your sources did find out that they’re getting some sort of government funding... from at least three governments. But nobody seems to have any idea what they’re doing with it.”

I tried not to grind my teeth too loudly. “Tell them to keep working at it. Through the night if they have to. I’ll pay them double the usual fee for anything they can find. No, make it triple.”

Another long pause. “They’re not willing to take this any further.”

I blinked. “None of them?”

“The brick walls they’re running into aren’t the kind that can be scaled with

time and elbow grease. That's the impression I was given, in any case. And this company you're looking into is already getting suspicious. They've initiated a bogus lawsuit against the shell corporation one of your sources was using to try to gain access to information."

"I'll pay whatever legal fees come up."

"That's not the point. Our current efforts aren't getting anywhere. If you want more, you're going to have to move on to less-than-legal means. And no one I talked to is willing to go that route." Another pause. "Neither am I, to be frank. No matter how much you pay me, I don't plan on risking jail for you—or whatever else a company with this much power, and this much to hide, could do to me. I don't think you'll find anyone who isn't in agreement with me on that."

He didn't wait for me to answer before he hung up.

I hadn't expected my sources to hand me a solution on a silver platter. Hoped, maybe, but not expected. But I also hadn't expected them to hit a complete dead end. I had thought we were fighting a tiny company hidden away in a little-known town in New England. Even once we had seen the fae in their lobby, even after they had threatened Skye, I hadn't truly understood. We were going to have to revise our conception of what we were up against.

And not getting any easy information meant we would be spending more time looking into them on our own. Which meant it would take longer for us to rescue Mab's agents... which, in turn, meant more danger for Skye. Not to mention more time before I could get back to not having to worry about anyone or anything but keeping my tan even and picking the right wine with dinner.

I stared at the bedroom door for a long time, arguing with myself, before I walked up to it. Even then, I stood with my hand raised, unable to bring myself to knock. What I was considering... it went against everything in me. I didn't know which part I hated more—the prospect of putting a human in danger, or the thought of trusting one of them.

But Skye was a part of this regardless. Arkanica had already made that decision for us both. I didn't have the power to change that, only the power to choose my reaction. And the best reaction was one that would make them regret ever involving any of us in this.

I knocked on Skye's door.

Naked hope shown on her face as she threw it open. I would have hated having to quash that hope. Instead, I was going to fulfill it, and I hated that even more.

I stepped into the room. "The man you spoke to about the scholarship—what did you say he offered you the slot for? Something about a... Reggiani Chemical?"

She nodded. “But that was just an excuse, right? You don’t actually care about that. Or my grades, or my test scores, or any of it.” She tried to smile. “Don’t misunderstand, the fact that I’m here at all with you is... I’m more honored than I can say. I just can’t help but wish it was because of something I had done, and not who my grandfather was.”

She might be about to get that wish. “Tell me what you did.”

“With Reggiani Chemical?” She looked confused, but nodded. “We were staying at this campground in Idaho, right next to a huge pond. I had been looking forward to it for weeks—I hadn’t gotten to go swimming in almost a year. Only the water had this gray film on it, and dead fish kept washing up on shore. When we asked around, everyone just shrugged, and said we probably shouldn’t swim in the water, what with all the crap Reggiani was dumping it. Like that was just... ordinary.” She shook her head. “So I went digging for information. Digging through files I wasn’t exactly supposed to have access to. At first, I just wanted to see if it was safe to swim. But I got really into the challenge. It was something to do, you know? It was tough, too. Took me almost a week.”

“You found proof that they were polluting the water, and publicized it,” I guessed.

She shook her head, blowing a raspberry. “I mean, yeah, I found proof. But what would have been the point of putting it out there? I’ve seen what happens with those stories—it’s all over the news for a while, and then everyone moves on to the next thing, and the company pays off enough people that they can keep on doing whatever they’re doing.” A sly grin spread over her face. “No, I got into the stuff they were keeping *really* under wraps. The formula for some next-generation jet engine coolant. I had no idea what made it any different from whatever they’re using in planes now. But I figured, if it was important enough to lock it up tighter than the evidence that they were breaking the law...” She shrugged. “So I blasted it everywhere on the internet. Emailed every single one of their competitors, too. Presto, out of business inside of six months.”

Apparently she had less of a survival instinct than Vicantha did. “You took a considerable risk.”

“I covered my tracks. Anyway, we left the week after. We were across the border to Canada before it made the news. For unrelated reasons, of course—I never told my cousins what I had done. They may be all about ‘finding educational experiences in the real world,’ but somehow, I don’t think they would have approved.” Her proud smile looked anything but regretful. “But Randall had heard some story about Bigfoot sightings and wanted photos to sell to **Weird America Weekly,** and Sheila wanted me to see the natural habitat of

elk for my homeschool science unit. And my name never showed up in the news, and no one ever came after me, so I think I did okay.”

“If you do what I’m about to ask you to do,” I said, “you’re going to need to be even more careful than that.”

She tried to hide the way her eyes lit up. She didn’t come anywhere close to succeeding. “What do you need me to do?”

I took a deep breath, and forced the words out. “I need you to find out everything you can about a company called Arkanica. But—”

“Sure, no problem,” she said easily. “Heck, I might as well do something to earn all that scholarship cash you’re throwing at me.”

“I’m not finished. This is dangerous. More dangerous than making a little-known producer of jet engine coolant angry. It could put you in the crosshairs of some very bad people. And I want to make sure you know the scholarship isn’t contingent on you doing this. I won’t force you, and the money is available no matter what you choose to do.”

“Aren’t I already in their crosshairs?” Skye pointed out. “That’s why I’m here in the first place, isn’t it? Anyway, it’s not about the money. This is a chance to help out *real live fairies*. Who on this planet would turn that down?”

I could think of more than a few. But I didn’t tell her that.

She reached for the decal-covered laptop sitting on the bed. But I placed my hand on it before she could open it. “Wait.”

She paused, brow furrowed.

“Before you agree to this,” I said, “you need to understand something. Really understand it, not just say the words.” I looked her in the eye, and tried not to despair at the brightness of youth I saw there. “This isn’t some noble crusade. You aren’t fighting on the side of the angels. There are no angels in this world. Only monsters.”

“Well, someone’s got to slay the monsters. Isn’t that what all the fairy tales are about?” Skye shrugged. “And if I can do it while earning a truckload of cash for college, so much the better.”

Hearing her dismiss the truth so easily hurt more than the ache of the laptop against my palm. But even though I had said she needed to understand this fully, there was only so much I could do to make that happen. I had hoped to see some flicker of understanding in her eyes. But deep down I had known, before I said anything, that she would need to learn this lesson for herself. Just like I had.

I just hoped the lesson wouldn’t be as violent for her as it had been for me. She, after all, was only human. If she died, there was no magic in her veins to bring her back.

I wanted to say it again, and again, and again, until something got through.

Instead, I lifted my hand from the laptop. Within seconds, she was cross-legged on the bed, tapping away at the keyboard. She had already forgotten about me and what I had been trying to tell her.

I backed out of the room and quietly closed the door behind me.

Chapter 10

I lay on the couch, wrapped in all three of Vicantha's wool blankets. I hadn't wanted to use my own and leave Skye without, and I was certain Vicantha neither needed nor wanted them. But despite the warmth, and the fact that I had won the thermostat battle for the night, I wasn't asleep.

Not because I was too tense to let go of consciousness. Sleep had tried to steal over me more than once already, luring me in with siren songs of curling up in my warm nest and waking up well-rested. But I knew better than to listen.

Tonight, I had other plans.

In my former bedroom, Skye was still tapping away at her laptop. The clack-clack of the keys sounded like booted mice scampering back and forth across the floor. I hated to leave her, even only for an hour or two. But for all Vicantha's aversion to having a human in the apartment, I knew that if someone were to attack, she would jump straight to the first and only tool in her toolbox—violence. She might think letting Skye die was the best strategic decision, but that didn't mean she would open the door for the people who had kidnapped Mab's agents and escort them with a smile to Skye's bedroom. Neither would she do anything to Skye herself, when she had seen how close I had come to unleashing my magic on her for less.

And what I wanted to do, I couldn't do with Vicantha and Skye along. Skye was a liability, and as for Vicantha, I knew better than to think she would let me have the conversation I needed to have.

I pushed the blankets aside, only because I would have drawn attention walking down the streets of Hawthorne wrapped in a cocoon of wool. I grabbed my coat, and my keys, and slipped out the door. I eased it silently shut behind me.

There weren't many people out on the streets at this time of night. The few humans on the sidewalk scurried ahead with their shoulders hunched, hurrying from streetlight to streetlight. I kept hearing the cry of something that wasn't quite a bird and wasn't quite a wolf. No matter how far I walked, it always sounded like it was coming from the next street over. More than once, I caught a glimpse out of the corner of my eye of something on the horizon that resembled the Northern Lights, but whenever I looked at it head-on, all I saw was the flat starless gray of a cloudy sky at night. Once, I jumped at the sight of a humanoid figure oozing out of an alley toward me, but a closer examination revealed only my shadow—a shadow whose movements were slightly out of sync with my

own.

I knew it was all just magic bleeding over from the Faerie portal. I also knew that even if this place really were full of ghosts and goblins, I could have made short work of anything that made the mistake of threatening me. Even so, I pulled my coat a little tighter. I was beginning to understand why most people who moved to Hawthorne didn't stay long.

Most of the businesses I passed were dark. The restaurants and bars that were open this late were lit with a dim don't-notice-me glow. The Drunken Scarecrow was the lone exception. It was draped with orange Christmas lights that shone like a beacon in the night. The Monster Mash blared inside, so loud I could hear it from the sidewalk. I stood a little straighter as I took it in, and my next breath came a little more easily.

I understood now what Jimmy had been saying. After walking down those streets, seeing things I shouldn't have been seeing and hearing things I shouldn't have been hearing, the campy Halloween aesthetic of this place made it feel like everything out there had just been a part of the joke. I knew that was an illusion, every bit as much as the Northern Lights and the cries in the night, but I felt a moment of gratitude for Jimmy anyway as I ducked into the bar.

Every seat at the bar was full, as well as half the booths. Most of the customers looked fairly young, with only a couple of exceptions. I quickly ran through my knowledge of this particular time and culture. Yes, they all looked about the right age to be recently finished with their education, and moving to a new place in search of work. If what I had learned about Hawthorne so far was correct, six months from now three-quarters of them would be gone.

A different person was working behind the counter now, a harried-looking woman with pink hair and big round glasses. The ghost had become a mummy, but although the costume was different, the build of the figure underneath was the same. The mummy walked from booth to booth taking orders, while the pink-haired woman poured drinks and held up a finger in a wait-one-minute gesture to the people who were getting too impatient.

I slid into one of the empty booths and waited. Despite the crowd, it took less than five minutes for the mummy to walk up, pen hovering above an order pad. "What can I get you?" a melodic male voice asked.

I held the mummy's cold blue gaze. "Arkanica."

The mummy stiffened. He turned to run. I grabbed his arm before he could. "Sit," I ordered.

He paused, clearly weighing the benefits of obeying me or taking his chances at outrunning me. I decided to help him out. "You know how many ways a confrontation with someone who knows the truth about you could go against

you,” I said in a low voice, just loud enough to be heard over the Monster Mash. “I’m offering you a chance to make it go your way. Sit.”

The mummy wrenched his arm away. I half-stood, preparing to take off after him, then let myself sit again as he slid into the seat across from me.

He undid the wrappings around his face. He had the delicate, angular features of the fae. His ice-blond hair was a photo negative of Vicantha’s, but their eyes were identical. The Winter fae tended to run in one of two directions, in terms of appearance—hair at the extreme end of pale or the extreme end of dark, and the same with their eyes, but always cold and severe. Most of the Summer fae, on the other hand, had eyes that evoked greenery and warm beaches, and hair the red of flame or the gold of summer fields. Or, every once in a while, hair that was almost black, but with a hint of red underneath, and amber-flecked dark eyes. Those were the ones who took after Oberon. The ones like me.

“You’re the one Jimmy was talking about. The one who hasn’t been taken.” I didn’t bother making it into a question. “For all he pretends it’s just a business arrangement, he cares about the fae under his protection—I could hear it in his voice. Which means he wouldn’t be willing to let you out of his sight, once it became clear that going into hiding wouldn’t be enough to save you. That’s the reason for the costumes, right? To throw Arkanica off the scent, when they come looking.”

His eyes drilled into mine in a painfully-obvious attempt at intimidation. “Who are you?” he demanded.

I held his gaze until I was the one daring him to look away, and not the other way around. “Let’s talk about who you are. You’re one of the five Winter Court agents who crossed over recently, right? The ones who disappeared.”

He tensed, and didn’t answer.

“If I’m interpreting your situation correctly, you’re already backed against a wall,” I said. “I’m trying to give you a way around that wall. Answer the question.”

He gave a small, jerky nod.

“I’m assuming Jimmy passed on our message,” I said. “Vicantha, Mab’s right hand, is here to save you. But you haven’t gone to see her. With rescue a few minutes’ walk away, you wouldn’t keep yourself in danger unless you had a very good reason.”

A flash of fear crossed his face. He pressed his hands against the table as he pushed himself to his feet.

I caught his wrist again. “Remember what I said about wanting this confrontation to come out well for you?”

“You’re working with her.” The music was gone from his voice. It was a

knife now, sharp and cold. And, buried almost too deep to hear, afraid.

“I don’t care about fae politics,” I said. “I only want one thing—Arkanica. And I think you can give them to me. What I’m thinking is, it takes more than a Halloween costume to evade the people who snatched up your fellow agents one by one even after they went into hiding. If it were that easy to stay out of Arkanica’s sight, none of you would ever have been taken. No—you wear the costumes to keep Jimmy happy. But you don’t need them. You’re not in any real danger.”

The growing fear on the man’s face, too sharp now for him to hide, told me I was on the right track.

“You figured something out about Arkanica,” I said, “and you’re using it to keep yourself safe. Maybe you have something on them. Maybe you made a deal. Or maybe you found a way to make them believe you would be more trouble than you’re worth. Whatever it is, you used it to save yourself, but not the rest of Mab’s people. And now you don’t want Vicantha figuring out what you’ve done.”

The fae flinched. “You’ve got it wrong.”

“Don’t try to convince me you’re a good person,” I said levelly. “I already know you’re not. The fae are what they are. Let’s accept that and move on.” I opened my hands to him, palms up. “I want whatever you know about Arkanica. If you give me useful information, it could mean the difference between Vicantha finding you, and you receiving considerable financial help to leave town and stay under the radar.”

Temptation brightened his eyes. But he shook his head. “Sorry. I hope you find someone who can help you.”

I stretched my hands further across the table, and caught his fingers in my own. I tightened my grip. “Tell me you don’t know anything about Arkanica,” I said, keeping my voice low as I leaned across the table. “Say it. If you can.”

“I know they exist. And I know they’re abducting the fae.” He tried to twist his hands away.

I didn’t let go. “Do you know more than that?”

He tried. He opened his mouth, but only a mewling sound came out. Even the fact that he was willing to try to lie to me at all said something. He was less afraid of his magic burning him up from inside than he was of what Vicantha would do to him if she found out the truth.

After a full minute of straining and gasping, he slumped. “Yes.”

“Well? Out with it,” I said, when he didn’t say anything else.

He shook his head. “You don’t know what she’ll do to me.”

“If you don’t give me what I need,” I said, “you’ll find out. I can have her

here in one phone call.”

I expected that to scare him. Instead, his brow furrowed as he eyed me like he was seeing me for the first time. “Wait. You’re the half-fae, aren’t you? Oberon’s son.”

I kept my face neutral, and didn’t answer.

He took that as a yes. His mouth turned upward, just a hair. “You won’t let her hurt me. You protect people.”

“I *protected* humans—past tense. I killed fae.”

“Only the ones sent to kill you. And not all of those. I’ve heard the stories. How you won the heart of Summer’s greatest assassin, defeating her with love rather than magic.”

I scowled. “We’re getting off topic. Do you want to gamble on me being as softhearted as you think I am? Or do you want to give me the information I’m looking for?”

He hesitated. Fear flickered in his eyes again. Apparently he didn’t believe the myths about me well enough to trust his life to them. Good.

And still, he hesitated.

I studied him more closely. “You’re not just afraid of Vicantha, are you?” I asked. “You’re afraid of Arkanica.”

His silence was acknowledgment enough.

“We’re on the same side,” I said. “We both want them stopped, so we can get back to our lives. And if I do it for you, you’ll never have to worry about them again. That’s half your problem taken care of, right there. As for the other half, I can give you the money to run. Vicantha will never find you on her own. She doesn’t know how to navigate the human world.”

“It’s not your world,” the fae said reflexively. He didn’t comment on my offer. Couldn’t bring himself to say yes, and commit himself to doing something that would paint a larger target on his back if it went wrong. But the temptation in his eyes was growing.

Enough of this. Every second I spent here was time I wasn’t guarding Skye back at the apartment. I would ask my questions. He could answer or not, depending on how well he could recognize a good offer when he saw one. “Do you know how to get inside the Arkanica building without going through security?” I asked.

“No,” he said easily.

“Do you know what they want with the ones they’re abducting?”

This time, he bit his lip, and waited a few seconds before answering. “Some of it,” he said, glancing to the side.

“They have fae working for them,” I said. “Why did the fae agree to help

them?”

He stared down at the table, and didn't answer.

But I was getting somewhere. He hadn't been entirely unwilling to answer my question about what Arkanica was doing. And he hadn't walked away yet—which meant he was still willing to consider my offer. “All right, then. Let's start with—”

A pale, slender hand slammed down on the table hard enough to rattle the entire booth.

I looked up, and was unsurprised to meet Vicantha's eyes, the same pale blue as those of the fae in front of me but several degrees colder.

Before I could say anything, she grabbed my shoulders and hauled me out of the booth. Caught off guard, I didn't have a chance to fight. It was all I could do to keep my footing as she tossed me to the side.

The fae shrank back against the vinyl. He quivered.

But all Vicantha's attention was on me. She leaned in, lips bared in a snarl. “Why are you speaking to one of my people without my permission?”

I had a few questions of my own. “What are you doing out here?” I demanded. “You left Skye alone in the apartment. Have you forgotten the danger she's in?”

“The human is your problem. My people are mine.” The sharp points of her teeth glinted in the garish orange light. “Tell me why I shouldn't rip you limb from limb for threatening a subject of Winter.”

“I wasn't threatening him,” I said, as mildly as I could. I didn't want this to turn into a fight—not while we were still in public, anyway. Already, a few curious heads had turned in our direction. If the three of us had anything in common, it was that none of us could afford to attract human attention.

Vicantha jabbed a finger at the fae, who cringed back like she had struck him. “Look at him! Do you see his fear? What did you say to him?”

The fae stared up at me, silently beseeching me not to reveal his secret. The plea was as loud as if he had screamed it in my ear.

“He's afraid of Arkanica,” I said, “not of me. We were having a conversation, that's all. He may have a lead. Give me another few minutes with him, and I'll update you once I've learned something useful.”

Vicantha shook her head. “Not a chance. Go home. I'll handle this.”

The fae's eyes grew wider. *Don't leave me alone with her*, I could practically hear him begging.

“This is not open for negotiation,” said Vicantha, when I didn't move. “Unless you wish to remove that iron shackle of yours here, in the middle of a crowded room, and test your magic against mine, you will leave immediately

and let me do what I came here to do—protect Mab’s people.”

I didn’t reach for my watch. That option was off the table. But I didn’t move, either. “He has information that could help us.”

“Then the two of us will talk,” said Vicantha, “and he will pass that information on to me. The one he *should* be reporting to, and not a stranger who wants no part of this mission.” She pointed to the door. “Go. Guard your human. I know you value her life more than ours—you’ve made your contempt for us plain. So attend to your priorities, and leave my people alone.”

I felt like I was betraying the costumed fae when I turned away. But I had never promised him anything. I never did—I knew how to be careful with my words. And he, for his part, had never accepted my deal. Besides, Vicantha’s ire had all been directed at me, for interfering with the person she was supposed to be protecting. She didn’t seem to have made the same connections I had. If he was careful, chances were Vicantha would never find out about his treachery.

Ignoring the fae’s pleading look, I walked out the door.

Chapter 11

Vicantha had been right. As soon as Arkanica had threatened Skye, protecting her had become my highest priority. The thought of her alone in the apartment made my skin itch. And the thought of leaving her there for any longer than necessary turned the itch into a scream.

But I didn't want to leave the fae man alone with Vicantha, either.

It wasn't about his life. Even if I had decided to go back to my old ways, and even if I had taken it on myself to protect the fae as well as the humans, I would hardly have started with this one. He had all but admitted to not saving the rest of Mab's agents when he could have. If there had been some small scrap of goodness hiding in the hearts of some of the fae—which I knew better than to believe—he would not have been one of them.

But he had information. And I couldn't trust Vicantha to ask him the right questions. If our confrontation in the bar had been any indication, she was too blinded by loyalty to see that he wasn't entirely on her side.

I hadn't tried to tell her in the bar. I had been afraid of setting off her wrath if I maligned one of Mab's agents, and unwilling to condemn the fae to death before he had a chance to tell us what he knew. But if I followed them, I might have a chance to step in before things went wrong. Before he took advantage of her selective vision to wriggle away from our grasp and disappear. Before he took it upon himself to slide a knife between her ribs in anticipation of her doing the same to him. Before... I shook my head. There was no sense in going over all the ways this could go wrong. What mattered was that I would be there to stop it.

Skye could wait a little longer.

I stepped into the shadow of a nearby building and let it wrap me in darkness as Vicantha and the fae stepped out of the bar. The strangeness of Hawthorne worked in my favor—the shadows were darker than they should have been, and neither Vicantha nor her companion looked in my direction as they passed. Of course, that could also have been that Vicantha was watching the man with a mixture of triumph and protective concern, while he was keeping his gaze fixed to the sidewalk, desperately trying not to let his rescuer see how afraid he was.

Vicantha leaned in and murmured fiercely in his ear, loud enough for me to hear. "You are under the protection of Winter again. The humans cannot touch you." That sharp tone of promised retribution was probably what passed for comfort with Vicantha.

They walked down the cold streets, and I followed. I didn't have enough control over my magic to wrap an illusion around myself, so I stuck to the shadows. Luckily, it was the darkest part of the night, and Hawthorne had more than its share of dark corners.

The cold was more of a problem than the light. Freezing air assaulted my nostrils with every breath I took. Even inside my gloves, my hands were going numb, and I couldn't feel my toes anymore. The two fae ahead of me strode through the night, neither of them wearing so much as a coat. The bandages of the fae man's costume trailed behind him, revealing bare arms and a thin t-shirt underneath. He and Vicantha didn't even have goosebumps, or flushed cheeks from the wind.

"What did he want to know?" asked Vicantha. I was staying back far enough that I could barely hear the question. But I didn't need her to elaborate to know she was talking about me.

"He asked about Arkanica," the man answered. "About why they didn't take me." I wondered if Vicantha could hear the reluctance in his voice.

"And what did you tell him?" asked Vicantha.

I had to admit, I was curious as to how he would avoid answering the question. As it turned out, he did it by changing the subject. "Are you really working with him?" he asked. "A half-fae? One who's killed so many of us?"

"He's a useful tool," Vicantha answered. "For now."

The fae didn't say anything for a moment. I wondered if he was thinking about the stories about me and Tristra. About what happened the last time one of the fae had decided not to kill me. But if he was, he didn't say anything. He had enough of a sense of self-preservation for that.

"Are you here to stop Arkanica?" he asked.

"I was sent to save you and the others. From what I've learned so far, it seems Arkanica is responsible for their disappearance. Is that correct?"

The fae nodded.

"But they didn't take you," said Vicantha.

I wasn't close enough to see, but I could picture the sweat that had to be building up around the man's collar. Assuming the fae sweated like humans. It was a question I had never had occasion to ask. Pondering it might have been an amusing diversion, but I wasn't in the mood to be amused.

"No," was all the man said.

"Well done," said Vicantha. "From what the human told us, they were able to track the others down even after they tried to run. The fact that you escaped their notice speaks to your cleverness and skill."

The man didn't allow his relief at her lack of suspicion to show. But I could

sense it, all the same.

Vicantha led the man past an abandoned skeleton of a building, and under a sign that led into a small park. Oak trees lined a stone path that ran along the Black River, which cradled the east side of Hawthorne like a cupped hand. A bitter breeze rolled off the river; as I disappeared into the shadows of the trees, it sliced at my face, until I imagined my eyes icing over, my breath freezing in my lungs.

Vicantha and her companion turned into the wind in unison, tilting their chins up and basking in the frigid breeze. They both seemed to relax slightly as they continued down the path, comforted by the relentless assault of the cold. I scowled, watching them, and pulled my coat in closer as I stuck to the trees.

The further we got into the park, the more the skin on the back of my neck prickled, and the more I felt the urge to look over my shoulder even though I knew nothing was there. The park was empty—I could tell because of the silence, a thick and heavy quiet that hung in the air like a layer of fog. But that didn't stop me from feeling the sensation of eyes in the trees all around me. With every step, the small forest grew darker—darker than the shadows on the road, darker than the entrance to the park, much darker than this small cluster of trees should have been. All around me, the air hummed with malevolence.

Another path split off from the first, winding into the trees. The stones were scattered. A small sign, or half of one, stood at the fork. It looked like it had once explained some aspect of the town's history. But half of it was gone, sheared off in what looked like it had been a lightning strike. The remainder was blackened and crumbled, with deep rot finishing what the lightning had started.

If the streets of Hawthorne had echoed with strangeness, this place screamed with it. Even as I had the thought, I heard another of those not-quite-birdlike cries. A second one answered it, and a third. Ahead of me, Vicantha and her companion kept walking without breaking their stride. Neither of them gave any sign that they had heard anything out of the ordinary.

Hawthorne was the site of a Faerie portal. And I would have bet a good percentage of my fortune that we were standing mere feet away from that portal right now.

"Why are we here?" asked the man. "I can't go home yet. Mab still needs me here."

Then I had been right about the portal. Also, the fact that he had been able to easily say he still had work to do meant it was more than an excuse. Whatever other reasons he might have for not wanting to go home and face the judgment of Winter, he genuinely did have a mission in this world, and that mission wasn't done. Interesting.

“What does Mab need you to do?” Vicantha asked. “Why did she send you here?”

“You’re not authorized to know.” Again, the words seemed to come easily. He wasn’t trying to fight his inability to lie. He didn’t need to. He was speaking pure truth.

That didn’t escape Vicantha’s notice, either. Her face darkened. “You do know who I am, do you not?”

The same man nodded. “I’m sorry. That’s what I was told.”

Even in the dark, I could clearly read Vicantha’s frustration on her face. So could the man—he edged away from her as much as he could without making it obvious what he was doing.

Vicantha shot her arm out and yanked him back in. He went rigid. But all she did was scowl. “What exactly do you expect me to do to you? It would be senseless to blame you for the orders you were given.”

She came to a stop by the water’s edge. He joined her. She picked up a stone and blew on it, then tossed it over the surface of the water. It skipped over the water again and again, longer than the laws of physics should have allowed, until it disappeared into the distance.

“This is far enough,” said Vicantha.

I couldn’t see her eyes. But the fae man could. And when he looked into those eyes, a shudder ran through him.

“Far enough for what?” He almost managed to hide the tremble in his voice.

“For no humans to be alarmed at the sound of your screams,” said Vicantha, “or to discover an inconvenient body on their streets.”

The man took off running. Or he tried. He didn’t make it three steps before Vicantha caught him by the arm. Her nails dug into his skin. Blue blood welled up where they bit his flesh, glistening darkly in the faint moonlight.

A fight between him and Vicantha would have been so mismatched it would have hardly deserved the name. I could tell he knew it, too, because he slumped in defeat, that last desperate rush of energy draining out of him all at once.

“Then you know,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“I knew as soon as you didn’t come to me,” Vicantha answered.

“Then why save me from the other one?”

“I wasn’t saving you from him,” said Vicantha. “I was ensuring that he couldn’t interfere.”

That was as good a cue as any. I stepped out from the trees, crunching the leaves under my feet just enough to announce my presence.

Vicantha’s eyes widened, just a little. She covered it with a sneer. “I thought you would have rushed home to your pet human.”

“He’s in more danger than she is,” I said, tilting my chin toward the man. My gut felt heavy as I said the words. I only hoped I was right.

She gave me a nod, like she was admiring a clever move in a game I hadn’t known we were playing. “I miscalculated. Next time, I’ll use an illusion.” Her lips quirked upward. “Here to save him, are you? I knew you couldn’t suppress your nature for long.”

I shook my head. “I’m here for the same information you are.”

“Then why interfere?”

“To make sure you don’t kill him before he has a chance to tell you everything.” I spoke coldly, not looking at the man as I did. “And to make sure you aren’t tempted to keep whatever you learn from him to yourself.”

Another approving nod. She turned back to the man, with a look like a hungry cat. “How,” she asked, as her nails sank deeper into his skin, “did you keep Arkanica from finding you?”

I could practically see the calculations running through the man’s mind. He couldn’t lie, and staying silent would only give Vicantha the opportunity to spill more of his blood. He ducked his head, staring down at his shoes. “I didn’t,” he said softly.

Vicantha waited for the rest, her body a single taut line.

He didn’t bother trying to drag it out. He gave her what she was looking for. “I... I gave them the others. In exchange for my life.” He held up a hand, as if to ward off the objections she hadn’t yet spoken. “I had to keep myself alive. For Mab’s sake. I hadn’t finished my mission yet.”

“And what is this mission,” asked Vicantha, low and dangerous, “that it was more important than the lives of your companions?”

“I already said I can’t tell you. If I were lying, you would know it by now.”

“But that’s the wrong question, isn’t it?” Vicantha leaned in to whisper in his ear, her voice intimate. “Tell me you sold the others out to complete your mission, and not because you fear for your life. Tell me, out loud, that you didn’t do it to save your own skin. Tell me, and I’ll let you go free to complete that mission. Anything worth sacrificing the lives of our people is far more important than what we’re doing here.”

He opened his mouth. Nothing but a strangled noise came out.

“Go on,” Vicantha cooed, “do it. You know I’m telling you the truth about letting you go. I can’t lie any more than you can.”

He made one last attempt to say the words. His cheeks grew red and blotchy with the effort. At last, he shook his head, and sucked in a breath. Tears glistened at the corners of his eyes.

Vicantha shook her head. “Pathetic. How did Mab ever imagine you were

worthy of any mission, let alone one that sent you to this iron-poisoned world? You're weak—and Mab has no use for weakness. She won't miss you when you're gone."

"They're still alive!" The words burst out of him as he stared, pleading, into Vicantha's eyes. "Arkanica told me they wouldn't be killed."

Vicantha went still. "Did a human or one of the fae tell you this?"

"Why does it matter?"

"Because humans can lie!" Vicantha all but roared. Her nails bit deeper, deep enough to draw a whimper from the man's throat.

"It wasn't a human," he said quickly. Tears rolled down his cheeks. "He was from the Summer Court."

Vicantha closed her eyes. She drew in a breath. "They're alive," she whispered. When she opened her eyes, her face turned hard again. "What does Arkanica want with them?"

"I don't know. They never told me. All they did was give me a choice. We all knew they were after us, and they knew we knew. They were afraid we'd run, and they wouldn't be able to find us again. They said I could keep track of the others for them, tell them where they were hiding. And let them know if any others came through the portal in the future. If I did, they'd let me keep my freedom."

"Freedom." Vicantha made a harsh noise. "They handed you a leash and collar, and you fastened it around your own throat with a smile. Is that all they promised you? The illusion of freedom?"

He stared down at his feet again. He didn't answer until she gave his arm a shake, her nails still buried under his skin. "Sanctuary in the Summer Court, after they had what they needed," he whispered. "And my weight in gold for each fae I gave them."

Vicantha slid her nails free of his arm. She dropped her hands to her sides. He looked down the path, like he was thinking of running. Then he took another look at Vicantha, and didn't try. He squared his shoulders and tried to blink away the tears.

Vicantha raised her daggers. He stared at the weapons with sick fascination. He swallowed. A little of his manufactured bravery melted away.

He tore his eyes away from Vicantha's weapons to meet my gaze. "Please," he whispered. "Help me."

I stepped forward, purely on instinct. But I had heard his confession as well as Vicantha had. He hadn't just neglected to give the others information that could have saved them. He had handed them over to a corporation that—whether Arkanica was keeping them alive or not—surely wasn't doing anything benign

with them. And he had done it to save his own skin, and for a little bit of wealth.

Like I had said at the bar, the fae were what they were. It couldn't be helped. The others Vicantha had come here to save probably weren't any more innocent than this one. But I had an incentive to help her save the others. Vicantha wasn't promising me anything to save this man's life.

I didn't take another step. I stayed where I was, ignoring the desperate plea in his eyes.

"You sold Mab out to Summer and humans alike." Vicantha bit out every word, sharp and precise. "For gold, and for your worthless life."

"None of us expected anything like this." The man's voice was thick. "The humans weren't even supposed to know we were here. I made the best choice I could at the time. Anyone would have done the same."

One of Vicantha's hands jerked forward, like it had a mind of its own. The dagger flashed through the air. But it stopped inches from the man's chest. Slowly, with a shaky breath, she drew her hand back to her side. "What else do you know about Arkanica?" she asked.

"They want the fae to make something for them," he said, finally giving up on me. "Faelight—that's what they're calling it."

I didn't recognize the word. I watched Vicantha's face for a reaction, but she looked as confused as I was. "What is it?"

"I don't know. I only know they need it."

"What else do you know?"

"They only want Winter fae. But the ones working for them, they're all Summer."

Vicantha's hands tightened around her weapons until her knuckles went white. "What else?"

"Nothing. That's all I know."

She took a slow, deliberate step toward him. "What else?" She repeated.

He shook his head, and kept shaking it. "Nothing else. I swear. I wasn't even supposed to find out that much. I overheard them talking when they thought I couldn't hear."

Vicantha gave a slow nod. "It isn't much, but it's something. Thank you. You can die with the satisfaction of knowing you've done something useful with your last moments."

She raised the daggers again.

"No!" I rushed forward to stop her, already knowing I would be too late.

She was too fast for me, as I had known she would be. She pulled the man against her with one hand, in a parody of an embrace. With the other, she drove the dagger through his back and into his heart.

“You will die here in the world the humans have claimed,” she hissed in his ear, “mere steps away from home. Your body will rot in their soil. Your magic will drown in their filth. If there is an afterlife, you will never reach it.”

She tore the dagger free. A fragment of his spine came with it, along with a wet, glistening chunk of his heart. And something else—something that glowed like a miniature sun.

I had known the fae could tear the magic from each other’s bodies. It was the only sure way to kill one of them besides iron. Since the magic was what gave them their healing and their immortality, to stop them from healing anything short of catastrophic physical damage required either suppressing that magic with iron or ripping it out directly. But even though I had heard the last option was possible, I had never seen it done before.

As the last of the light faded from the man’s eyes, Vicantha raised the dagger to her lips. The magic followed, clinging to the bone weapon like a spool of cotton candy. She blew softly on that molten core, and it dissipated into the wind. Some sparks died almost immediately; others drifted down and settled onto the path.

Vicantha spat on the sparks that had landed at her feet. She pushed the man’s body into the river, and shook the last drops of blood from the dagger into the water.

“He could have helped us.” My voice was rough. “He had connections inside Arkanica. He might have been able to get us into the building.”

Vicantha didn’t bother looking at me as she answered. “He betrayed the Winter Court. He condemned Mab’s people—his own people—to whatever fate awaited them in that building. He could not be allowed to live.”

“And because of what you did, now we’re no closer to rescuing the rest of them.” The body bobbed on the water before slowly sinking below the surface. I looked away.

“Being what you are, of course you can’t understand. Humans are the enemy.” Now she turned and met my eyes. “They have been since they pushed us out of this world. Faerie was never meant to be more than a dreamscape. A place for visions, and magical workings, and sacred rituals.”

Only because the fae had decided that was the case. Faerie was their original home, and they all knew it, or else why would they look down on humanity for arising from the world of matter instead of the world of magic? But I didn’t interrupt to remind her of that fact. This wasn’t the time.

“Now it’s all we have,” she continued. “And even that is tainted by your influence. Your buildings. Your roads. The echoes of your wars and atrocities.” She kicked at the stone path, and snuffed out one last lingering spark. “And he

gave us to them. He couldn't be allowed to live after that, and he knew it. If we had delayed the inevitable, we would never have been able to trust him. He would have done everything in his power to escape or betray us before we got the chance to give him the end he deserved—a much crueler end than this."

The ripples on the water smoothed out as the body sank deeper.

"What's next," I asked, "now that you've killed our only lead?"

For a second, I saw real hatred in her eyes as she looked at me. "Now? Now I grieve, human." She spat the word at me. "One of Mab's agents, one of the very people I was sent to retrieve, is dead at my hand. An immortal is gone from the world. There is a wound in the landscape of the Winter Court, a wrong that can never be righted. Tomorrow, we will make plans to save the others. But give me tonight."

She raised a hand. Silver shimmered in the air. It swirled around her as she built her illusion, and then she vanished. As far as my eyes were concerned, I was alone out here—alone with the river, and the thick aura of the portal, and the phantom sounds in the trees. I listened, but I didn't hear her go.

Chapter 12

All the way back to the apartment, I imagined opening the door to find the place silent and empty—or Skye lying cold on the living room floor. But when I walked in, the place was ablaze with light. Skye was at the kitchen table, hunched over her laptop as she sipped at one of my White Russians. She raised her hand enough to wiggle the tips of her fingers at me in greeting, but she didn't look up from her screen.

I didn't realize how worried I had been until my heart surged back to life again, slamming against my ribs double-time. I snatched the bottle out of her other hand, more roughly than I needed to. "You're underage."

Still without looking up at me, she rolled her eyes. "You're an ageless being of pure magic. You've probably been around since the beginning of time. And you care about the difference between fifteen and twenty-one?"

I started to pour the bottle over the sink, then reconsidered and tilted it to my lips instead. "Just a few hundred years. And I'm putting you in enough danger without also ruining your liver." Not that there was enough alcohol in these things to do any serious damage, but it was the principle of the thing. The sight of her with a drink she was too young for by modern standards felt like a symbol to me, one I didn't want to delve too deeply into. Better to take the bottle away, and prevent what damage I still could to her young life.

"Whoa, really?" Skye looked away from the laptop long enough to glance up at me with wide eyes. Apparently my age was more impressive when it was a span of time a human mind could actually conceive of. The theoretical idea of immortality was one thing, but even someone as young as Skye could imagine a few hundred years.

Wordlessly, I nodded. This wasn't the conversation I wanted to have. Just as well that she had already gone back to her work.

But she kept talking, even though she couldn't have seen my response with her eyes fixed on the laptop. "I don't even know what I would do with that much time. You must have learned so many languages by now."

"A few. I've moved around a fair amount, and it helps to be able to communicate with the locals. But mostly, I've had other things on my mind."

"Right. Like fighting the Nazis." She turned her chair around to face me. "I had no idea that even the fae joined in that war. I love that—everyone in the world, mundane and magical, coming together to fight a great evil. It's like the best kind of story."

Her eyes shone as she sought out my gaze, searching for something I couldn't give her. I looked away. "The Faerie Courts didn't fight. Only me."

That didn't dim the light in her eyes. If anything, it only grew stronger. "That just makes you even more of a hero, doesn't it?"

I clenched my teeth. I had grown to hate that word. They had called me a hero, too many people over too many years, and then turned around and treated me as the thing heroes fight. They had called Ernest a hero at his funeral. I didn't know what the word was supposed to mean anymore.

"So if none of the other fae came out to fight," said Skye, "why did you?"

I thought longingly of the bed I had given up in what was now Skye's bedroom. I had just confronted a rogue fae. I had trailed Vicantha through the frigid Hawthorne streets. I had tried and failed to save a life, a life that shouldn't have mattered one bit to me. I wanted a few hours of sleep, not to sit down and tell my life story. Especially not to Ernest Watkins's granddaughter—who, if I was remembering correctly, had loved him deeply and devotedly, with the innocence of a child.

"Go to bed," I said, letting my own exhaustion come through in my voice. "You need sleep."

Skye glanced over her shoulder at the screen. She straddled the chair to tap at the keyboard. "I'm really close."

I shrugged. "Suit yourself." I downed the rest of the drink in one go.

Skye looked back up in time to catch me pour the last drops down my throat. Her eyes followed me to the sink as I rinsed the now-empty bottle. "Wasn't that full a second ago? You might want to slow down there."

"If you won't sleep, at least work from your bedroom," I said, not dignifying her comment with a response. "That's one more locked door between you and Arkanica."

Skye glanced wordlessly and pointedly at the locked apartment door. She didn't roll her eyes this time, but I got the idea.

"That lock won't protect you if they want to get in badly enough," I said.

"If they want to get at me that badly," said Skye, "an extra door won't make that much of a difference either."

I supposed she was right. The thought didn't improve my mood. I tried to clear it away with a firm shake, and when that didn't work, took another drink out of the fridge. I avoided her reproachful gaze. "Don't you have work to do?"

As she turned back to her laptop, I sipped steadily at the drink and tried to get the image of the dying fae out of my head. The alcohol wouldn't help that much. This stuff would have been weak even for a human; it was no match for my metabolism. And even if it had been strong enough, I had learned my lesson

back in Paris after the war. I had lost two years drowning my sorrows, and gotten nothing out of it but a few queasy memories of cobblestone streets, and a determination to use my wealth in a more enjoyable way than giving myself hangover after hangover. And it still hadn't banished the memories, nor would it now. I knew no matter how hard I tried to drive the images back, they would only return the second my head cleared—and if I never let it get that far, they would still come to me in my dreams.

But sense memory was a powerful thing, and to me, alcohol still tasted like grief and forgetting. So I drank, and tried to convince myself it would make a difference.

When the second bottle was empty, I was as sober as I had been before I had taken the first away from Skye. I eyed the fridge for a moment, pondering a third. Instead, I lay down on the couch and pulled the blanket up to my chin. The thermostat was up the way I liked it, but I could still feel the cold lurking outside the windows, waiting for me to let my guard down.

"Hey," Skye called from the kitchen, "can I ask you something?"

I barely suppressed a sigh. "What is it?" I asked without opening my eyes.

"If you're fae, how are you wearing that metal watch? Is it a fake? Or is the iron thing another myth?"

Apparently we were going to have this conversation whether I liked it or not. Either that, or I would spend my few remaining sleeping hours dodging her questions. At least if I got this out of the way now, maybe I could still sleep a little when she was done with me.

I shoved myself into a sitting position, legs tucked under me, and wrapped the blanket around my shoulders. "Full fae can't tolerate iron at all. It blisters their skin when it touches them. Any amount of iron in their bloodstream could be fatal. And it doesn't even have to be touching them to affect their magic. But I'm not a full fae. I'm half-human."

Her eyes widened again, this time with curiosity rather than awe. I braced myself for the questions that would come next, but all she asked was, "So then iron doesn't hurt you?"

In answer, I got up—leaving the blanket behind with a silent sigh—and walked to her side. I pulled the watch up on my wrist, just enough to show her the skin underneath. My wrist was covered in layer upon layer of thick, twisted scars. It looked as if I had drenched it in acid, or burned it in a fire. As it happened, I had endured both of those, but neither had left behind any permanent damage. Iron scars went deeper than any other, and took longer to heal. And constant contact with iron, over hundreds of years... the scars on my wrist would never fade.

Skye reached out a hesitant finger, like she was going to touch my wrist. She drew her hand back before I could snatch my arm away. Her brow furrowed. "So why do you wear that?"

"I was born with fae magic, but not their ability to control it. Human bodies were never meant to contain that kind of power. The iron keeps it suppressed."

She had seen that magic in action, once. But apparently, she hadn't made the connection. If she had, I doubted she would have been willing to sit this close to me, and ask me intrusive questions without a hint of fear in her voice.

I hadn't thought it was possible for her eyes to get even wider, but she proved me wrong. "So that means anyone wearing iron could be suppressing magic. The fae could be all around us." Her eyes unfocused, and I could see her going back over her memories, cataloguing everyone she had ever seen wearing an iron watch or ring or chain.

I shook my head before she could get too far. "They could be, in theory. But they aren't. I'm the only living half-fae."

Skye nodded, sadness crossing her face. "Because the fae don't come here much anymore, right? There's less magic in the world than there used to be." She let out a soft sigh.

It was that little sigh that did it. My voice sharpened. "No. It's because if the fae don't kill us, your kind takes care of it for them."

She startled a little at my tone. I expected her to go back to her work, shoulders hunched and voice cowed. Instead, she stared into my eyes. I tried not to flinch at being studied that closely by a human. She was a child, I reminded myself. She wasn't a threat. Yes, there were threats out there, but she was here so I could protect her from them.

But that was how it always started, wasn't it?

"They tried with you, didn't they?" she asked quietly.

I didn't bother asking her whether she meant the humans or the fae. The answer was the same either way. "Yes."

"I'm sorry that humans—people like me—did that to you." She actually sounded sincere. She was so, so young. She reached out and took my hand. Her palm felt small against mine.

That little gesture was exactly what Ernest would have done. I pulled my hand away. "Don't," I said as hurt crossed her face. "Don't try to distance yourself from them. In other circumstances, you would have done the same as them."

She pulled her hand back to her keyboard. A kaleidoscope of emotions crossed her face—confusion, anger, pain. "Is that really how you see me?"

"I've met a lot of humans in seven hundred years," I answered. "I find it very

unlikely that you're the sole exception."

And yet I had stood here in the kitchen, talking with her as if she were a friend. Or at least not a potential enemy. It was her age—it had to be. Her age, and Ernest's smile. It was easy to forget, with the aura of innocence that surrounded her, that she was just as human as the rest of them.

I had effectively killed the conversation. She parted her lips, like she wanted to say more, but turned back to her laptop instead. She looked a little smaller than she had a second ago.

I looked over my shoulder at the couch, but all of a sudden I didn't see how I could fall asleep in this apartment. Not in front of a human. There was a reason I made sure everyone I had brought into my home back in Hawaii, from hired help to more intimate company, left before I allowed myself to sleep.

A little of the hurt faded from Skye's face as she leaned in toward her computer, fingers tapping furiously. "Yes," she hissed through her teeth. A tight smile spread over her face. "So close. I just need..." Then the smile faded as she glanced up at me. She seemed to come out of the reverie she had briefly been lost in. "You haven't said anything in a while."

I hadn't realized that much time had passed. "I didn't think there was much left to say."

She studied me with a small frown. "You're actually afraid of me, aren't you?" she said, like she was having a hard time imagining such a thing.

I couldn't remember the last time I had talked this candidly with a human, and for this long. I had let my guard down because of the bits of Ernest I could see in her face, and because of her innocent wonder. Because she needed protecting.

The same old weakness. I had protected innocents before. I had seen innocent hands stained red with my blood. I glanced down at the small hand that had held mine a moment ago. Her fingers were covered in a dark liquid that hadn't been there a second ago. I breathed in, and smelled the tang of blood on the air.

I blinked, and it was gone.

Skye's frown deepened. "Are you okay?"

I barely heard her question over the rushing of the wind outside, and the ragged sound of my own breathing. My pulse throbbed in my fingertips. The last hint of cream from my drink curdled on my tongue.

Fingers snapped in front of my face. "Hey, you still in there? Can you hear me?"

I didn't know what was real. The blood dripping from her fingers. The hoofbeats turning to sirens on the wind. The smell of smoke in my nostrils, the sharp bite of the flames licking at my feet.

The heavy drumbeat of footsteps on the stairs.

I tensed. The rest had been echoes and dark imaginings. But the footsteps... they had been real. I could still hear them, even now that the rest was starting to fade. "Skye," I said tightly, without looking away from the door, "get into the bedroom."

But something had already distracted her from her concern about me. She was bent over her keyboard again, her hands dancing like spiders as she studied what looked like a string of gibberish on the screen. "Just a minute," she mumbled. "I almost..." Her voice trailed off as she tapped out something else.

The footsteps were coming closer. Maybe it didn't mean anything, and I was just on edge. Maybe it was someone from the convenience store below, or Vicantha, coming home for the night. But there were too many of them. At least three people, maybe more.

"Yes!" Skye hissed again. She smacked the table; my watch was halfway off my wrist before I realized what I had heard. "I did it! I'm in!" Her eyes refocused on me. "Hey, you're back. Are you okay? It looked like you were gone for a second there."

The footsteps stopped.

I tightened the watch around my wrist again, but kept my fingers on the clasp. "Into the bedroom," I snapped. "Now!"

Something in my tone must have gotten through to her. She grabbed the laptop, and clutched it to her chest as she hurried into the bedroom.

I stepped forward until I was standing in front of the door. I held myself perfectly still, hand on my watch, ready to undo the clasp and let it fall.

Somebody rapped on the door—three sharp knocks.

I drew in a breath, slow and even. Another. I didn't answer.

Vicantha wouldn't have bothered knocking. She had her own key. And there was no one else in this world I had any reason to open the door to.

Another three knocks.

I didn't move. Didn't breathe.

Not even when the door burst open.

The two men stepped inside at exactly the same time, like they were a pair of windup toys and someone had turned the keys in their backs simultaneously. They wore suits a shade too crisp for Hawthorne, and both had their hair slicked back in an identical forgettable style.

My eyes went to their ears next. Not fae, unless they had illusion magic and had made the decision to use it on me—which, given the circumstances, I didn't think they would consider worth the energy. But Vicantha's illusion hadn't worked on them well enough to keep them away from the apartment, even after

she had strengthened it to work on the fae. That meant they had one of the fae with them, someone whose magic was strong enough to see through the illusion. Either that, or they had known where we were before Vicantha had put the illusion up. Or both. I tried to peer past them, but their broad shoulders blocked the doorway.

“You know who we are,” said the man on the left, in a voice as generic as his face. “And why we’re here.”

I answered with a single short nod. “And I assume you know who I am.”

The one on the right answered this time. “Son of Oberon. Protector of humans. Wanted by both fae Courts. Currently operating under the alias Kieran Thorne. I could go on. The Summer Court has a great deal of information on you.”

“Then you have enough information to know what a bad idea it is for you to be here.” I slowly unclasped my watch, making sure they could see me doing it.

“We know you brought the girl here,” said Lefty. “We also know about her skills, so I assume she’s the one currently trying to break into our files. You are to hand her over to us immediately.”

I crossed my arms. “I suppose now is when you try to convince me that if I give her to you, you’ll let me go.”

“If you hand her over, we’ll let you live.” Righty’s eyes twinkled, like he was sharing a private joke with someone who wasn’t me.

I remembered how the doomed fae had insisted to Vicantha that what he had done wasn’t so bad, because the prisoners were still alive. My mouth tightened in a smile of my own. Mine had no humor in it. “I have a counteroffer. Leave, and I let *you* live.”

Lefty looked over his shoulder. “Get the girl,” he snapped.

The two of them took identical windup steps into the apartment, enough to let two fae in tactical gear march in past them. With these two, I didn’t have to waste time wondering whether they were human. If the subtle alien cast to their features hadn’t made it obvious, the ears would have. They weren’t even bothering to try to hide them.

I looked down at my watch. Vicantha had been right about what she had said the other day. There were innocent people below us. People who would die if I unleashed my magic in this place.

But I had also been right. That didn’t matter. No humans were innocent. Not really.

I clenched my jaw until it hurt. Then, as the fae marched toward the bedroom as if pulled there by some inner directional sense, I unclasped the watch. And I let it fall.

Vicantha's magic, like most fae magic, was fairly straightforward—her power resonated to a single element, with all the tricks that element could command. Occasionally, a fae was born with magic that touched two elements at once—and usually had weak control at best over both. But I had pegged Vicantha as pure air from that first blast of wind she had used on me. Air meant wind, and storms, and certain types of mental magic like illusions. Most fae from the Winter Court took their power from air or water. Most Summer fae had earth or fire. Exceptions existed, but they were rare.

I was a different kind of exception.

The division of the elements had been a fundamental part of their magic for so long that most of the fae, even the ones who had been alive for thousands of years, couldn't imagine it being any other way. Nevertheless, it had been different once. Fae mythology held that their magic had been sundered at the moment the first human told the first lie. In reality, it had likely been more of a gradual process. But although most of the oldest fae were gone now—victims of wars between the Courts, or the weariness that overtook all immortals eventually until they faded back into the substance of Faerie like a dream, or so said Tristra—a few still remained. One of them was Oberon—king of the Summer Court, and my father. And I had inherited his magic.

Magic was the spiritual power that undergirded the physical world. It had given birth to the fae the way the earth had given birth to humans, or so the stories went. In the beginning, before the sundering, all fae had been born with the raw power of the universe flowing through their veins, power that hadn't been limited by ideas about what belonged to this element or that. That was the power my father had given me.

In theory, that meant I could do anything at all with my power, without the artificial boundaries that held the other fae back. In reality, it meant my magic did whatever it wanted—regardless of what I needed from it. It had a mind of its own, and once I no longer had iron touching my skin, I had no control over how it chose to manifest. Oh, I could make suggestions. Sometimes, it even obeyed me enough to let me believe I was in control. More often, I had no such illusions.

Keep it contained, I thought as hard as I could at that inner core where my magic lived, as the watch hit the floor with a soft metallic clunk. I thought about the people below me, in the convenience store that was still open even at this hour. I thought about the few people walking past on the street, shoulders hunched against the wind and the darkness, hurrying from one oasis of light to the next. *In, in, in.*

But that inner core said, *Get out.*

I wanted them gone. I wanted *all* of them gone. Arkanica. Vicantha. Skye. Every fae assassin, every human with their helpless-looking hands and innocent smiles. I had declared myself done with them all seventy-five years ago. That hadn't changed. No matter what Vicantha offered me. No matter what Arkanica held over my head. I was *done*.

A burst of air erupted out from me in all directions. The two bottles on the counter burst. A second later, so did every window in the apartment. Cold air rushed in to nip at my cheeks. The thermostat was a pile of plastic on the floor.

The two men in suits hit the wall hard enough to leave twin dents. The two fae stayed on their feet, but only barely. They wobbled, and clutched the wall and each other.

A cyclone spun through the room, with me in the still center. As the winds expanded outward, they picked Lefty off his feet and spun him through the kitchen. Righty tried to run, but the storm caught him a second later. Then the refrigerator, and the kitchen table, and the couch with its discarded blanket.

Get out. Leave me in peace.

I didn't have blood in my veins anymore. In its place, liquid light roared through my body. It pounded at my pulse points like a war drum, and howled within my body as loudly as the winds outside me. It felt like riding a runaway horse, or watching myself in a dream. I could feel it inside me, as if I were the one directing it, but I was as much of a spectator as the four men from Arkanica. And I didn't know what the magic would do any more than they did.

I expected the winds to toss them out the window, and let them run back to the hole they had crawled out of. But that wouldn't be enough, would it? They always came back. More who needed me, and later, more to kill me. I had learned that lesson early on with the fae assassins: the only way to stop them was to destroy them.

The winds picked up speed. With a screech of metal, the refrigerator door ripped from its hinges. The blanket unwove itself as I watched, until the air was filled with a flurry of thick wool threads. One couch cushion split, then the next, and puffs of stuffing like oversized snowflakes scraped along my skin as they rushed past. A splinter of wood—part of what had been one of the couch legs—came within inches of lodging itself in my arm.

Not all the scraps of fabric were from the couch, or the blanket. Some were too thin for that, and too starched. They were tatters of black and white, sailing through the air like a flock of birds—scraps of the two men's suits. Soon, thicker and wetter bits joined them. It took me a moment to realize what they were, and when I did, my stomach lurched. Skin, and the things that lay beneath. Some of the chunks were red and glistening, misting the room with blood as they passed.

Others were splinters of white bone.

The howling of the wind swallowed the screams.

The fae were still slowly fighting their way across the room, resisting the pull of the wind. As my eyes landed on them, a tongue of air lashed out toward the closest of them. It sheared the clothing from his back, along with the skin underneath. He jerked in silent pain, but didn't waste time with screams. Instead, he turned and flung fire at me with both hands.

A rush of heat washed over me, but the fire never touched me. The wind snuffed the flames before they could come close.

There was no second attack. A tangle of metal and fabric and blood swept by, and when it passed, the fae was gone. I couldn't tell which fleshy bits in the air belonged to him and which had come from the two humans. It didn't seem worth my time to figure out. Not with the other fae still headed for the bedroom.

When the wind came for him, he was ready. He threw up a shield of obsidian between us, a second before the air could take hold of him. My storm slammed against the shield again and again, but although he had to clutch the wall to keep from falling over, he kept going.

Twisted knives of plastic—the remains of the refrigerator—crashed into the shield. Shards of glass followed, and spears of bone. The fae kept moving.

Skye had been right about the lock. The last fae didn't even bother trying the doorknob. He extended his hands, and the door parted to either side with the groan of a tree falling. As the winds swirled faster, he stepped through the opening he had made.

Skye was huddled in the corner of the bedroom, between the bed and the wall. Her knees were drawn up to her chest, and she was holding onto her laptop like it was a teddy bear. For a second, I didn't see her as she was now, but as she had been five years ago, hiding under her bed as she waited for a different storm to pass. Then the memory faded, and all I could see was Skye in the present day, cringing against the wall as if that would protect her from what was coming. Whether she was hiding from my magic, or the man advancing on her, I didn't know.

The fae dropped his shield. I took a step closer, and the winds followed. The air, thick with blood, reached hungrily for him—

And he grabbed Skye by the shoulders and dragged her to her feet. He spun and pulled her against him like a shield.

The storm stopped.

It didn't come to a gradual halt. One second, everything in the apartment—including the intruders—was flying through the air in unrecognizable pieces. The next, the air was still, and so quiet I could hear every catch of Skye's breath.

But the scraps caught in the cyclone didn't fall to the ground. Everything, down to the tiniest drop of blood, hung suspended in the air as the fae walked out of the bedroom. He kept Skye between him and me, a living shield in place of his magical one. When Skye tried to drop the laptop, he caught it in one hand, and pressed it tightly against her belly.

Stop him, I ordered my magic. *Save her*. But I had seen what the wind had done to her. And now she was standing mere feet away, between me and the enemy. The risk was too great.

I could destroy the fae man without harming Skye. I knew I could. I had done it before. But no matter how many times I reminded myself of that, my magic remained frozen, unwilling to put a human at risk.

And here I had thought I had come so far.

The fae didn't look at me as he hurried toward the door. The tension in his body betrayed his fear, but he needn't have worried. My magic did what it wanted, when it wanted, and if it didn't want to risk Skye's safety—if it wanted to make the same mistake all over again—there was nothing I could do. And I hadn't thought to arm myself with a mundane weapon. I had assumed the magic would be enough.

The ruins of my furniture hung unmoving in the air as he left the apartment with Skye, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter 13

I didn't know how much time had passed by the time Vicantha found me in the destroyed apartment. I was kneeling in the center of the living room, staring at the door. The apartment was cold enough to suit even Vicantha's tastes, but I had stopped feeling it. Just like I no longer felt the shards of metal and glass under my legs. The place stank of blood and spilled alcohol, dark and thick with a sharp sweetness underneath—half the sugar of the drinks, half the distinctive smell of fae blood. It wasn't the same as a human's. I had forgotten that.

At some point, I had slipped the watch back onto my wrist. That was where Vicantha looked first, as soon as she took in the state of the apartment. A flash of relief crossed her face before she brought her eyes to mine in a silent question.

"Arkanica took her." My voice shook. Not with fear. Not with exhaustion. All I was feeling in that moment was pure, helpless rage. "Two humans. Two fae. I killed three of them. The fourth made it out with her."

Vicantha acknowledged my words with a single nod. "Why would they remove their leverage?" she asked. "We haven't moved against them yet."

"The two of us haven't. Skye has. I asked her to get into their computer systems. Access information my sources couldn't find. They must have figured out what she was doing."

If Vicantha could hear the guilt in my voice, if she knew my anger wasn't only for Arkanica, she didn't waste time on reassurances. "What did she find?"

"I don't know," I answered. "She did make it into their systems, just before they got here. But I don't know how much she was able to see, if anything. And they took her laptop too, not just her. That was what made me think they had to know what she had been doing."

Vicantha frowned thoughtfully. "They were willing to send four people for a human teenager. That means two things: they saw her as a significant threat, and they have manpower to spare. But they haven't come back for you—and that means that however many people they have, they aren't sure they have the power to stand against you."

"What's your point?"

"They know we aren't going to stop. But if they haven't moved against you already, while you've been sitting here making yourself a perfect target, they aren't going to. That means they'll come after you in a more oblique way. And if they made it through the door, we can't count on my illusions to protect us." She waded across the floor and held out a hand to me. "We need to leave. I'll create

the strongest illusion I can, to shield us from anyone who might be watching the area around the apartment. Creating something strong enough, with such broad targeting, will take the bulk of my strength—I won't be able to keep it up long-term. After we get away from this building, we'll need to rely on human methods to stay hidden. That will be your responsibility."

No trace of concern for Skye. No word of sympathy, for her or for me. She was Winter, all right—cold all the way through.

But she was also right.

I didn't take her hand, but I did stand up. I winced, feeling the pain in my legs for the first time in... I glanced out the window, and my eyes widened. The sun was coming up. Hours had passed. I picked shards of glass from my calves, and felt the familiar itch of my skin knitting back together.

One thing about having destroyed the entire contents of the apartment: it made packing up and moving easy. When I looked around, I didn't see anything that was still intact, let alone anything worth retrieving. After a glance down at my torn and bloody clothes, I checked my closet. Everything inside had survived, probably thanks to how close Skye had been to the closet door.

The bedroom door was warped and useless, so I ducked briefly into the bathroom to change clothes. With a silent apology to my assistant, who would be responsible for explaining the state of the place to whoever he had rented it from, I left the bloodstained clothes puddled on the bathroom floor. I wouldn't be needing them anymore.

I slipped on my coat, and felt for my wallet in its pocket, to reassure myself that it was still intact. While Vicantha stood by the door, visibly restraining herself from tapping her foot to encourage me to hurry, I took one last look around the apartment. After a second's hesitation, I grabbed one of the remaining blankets from Skye's bed. With Vicantha's illusion wrapped around us both, no one would remark upon the oddness of someone walking down the street clutching a thick woolen blanket in their arms. Besides, it was Hawthorne—I was sure everyone here had seen stranger things than that.

There was nothing else worth saving. Ignoring Vicantha's look of silent disapproval as she took in what I had grabbed, I pushed past her and out of the apartment.

I didn't know what I would see when we left the apartment. I had tried to keep the magic contained, but the magic had amply demonstrated how little it cared for my preferences. But outside the apartment, there was no visible damage. The floor did creak ominously as we stepped out the door. Subtle structural damage to the building, maybe. I tried to soothe my pang of guilt with the thought of what the other people in this building would have done to me if

they had seen what had happened.

The air shimmered silver around us as we stepped out into the early morning. I wondered what the people around us were seeing and hearing. Vicantha hadn't given me the specifics of the illusion she planned to weave. Not that there were too many people around to see us. With the rising of the sun, the people on the sidewalk were standing straighter, and had their heads raised higher. But aside from a couple of joggers and a few people walking dogs, Hawthorne was still at home in bed.

I eyed each of the people we passed in turn. But I had no way of knowing whether any of them were working for Arkanica. None of their gazes lingered too long on me, but with Vicantha's illusion in place, that didn't mean anything. The air was below freezing, and everyone had their ears tucked under hats or hoods.

"We'll need to find a place to regroup," said Vicantha as we walked down the sidewalk. "After that, we'll decide on next steps. Arkanica felt threatened by the human girl's actions, which means you've found a potential vulnerability. Maybe your sources can find us another skilled human to exploit that weakness more effectively than the girl could."

Vicantha could make all the plans she wanted. I was only interested in one thing. "How do we get her back?"

Vicantha didn't look at me as she answered. Her gaze was fixed on some distant point ahead of us—or, more likely, on the illusion she was holding in place with her mind. "We don't."

More than likely, Arkanica was watching. Drawing attention wouldn't lead to anything good. And I didn't know how much of our conversation Vicantha's illusion was muting. That was the only reason I kept my voice low. "You'll want to reconsider what you just said."

"This is for the best," said Vicantha. "With no hostage, Arkanica has lost a lot of their power over you, even if they don't realize it yet. Although managing without her skills will be difficult. If you frightened Arkanica enough to make them move against her that quickly, that means she was surprisingly competent. For a human."

"*Is* competent," I snapped. "She's still alive until we see a body. And don't forget that the only reason she was accessing their files in the first place, the only reason she was here at all, is because of us."

"You determined that she would be safer with us in Hawthorne than anywhere else," said Vicantha. "Maybe that was true. Maybe not. Either way, this likely would have happened regardless. If not due to her own actions, then due to our refusal to accept their demands."

“In other words, because you refused to give up and walk away.” I ducked my head in a futile attempt to shield myself from the cold wind. I had thought it was close to unbearable last night. But now, even with the sun up, the cold bit more sharply than it had only a few hours ago.

“Because my people were in danger,” said Vicantha. “Don’t expect me to regret that choice. Even a human should be able to understand loyalty.”

“Of course I understand. You wouldn’t walk away because agents of the Winter Court were in danger. People you had sworn to protect. Then you killed one of those people yourself, and demanded space to grieve—even though, according to you, he more than deserved his fate.” My voice had gotten louder. I took a breath, and forced myself to lower the volume. “Now a human I was supposed to protect is gone. A human whose only crime was doing what we asked her to do. And you want me to write her off and be grateful Arkanica can’t use her against me anymore.”

“I thought you no longer cared about human lives.” Vicantha’s tone was neutral. I couldn’t tell whether she was working to keep the emotion out of her voice, or if it had never been there in the first place.

In the distance, I saw a sign for a bus stop. I sped up. Vicantha quickened her stride to match my pace.

“Maybe,” said Vicantha, still without looking at me, “it’s time to reconsider our arrangement.”

“Meaning what?”

“I hadn’t taken into account what Oberon’s sickness would mean for you, in terms of this mission. If anything, once the incident in the airport made it clear you weren’t responsible for the disappearance of the Winter Court agents, I thought you would be compelled to rescue them. Instead, Arkanica took advantage of your weakness and used this human against you. They’ve turned you into a liability. You’re distracted now, and your emotions have you off-balance. Your priorities are skewed.”

I wasn’t going to have another argument with her about whether I was or was not the same person who had inherited that fatal weakness from my father. “It’s a little late to think about that,” was all I said.

“But it’s not too late to revise my strategy. It’s time to release you from our arrangement. You can go. I’ll figure out the rest on my own.” She paused. Her eyes flicked toward me, almost too fast for me to see. “I will still do what I can to stop Winter from sending any more assassins against you. Regardless of what you do for me. I promise it.”

I looked at her sharply. She had already gone back to staring straight ahead. I couldn’t read anything on her face, which left me trying to guess at her motives

without any clues to go on. When she had promised earlier to try to call off the assassins, she had made it contingent on my helping her. She had no obligation to follow through if I left without holding up my end of the agreement. And she certainly had no reason to make another binding promise—a promise to help me without me offering her anything in return

With those words, she had lost her last bit of leverage over me. And from what she had said to me about Skye, I knew she understood the importance of leverage.

Was she that desperate to get rid of me, now that my concern for Skye had made me less useful to her? Or... was it possible, just maybe, that she felt guilty?

I shook my head. Her motives didn't matter—not just because her promise was binding regardless of her intentions, but because I couldn't take the offer. Not while Skye was in danger.

"I can't leave yet," I said. "Skye doesn't matter to you. You won't do anything to save her. That means it's up to me."

Vicantha paused for so long I thought she wasn't going to answer. I imagined her seething inside at the thought of being shackled to me for the rest of this mission. I couldn't suppress a grim smile at that. She had brought that fate on herself, and it was nothing more than she deserved.

But as we approached the bus stop, she spoke so quietly I could barely hear her. "I will do everything in my power to save the human child who acted against Arkanica on our behalf."

I stumbled on a crack in the sidewalk that didn't exist. I replayed her words in my mind, then did it again. "You made that binding." A simple statement, with no loopholes. One that would force her to rescue Skye from Arkanica or die trying. That was two binding promises in the space of less than five minutes. And neither of them benefited her at all, as far as I could see. Unless getting rid of me was worth that much to her.

"Your words... clarified something for me." She spoke through her teeth, each word coming slowly and reluctantly. "The way I spoke of your human... I would have killed anyone who spoke that way about any of the people under my protection." She shot another lightning-quick glance at me. "Leave," she snapped. "You've done enough."

I ran over Vicantha's promise in my head a third time, just to be sure I hadn't missed anything. I hadn't. The only way Vicantha wouldn't save Skye was if Skye was already dead, or if Vicantha died in the attempt. If it was at all possible to save Skye, she would be saved. Whether I was here or not.

I could leave with a clear conscience. I was free.

I paused, there in the middle of the sidewalk, and closed my eyes. I tried to picture the beach—the waves crashing against the shore, the sun beating down on my skin. The salty smell of freedom in the air.

But all I could feel was the cold.

Again, I pictured an iron cage. Only now, that cage was underneath Arkanica, with the four remaining Winter Court agents trapped inside.

Along with Skye, assuming she was still alive. Or maybe not. She wasn't fae, so it was anyone's guess where they were keeping her. Or what was happening to her in there.

I opened my eyes. I kept walking.

Now I was the one who refused to look at Vicantha as I spoke. I kept my eyes fixed straight ahead, on some imaginary point on the horizon, obscured by brick and distant trees. "I chose to make Skye my responsibility five years ago. It may not have been the right decision—even then, I knew it probably wasn't. Even so, it's the one I made. And Arkanica found her because of it. She's my responsibility."

I should have known. I should never have let myself believe I could hide from my fate forever. I had spent over six hundred years of my life protecting humans, and dying for my trouble. Almost my entire lifetime—a lifetime longer than any human would ever see. How had I ever imagined I could free myself so easily?

But then, it was my own fault, wasn't it? It had nothing to do with fate. Only my own actions. I had broken my own rules when I had helped Skye five years ago. I had imagined, against all logic, that what I had done for her wouldn't have consequences. That I could afford one small lapse. But protecting a human always brought consequences in its wake. And those consequences were always the same: danger and death.

One more time. One more time, I would break the rules I had set for myself. And then I would walk away again—the right way, this time. No exceptions. Nothing that would tempt me. No allowances for sentiment like the kind that had driven me to attend Ernest's funeral, which had led me to Skye in the first place. I would wall myself off so well that neither fae nor human would ever be able to find me.

Ahead of us, a bus creaked and grumbled its way to the curb.

I hurried to meet it. Vicantha hung back. She looked up at the metal structure, and a shudder ran through her.

I looked at the bus again. This time, all I could see was the iron worked into every inch of the vehicle's structure. For a few minutes, I had forgotten. "It's all right. We can walk."

Vicantha shook her head. "Too slow. I can't keep an illusion this strong up for

that long.” As the bus’s doors opened, she squared her shoulders. “At least it will discourage the fae working for Arkanica.” She strode past me and marched up to the bus like it was an enemy army and she was preparing to fight a doomed battle. She paused in front of the doors and looked over her shoulder, making sure I was coming.

As I joined her, I followed her example and braced myself. Not against the metal—the ride wouldn’t be pleasant, but modern human transportation was a necessary evil, and I had accustomed myself to it as best I could. No, I was bracing for what would happen once we reached our destination, and made our plans, and fought the actual doomed battle that was waiting for us.

I had been down this road many times before. I knew what was coming. The pain, the death. But there were some things in this world that never got easier, no matter how familiar they became. Dying was one of them.

Chapter 14

There's a certain type of hotel chain that feels like it exists in another, emptier reality. As soon as you step through the doors, you leave behind wherever you happen to be, and enter a liminal space shared by travelers around the globe. There was a hotel like that off the highway just south of Hawthorne, and that was where we rented a room, under a false identity I had constructed years ago for emergencies like this—although this was the first time I had ever needed to use it.

The walls were beige, the art inoffensive pastels. The room had been carefully scrubbed of scent. The room was neither hot nor cold, the lights neither bright nor dim. This was a place designed to leave as little mark on one's memory as possible.

We had a token argument over which of us would take the bed. It ended the way we had both known it would: with me in the easy chair, and Vicantha on the floor by the door, propped up against the wall with weapons in hand. I didn't know whether she slept. I didn't expect to sleep myself, not until I woke from uneasy dreams to the whiz of traffic outside the window.

I got up and pushed the curtains aside. The sky was a muted pre-dawn gray. I had gotten a couple of hours of sleep. Better than nothing. We had gotten through the night without Arkanica coming after us, which was even better. Either they didn't know where we were, or they knew but were afraid to move against us. But the flipside was that we were as helpless to act against them as they were against us.

Finding them wasn't the problem. I knew exactly where they were—in the mill building downtown. While I couldn't say for certain that Skye was locked away in that basement Vicantha had sensed, it was the most logical guess. But knowing didn't get us nearly as far as I had thought it would when I had first offered Vicantha my help. Unless we opted to level the building, knowing where they were was about as helpful as knowing their name: in theory, very, but in practice, hardly at all. And while reducing the place to rubble did hold a certain appeal, even my power had limits.

Not to mention, we had to remember the most important consideration: getting Skye out alive.

Vicantha wouldn't agree with me on our priorities—although she would have her own reasons for not wanting to destroy the building and everyone inside it. But if it came down to rescuing her people or rescuing Skye, I planned to be the

one to decide which took precedence.

I glanced over at the door. Vicantha was already awake, and scrolling on her phone. The white light of the screen gave her face a ghostly pallor.

I frowned. Vicantha didn't have a phone.

A look over at the nightstand, and the now-empty charger I had bought at the front desk last night, told me whose phone she had. Mine. I crossed the room and snatched it out of her hands. She looked up at me with an annoyed expression, as if I were the one who had done something wrong here.

I pocketed the phone without comment. "We need a plan."

"We have a plan," said Vicantha. "Return to information-gathering. Find another human to do what yours was doing. An expendable one this time." But her fingers drummed on her leg. She knew as well as I did that the more time we spent collecting information, the more time Skye and the Winter Court agents would spend in Arkanica's hands.

"You know we can't afford to do this the slow way," I said. "Skye could already be dead." My hand clawed at my thigh.

Vicantha turned her icy gaze on me. "You were willing to wait for your sources as long as necessary a couple of days ago."

"You know what's changed since then." My fingers dug in deeper.

She rose up from the cheap carpet, somehow managing to make it look as elegant as a choreographed move in a ballet. "I will remind you that I have felt what you are feeling since the moment I was given my assignment. I waited patiently, because you were right—it was necessary. Now you will do the same." She opened the door, and paused to glance over her shoulder. "For now, I intend to visit the eating area downstairs. You can either do the same, or suffer the effects of not having enough physical fuel to act efficiently."

It was an odd sort of lecture, but a reasonable one. I couldn't expect to come up with a decent strategy on an empty stomach. Besides, if I went with her, I would have more of a chance to convince her to make a plan other than "find ourselves a hacker whose death won't upset us." I followed her down the sterile hallway, with its beige carpet and its walls painted in a slightly lighter beige.

We were the only ones here this early. The hotel employees were just now setting up the buffet. The tile floor and plastic tables were still wet with citrus cleaner. Half of the tables still had chairs resting upside-down on top. As we stepped into the room, one of the workers gave us a dirty look.

But there was food at the buffet, which meant we technically weren't here too early. I grabbed a couple of wilted pastries and a spoonful of scrambled eggs that looked more like mashed potatoes. Vicantha piled her plate high with half the hotel's supply of sausages, bypassing the metal utensils to grab them with her

hands. She ignored the pointed glares of the staff. We sat down across from each other at one of the open tables, Vicantha wrinkling her nose at the smell as she swiped a cautious finger along the damp surface.

I looked down at my food, but couldn't bring myself to take a bite. Instead, I leaned across the table toward Vicantha. "You say information gathering is the way to go? Here's how we do it." I kept my voice low. "We wait in the parking garage, early morning or late evening. When the early birds or the last stragglers will be coming through. Then we get the drop on one of them, and we get what we need. This time, you can do it your way."

Vicantha blinked at me. She looked like I had actually caught her off guard. "That doesn't sound like you."

She was right. It didn't. But that didn't mean there was a problem with the strategy. I was beginning to think the only problem lay with me. "Maybe the mistake I made in my other lifetimes wasn't that I forgot what the humans were—selfish, rotten, corrupt. Maybe the mistake was forgetting what I am."

"We both know what you are," said Vicantha. "You're Oberon's son. And you've been amply demonstrating it so far, although this morning is... a surprising departure. But I fail to see how this will help us. So far, it's only done the opposite."

"That's not what I'm talking about," I answered. "Humans are what they are. Rotten to the core. And the fae are what they are. They're cruel, and they're vicious. I've been telling myself I'm neither human nor fae. That's true, in one sense. But in another sense, I'm both. Human and fae. Corrupt and vicious. Maybe it's time I lived up to that."

Vicantha's brow furrowed. "And you'll embrace this supposed darker nature in order to... save the life of a human."

I heard her implication loud and clear. I chose to ignore it. "Back to the plan. I'm offering you what you've wanted from the beginning. Are you in or out?"

She frowned thoughtfully. "It's tempting," she said, popping one of the sausages into her mouth with her fingers. "But once they realize someone is missing, they'll know we're coming for them. And that will make it harder to accomplish our ultimate goal: getting inside that building."

"I think I can help you with that," said a woman's melodic voice.

I jerked my head up, just as a middle-aged woman in a tailored suit slid into the seat next to me. She tucked her dark hair behind her ear in a slow and deliberate gesture, allowing me a good look at the curved tip of said ear. Human—or using a good illusion. I shot a questioning look at Vicantha. Vicantha squinted at the woman, and shook her head. No illusions.

"However," she continued, before either of us could speak, "I hope you don't

mind if we have this conversation here in public. Considering the exchange I just overheard between you, I can't help but feel a bit threatened." She laughed, like the trill of a songbird.

I gripped my fork like a weapon, considering optimal angles of attack. "How did you find us?"

Another laugh. "Did you think we didn't know about that alternate identity of yours?"

Yes, actually, I had. Considering I had never used it before last night. I tried not to let her see the chill that swept over me. "Will she suit your purposes?" I asked Vicantha. "Maybe we won't have to bother with the parking garage after all."

I was hoping to inspire a flash of fear on the woman's face. She disappointed me. "Let's not be hasty," she said, with an unruffled smile. "I did tell you I was here to help you, remember? My name is Phoebe Grange, and I'm here as a representative of Arkanica, Inc. You are lately known as Kieran Thorne, and your companion is..." She tilted her head at Vicantha, and waited.

"The instrument of your destruction," Vicantha said flatly, narrowing her eyes to shards of ice.

Phoebe giggled. "Oh, I do love the melodrama of your kind. Human teenagers have nothing on you."

Vicantha reached under the table. Possibly for her daggers. I shook my head at her. She kept her hands where they were, but didn't attack. Not yet.

Phoebe still didn't look afraid. "I'm here to offer you a deal." She took out her phone, and laid it on the table.

And then I knew why we didn't scare her.

Skye glared out at us from the phone. A smear of blood dotted her forehead. I opened my mouth to speak to her, before I realized it was a still image. This was a photo, nothing more.

Phoebe knew we couldn't hurt her. Not when she had something we wanted. Something I wanted, at least.

Phoebe tapped the photo with a long purple nail. "Specifically," she said, "I've been authorized to place this girl back under your protection. If you come down to our office, and sign the contracts we've drawn up for you, we're prepared to turn her over to you immediately, alive and unharmed."

I looked pointedly at the blood on Skye's forehead.

Phoebe rolled her eyes. "A scratch, that's all. To be honest, I'm surprised she didn't come away with worse, after the way she fought us. Our security team showed remarkable restraint, if you ask me. But if you like, we'll include a provision in the contract that she must be free of major physical injury. We have

no reason to hurt her. Not as long as you do what we want.”

“And these contracts?” I asked. “What do they involve?”

“A standard agreement, forbidding you from acting against us in any way—in person or by proxy—or revealing any sensitive information about our company. We’re familiar with the... handicaps... of your kind. We know a simple contract will be enough to keep you under control without the need for violence. We would much rather take care of things this way, without any mess.”

“No,” Vicantha snapped, before the last word left Phoebe’s mouth.

I shot her a sharp look. “Let’s hear her out.” My gaze returned to that photo of Skye. It almost looked like she was staring into my eyes—pleading, accusing.

“They have my people.” Vicantha’s voice was a growl. The warning grumble of cracking ice. “I won’t sign them away. No matter what promises I made to you.” She turned Phoebe’s phone over, so I couldn’t see Skye anymore. When I looked up at her, her gaze drilled into mine. “I’ll break my word to you and face the consequences, if it comes to that. As long as I get the chance to rescue my people first.”

With difficulty, I tore my gaze from Vicantha’s long enough to glance over at Phoebe. “I don’t suppose freedom for the captured Winter Court agents is also on the table.”

Phoebe answered with a small smile. “It sounds like you both already know the answer to that. I’m sorry, I really am. We do prefer everyone to walk away from an agreement completely satisfied. But you can’t expect us to hobble our operations just to rid ourselves of the minor threat you present.”

“And those operations would be...” I waited for an answer I knew I probably wasn’t going to get.

She answered with another quirk of her lips, and a barely-perceptible raise of her shoulders.

“Answer him.” Vicantha smacked the table loudly enough to make a woman in a muumuu at the buffet jump. “Faelight. What is it?”

Phoebe raised her eyebrows. “We have a leak in our operations, I see. Thank you for bringing it to our attention. We’ll have to do something about that. As for your question, I’m afraid I can’t give you an answer. Trade secrets, you understand.”

Vicantha started to bring her hands back up to the table. I highly doubted they were empty. I shook my head at her again, more sharply this time. But what stopped her was Phoebe, smile still painted on her face as she tilted her head at a family of four that had just sat down next to us.

“I suspect,” she murmured, “the two of you would prefer to stay inconspicuous as much as I would. You may want to reconsider your plans for

the next few minutes in that light.”

I was surprised the strength of Vicantha’s glare didn’t drop Phoebe dead where she sat. But she slipped her hands back under the table.

Phoebe picked up her phone. It disappeared into her small black purse. “I’ll leave you to discuss your options. When you’re ready to sign, go to the front desk and give my name. Security will bring you to me immediately. But don’t wait too long. The offer expires at the end of the day. After that...” Her smile broadened. It was as cold as Vicantha’s eyes. “Well, you still might get your hacker back. But I can’t promise she’ll be in one piece. I sincerely hope it doesn’t come to that. She’s a sweet girl, and her skills could take her far, if she sticks to fighting the bad guys in the future.”

“You’re threatening a teenage girl,” I pointed out, gripping the fork so tightly I couldn’t feel the tips of my fingers. The touch of the metal sent sharp pulses up my arm. “You’re the definition of the bad guys in this scenario.”

Phoebe shook her head, like she pitied me. “No,” she said gently. “We’re the heroes who are going to save the world.”

With that, she pushed her chair back from the table and walked away.

Vicantha surged up from her own chair. I grabbed her wrist. When she started to shake me off, I held up the fork. Maybe I couldn’t fight her, with so many humans around. But I didn’t have to. One touch of this on her skin would be enough. And if she forced me to it, driving the tines through her flesh could well be fatal.

I didn’t want it to come to that. Not after what she had tried to do for me last night. But if Phoebe was our way to Skye, then until Skye was back with us, Phoebe was under my protection.

Or until I was sure I could take my revenge on Phoebe for that smear of blood on Skye’s forehead without endangering Skye in the process. But we weren’t there yet.

The glare Vicantha had used on Phoebe hit me full-force as she sank back into her chair. “If you think I would ever—” she began, in a low, furious hiss.

I held up a hand before she could waste any more words. “Stop. I know you won’t sign away your chance to save Mab’s agents. I wasn’t going to suggest it.”

“Then why even pretend to consider what she’s offering, instead of taking her apart until we find something of use to us between the layers of her flesh?”

Vicantha certainly had a graphic way of putting things. “Think about who they sent,” I said. “You’re sure she wasn’t using an illusion?”

Vicantha nodded impatiently. “I’m sure. Unless she’s a lot stronger than I am. In which case, she wouldn’t have bothered debasing herself with this sort of negotiation. She would have destroyed us, and worried about the consequences

later.”

“Then she was definitely human,” I said. “Arkanica sent a human, and not one of the fae. Someone who can’t use magic—despite the fact that they saw me as too dangerous to send another team after me last night. They sent her up against us completely defenseless, armed with nothing but that photo of Skye.”

Vicantha shook her head. “She had something iron in her purse. Probably a knife. I could sense it. Another reason I can be sure she wasn’t using an illusion.”

“Even so. I’m sure the human half of last night’s team had iron weapons on them. It didn’t save them. And Arkanica has other fae they could have sent. They wouldn’t intentionally put themselves at a disadvantage. Which means they *weren’t* at a disadvantage.” I leaned over the table, pushing my plate of food aside. “What can a human do that one of the fae can’t?”

“Touch iron?” Vicantha suggested. “But this place isn’t any harder to endure than any other human building.”

“Humans can lie,” I said. “If they sent her, they needed someone who could lie through her teeth more than they needed someone who could fight. This contract signing is a trap.”

Vicantha frowned over her shoulder at the outer doors Phoebe had disappeared through. “If she’s lying, why pretend to consider her offer, rather than giving her an incentive to tell us the truth?”

“Because at least one thing she said was true, even if she didn’t think so,” I said. “She can get us into the building. We give her name, they let us in, and bring us face to face with Skye. It’s our best way to get close enough to Skye to get her out of there.”

“You’re suggesting we spring their trap.” I heard the obvious question on her lips even before she asked it aloud. “Once the trap closes on us, how do we get out again?”

“We have time to figure that part out.” I glanced down at my watch, and saw the seconds ticking by, one by one. “Just not too much. You heard what she said—the offer goes away at the end of the day. That means we need to get started now.”

And if I had misread the situation, and it wasn’t a trap? If there really was a contract to sign in exchange for getting Skye back?

In that case, I would need to figure out what to do about Vicantha. Because she wasn’t going to keep me from getting Skye back, any more than Arkanica was.

Chapter 15

We showed up at the Arkanica building at noon on the dot. While Vicantha hung back, hands hovering near her waistband, I stepped up to the front desk. There was a different man behind the counter this time. This one looked painfully young, with slicked-back hair and glasses too big for his face. I wondered if he knew he was working alongside magical beings. Or, for that matter, that his employers had kidnapped other magical beings, and had imprisoned and enslaved them not that far below the desk he was sitting at.

When he held out the black rectangle to me, I shook my head. “We’re here to see Phoebe Grange,” I said in a low voice.

His expression didn’t change. “Wait there.” He typed something into his computer. Approximately thirty seconds later, the door behind him opened, and two beefy men straight out of central casting motioned us forward.

“Weapons,” one of them ordered as we stepped up. Reluctantly, I handed over the short knife I had bought on the way here. I had a feeling I wouldn’t be seeing it again. It hadn’t cost me anything I couldn’t afford to lose, but I had liked the weight of it.

Beside me, Vicantha held out her empty hands. The sides of her waist shimmered silver. One of the guards stepped forward to pat her down; she didn’t resist. His hands brushed the place where her weapons were hidden without so much as a pause. After he had checked her boots, her sleeves, and her hair, he shrugged at the other guard, and they stood aside to let us pass.

I shot her a glare. It wouldn’t have been hard for her to tell me the plan before I handed over my weapon. She pretended she didn’t see me. I couldn’t help but wonder whether she was simply so used to illusions that she had forgotten I didn’t have the same option available to me... or whether she thought my lack of a weapon might work to her advantage.

We followed the guards through the door. One of them led us down the hallway, while the other took up the rear. Vicantha and I walked side by side in silence. Her eyes scanned back and forth, back and forth. Watching for threats, searching for escape routes. I tried to do the same, but mostly, I watched Vicantha’s hands. If she went for a weapon, that would be the quickest way to turn a bad situation worse. And from what I had seen of her so far, I didn’t trust her not to give in to the temptation to take the quick and violent route to the prisoners below.

The broad hallways were lined in wood paneling slightly too shiny to be the

real thing. Every few feet, another window spilled bright, warm sunlight over us. The sun must have come out since we had stepped inside, and the temperature must have gone up, too. It had been cloudy and in the low teens when we had walked in.

The security guard in front pushed a door open, revealing a set of stairs leading down. Vicantha tensed. Her hands crept a little closer to her waistband. I glanced over my shoulder at the guard behind us, checking to see if he was going for a weapon. Maybe this was where they would spring the trap. Maybe they were leading us straight into their cage.

But the security guard met my glance with a bland smile. No one reached for a weapon. Not even Vicantha.

It wasn't time to fight yet, then. I pasted a smile of my own onto my face, and followed the first guard down the stairs.

We walked past one door, then another. And another. I was beginning to think they had as many floors underneath the building as above. But we hadn't passed an elevator. This had to be quite the walk, for people who worked down here every day. Was Arkanica simply that committed to their employees' health? Then I remembered—of course. Iron. Whatever they had done to replace the iron in the skeleton of the building, I doubted they could use the same methods to build an elevator.

The farther down we went, the more the muscles in Vicantha's arms tightened, and the faster her eyes scanned the stairwell. I knew why. It wasn't just that we were getting closer to the moment where we would have to abandon our pretense, or even that every step we took brought us farther from a quick escape. It was the iron. I could feel it too. The more we walked, the closer we got. The metal hummed a discordant melody in my bones, warning me to turn back.

At the next landing, the guard in front stopped. He pushed open the door. We emerged onto a hallway that was a twin to the one above.

Right down to the windows.

I made the mistake of glancing out, and had to fight a wave of vertigo. Consciously, I might have known we were deep below ground. But my eyes insisted we were looking down on Hawthorne from high above, farther up than the highest floor of the building. We were at the top of a skyscraper, watching the ants go about their business below. I quickly looked away, and returned to the much less unsettling business of making sure Vicantha wasn't in the process of drawing a weapon.

The guards led us into a small meeting room. There was a whiteboard up front, scrubbed blank, and a wooden table in the center. Two black folders were

already sitting on the table, in front of two chairs clearly intended for me and Vicantha. A single amaryllis in a black vase, at the center of the table, was the room's only decoration. The space was spare and clean, unmarred by a single mote of dust or scrap of personality.

But one thing in the room drew the eye. A window that took up most of the far wall. Even without walking closer, I could see that it showed the same impossible scene as the windows in the hallway. It wasn't a still picture, either, or a recording on a loop—I saw enough movement below, and enough variations in that movement, to be sure of that.

The rest of the walls were wood-paneled, the same as the hallways. But underneath the false wood was something else. Pure iron. Even I could feel it biting into my veins, turning my blood slow and my thoughts sluggish. Next to me, Vicantha staggered, and caught herself on my arm. She drew in a labored breath.

But the iron wasn't the thing that set my nerves on edge. Neither was the window. Sitting at the table, across from the two folders, was Skye.

Her wrists were handcuffed in front of her on the table. The metal cuffs made my own wrists ache in sympathy, even though I knew full well that she was human and they didn't hurt her the way they would have hurt me. Or maybe it was the rest of her appearance that made me wince. Three of her colorful nails had torn partway off the nail bed, probably when she had fought her captors. She had a dark bruise on her cheek that I had missed in the photo, and scratches down her arms. Her hair had gone from artfully messy to an oily, matted tangle. She couldn't have looked more out of place in this sterile corporate room if she had been wearing a clown suit.

But she was smiling. And that smile didn't fade when she saw me. It didn't morph into the look of accusation I had been expecting. She stared in blissful wonder at me and Vicantha, as if we were angels from on high who had soared down on pristine white wings to save her.

"I knew you would come," she breathed.

I spun at a faint sound from the hallway beyond, sharp and shrill, like the howl of an animal. It came again—a scream of terror and pain. I waited for it to stop, but it went on and on. Beside me, Vicantha's face twisted in rage.

The guard at our backs closed the door. The scream cut off as soon as the latch clicked into place.

I shot Vicantha a warning look. But her arms stayed at her sides, and although her face spoke of murder, she wasn't showing any signs of being ready to deal any out just yet. Maybe she was learning the value of subtlety. More likely, the iron surrounding us had her hyperaware of the relative weakness of her position.

Phoebe was leaning against the wall by the window, looking as unconcerned as if she heard anguished screams in the distance every day. Working here, she probably did. She walked to the window, looked down, and smiled. “I’ve always found this trick particularly impressive. It’s a simple pleasure, the feeling of looking down on the rest of the city. And it helps with the claustrophobia.” She turned to face us, wearing a satisfied smile. “There are advantages to having fae on the payroll.”

She turned her gaze on Vicantha, whose jaw was clenched in visible pain—and fury. Her smile broadened. She gestured to the chairs in front of the folders. “Please, sit. I can see you’re uncomfortable.” Despite the warmth in her voice, it was clear that this wasn’t a request.

“Why the iron, if we’re only here to sign a few papers?” Vicantha challenged her in a labored voice.

Phoebe gave a light shrug. “A precaution, nothing more.”

Vicantha didn’t sit. Neither did I.

Phoebe crossed the room to stand behind Skye. She placed a hand lightly on Skye’s shoulder. One of her long nails brushed Skye’s neck. Skye flinched.

“Sit,” Phoebe repeated, as pleasantly as before.

I lowered myself into the closer of the chairs. It was wooden—that was something, at least. She wasn’t going to try to make a show of power by forcing us to sit in metal seats while going through this charade. Of course, I was sure she already had more than enough of a demonstration of Arkanica’s power planned.

Vicantha hesitated. I opened my mouth, but before I could say anything to her, she folded herself into the seat next to me. She kept casting quick glances at the door. Planning our escape, maybe, but I didn’t think so. If I had to guess, she was still thinking about that scream.

There was a second chair across from us, next to Skye. But Phoebe didn’t sit. She stayed where she was, her hand resting on Skye’s shoulder. “Well?” she asked. “I would have thought you would be eager to take a look at the paperwork you’ll be signing. Aren’t you the least bit curious as to what you’ll be agreeing to? You don’t want to find yourself in a position to inadvertently violate the terms, after all. I’ve seen the effects of one of the fae breaking their word. I wouldn’t care to see it again.”

I didn’t touch the folder. “I would be curious, yes, if you had actual contracts for us. I assume when I open this, I’ll find nothing but a few blank sheets of paper, and your people will take that as the cue to attack. Shall we skip the pretense, and get on with our real business?”

Phoebe blinked. “What? No, the contracts are quite real. Open your folders,

and see for yourself. They're quite comprehensive. Luckily for all of us, our legal team has studied the fae extensively. You'll find no loopholes, but a great deal of leeway when it comes to living your lives, as long as you don't interfere with us in any way. For our part, we won't harm the girl or otherwise interfere with her, unless she pokes her nose in our business again. Which, of course, will be up to you to enforce—there's no point in asking her to sign anything, not when humans don't share your particular affliction."

I opened the folder. In place of the blank pages I had expected, I found at least twenty sheets, double-sided, all covered in tiny type. I flipped through, struggling to keep my eyes from glazing over. I had spent some time studying contracts, several centuries ago, to try to better understand my particular brand of the affliction Phoebe had referred to. Most of my knowledge was out of date, of course, but it did mean I had practice reading dense legal documents. Even so, this paperwork was a challenge. Arkanica's legal team was leaving nothing to chance.

"As you'll see if you flip to the final page," said Phoebe, "I've already signed both copies. All that remains is for you to do the same." She pulled two pens out of her breast pocket and slid them across the table to us.

I took the pen, and stared down at the contract. Could I have been wrong? Had they sent Phoebe for a different reason, and not because they needed a liar? Was it possible Arkanica truly did only want to remove us as a threat in the easiest and cleanest way possible?

I bent over the paperwork, watching Phoebe through my lashes. It had to be a trap. My earlier logic still held true—it didn't make sense for them to have sent a human if they didn't need someone to lie for them. I took my attention from Phoebe, and concentrated on reading slowly over the contract, line by line. It looked real enough. If this was a ruse, they had put a lot of effort into it.

And if it wasn't...

If it wasn't, this small stack of paper was the only thing standing between Skye and freedom.

I uncapped the pen.

Vicantha stood up so fast her chair toppled to the floor behind her. "It doesn't matter if it's real. We're not signing."

No, I corrected myself. Not the only thing.

Skye didn't even look worried. Not when Vicantha shoved the pen back across the table at Phoebe so hard it shot past the woman to hit the whiteboard behind her. Not when Phoebe's nail dug into the skin of her neck. She just kept watching us with that same maddening look of reverence. It was as if she truly couldn't conceive of one of her magical fae leaving her to die.

“What happens if only one of us signs?” I asked, ignoring Vicantha’s sharp look.

Phoebe shook her head, slowly and regretfully. “I’m afraid it has to be both of you for the agreement to take effect. You’ll find the details on page seven.” Her nail dug a little deeper.

“Don’t bother trying to convince me.” Vicantha glared down at me. “I won’t do it.”

“I know.” Of all the possible solutions running through my head, convincing Vicantha to sign had never been one of them. I frowned down at the papers, then turned that frown on Phoebe. “This is what you say it is,” I admitted. “If there are any hidden catches, I’m not seeing them.”

“I already told you that,” said Phoebe, with a hint of impatience. “Now, I’m afraid you’ll have to bring your partner under control, or you’ll both be escorted from the building. At which point the deal will no longer be valid.”

I tapped the papers. “So if this is real, then why were you the one to come talk to us, instead of one of the fae—someone who stood a chance of being able to defend against our magic if we didn’t take a liking to you? You’re human—your only advantages are your ability to use iron and your ability to lie. You didn’t need iron in that conversation, so you must have needed lies. So tell me—what were you lying about?”

I flipped to the last page. Her signature was there, just as she had said it would be. A messy scrawl, but not so messy that I couldn’t make out the shape of her name.

I traced the letters with my finger. Slowly, I looked back up at her.

“If I asked you to bring in one of the fae to sign this,” I said, “would you do it?”

Phoebe laughed lightly. Too lightly. “You’re assuming we put any of them in positions of authority.” Her hand tightened on Skye’s shoulder enough to make Skye wince.

I didn’t break her gaze. “Humans aren’t bound by their word the way we are. If you break this contract, what’s the worst that could happen to you? We sue?”

Phoebe’s smile disappeared.

I rose from my seat, slow and deliberate. “I was right. Arkanica needed a liar—but not for our conversation in the hotel. For this.” I jabbed an accusing finger down at her signature. “You never intended to let Skye go. You planned to bind us with promises we couldn’t break, and then kill her anyway.”

Now, finally, real fear crossed Skye’s face. She tried to pull away from Phoebe’s grip. Phoebe tightened her hand. The two guards each took a step closer.

I went back a few pages and skimmed, reading with a new eye this time. “Everything we would be agreeing to if we signed this... none of it is contingent on you keeping your word. We agree to leave you alone; you agree to let Skye go. Two separate things. It’s a subtle trick of wording. The end result is that even if you don’t keep your word, we’re still bound by ours.”

Phoebe let out a soft sigh. “I’m truly sorry for the deception. I may be human, but I was telling the truth about a lot of things back there at breakfast—not least, the fact that we prefer clean solutions to our problems, solutions that leave both parties satisfied. The trouble is, in this case, we simply can’t trust the girl to keep her word. Especially since we don’t know what she’s already learned. She was surprisingly resistant to our questioning, and of course we couldn’t take things as far as we would have liked, since we needed to leave her undamaged for you.”

“Funny you should mention what Skye knows.” I slapped the folder closed. “As it happens, we’ve come prepared with a counteroffer.”

My voice sounded calm and unworried. It was a lie, as much as anything I was about to say. I had to fight to keep myself from staring at Phoebe’s hand, so close to Skye’s neck. My watch felt heavy on my wrist. The iron in the walls pressed in on me.

After a small eternity, Phoebe answered with a slight nod. “I’m listening.”

Chapter 16

“The deal is this.” I placed both hands flat on the table, palms down. “We don’t sign anything. The two of us walk out of here with Skye.”

“And every Winter Court fae you’re holding prisoner,” Vicantha interjected. She wasn’t reaching for a weapon, not yet. She was still going along with the plan. Good. But I couldn’t count on that lasting.

“And all the Winter fae,” I echoed. Might as well start by asking for everything we wanted. If they agreed to all of it, it would mean never having to think about Arkanica ever again, and that was more than worth the gamble. And they might actually agree. It would all come down to how much they wanted to avoid the consequences of not going along with us. And how extensive their files on me really were.

Phoebe raised her eyebrows. “I’m not sure you realize what you’re asking.”

“And I’m certain you don’t realize what will happen if you don’t do what we’re asking,” I said. “So let me explain it to you. If you don’t meet our demands, the information Skye pulled from your servers before your team got to us will be automatically released. You have until the end of the day.” I gave her a thin smile. “That seems like a fair deadline, wouldn’t you agree?”

Phoebe gave me a probing look. I didn’t blink. Finally, she asked, “And what exactly did she take?”

I smiled internally, although I didn’t let it reach my lips. I had told Skye the truth when I had said I was the only living half-fae. And while I had accumulated enough of a reputation among the fae for them to tell stories about me, the only ones who had gotten up close and personal with me hadn’t survived the experience. Tristra being the sole exception, of course, but unless she had changed a lot in the intervening centuries—and change wasn’t something the fae were known for—she wouldn’t have spread gossip about me through the Courts. Which meant there was a good chance the Courts’ knowledge of how the half-fae actually worked, and thus Arkanica’s knowledge of the same, had more than a few holes in it.

I hoped I was right. I was betting all our lives on it.

When Phoebe had told us about the contracts, she had mentioned our handicap. Ours—mine and Vicantha’s. As if we were one and the same when it came to our relationship with the truth. And when it came to contracts, that was accurate. What I was hoping was that she didn’t know that in any other situation, I could lie as well as any human.

I was walking a dangerous line. And not only because I didn't know if she would fall for my ruse. What I was doing came perilously close to a verbal contract. If I had been telling the truth, and Skye really had pulled information from their servers, there would have been no ambiguity about it—it would have been a formal agreement, and it would have bound me as surely as the papers in front of me. But the entire thing was based on a lie—that I was in possession of information Skye had stolen from the Arkanica servers. Which meant I was in the clear. I thought. I hoped.

I continued looking Phoebe straight in the eye as I spoke. “She knows what you're doing with all those kidnapped fae. And in a few hours, so will the rest of the world.”

Phoebe's hand loosened around Skye's shoulders, just a hair, but enough to release the band around my chest. Her eyes unfocused as her brow furrowed in thought.

Then she turned to Vicantha.

My heart plummeted to somewhere around my shoes as Phoebe asked Vicantha, “What did the girl take off our servers?”

“I wasn't there,” said Vicantha, her answer immediate and completely honest.

I barely had time to let out my breath in relief before Phoebe spoke again. “And if we don't send the prisoners back with you,” she asked, still addressing Vicantha, “will any information be released?”

Vicantha tried. She opened her mouth, and let out a series of strangled croaking noises. Her face turned pink, then beet-red. But she couldn't force out any actual words.

Phoebe nodded in my direction. “A worthy effort. I can't help but respect your determination. As a bonus, I've learned something new today, something I'm sure will come in handy for us one way or another. I had no idea half-fae could lie. You deserve a token of appreciation for adding to our knowledge—although, sadly, you'll have to make do with a simple thank-you. Our budget is tight around here, and we just don't have the money for extras.” Then her hand tightened on Phoebe's shoulder again. “But that little diversion is over and done with. Now you have two choices. You can sign, and agree not to harm us. Or you can go a step further and make an active contribution to our work.”

“Do you really think we would agree to *help* you?” Vicantha spat. “After everything you've done?”

Phoebe gave a tinkling laugh. “Of course not. I never said it would be voluntary.”

Her gaze turned sharper as she regarded us. Her mask slipped the tiniest bit, just enough to reveal something else behind her eyes. Something greedy.

Something hungry.

Vicantha went still. Her eyes defocused. I knew what came next—I had seen enough fae reach for their magic over the centuries. My hands went to the clasp of my watch by reflex, before I realized I was doing it. That stillness, and that blank expression, had always been a sign of impending death.

But nothing happened.

“And now you see the value in taking precautionary measures,” said Phoebe to the two guards, who had backed up against the door—to stop us from leaving, or else to be ready to flee if necessary, I couldn’t tell which. She turned back to us. “You asked about the reason for the iron. This is why. We were afraid you would resort to violence, even though we took every step to ensure you wouldn’t need to go to such extremes.”

“You’re not as prepared as you could be,” I pointed out. “You’re not carrying a weapon.” Not unless it was very small, or not made of iron. I didn’t sense any metal on her. And if a human was going up against the fae, choosing a non-iron weapon would be like intentionally bringing a knife to the proverbial gunfight.

On the off-chance that she was carrying a weapon, my words would have prompted her to reveal it, giving us a better sense of what we were up against. She didn’t draw a weapon, but neither did she look concerned. “I can assure you,” she said, “in hand-to-hand combat I’m easily a match for both of you. Especially since your kind is used to relying on your magic. I wouldn’t advise testing the truth of that—being forced to kill you would be a shameful waste of resources.”

Maybe she was bluffing. I couldn’t tell. A twitch in her jaw muscle made me suspect she was more nervous than she was letting on. But it didn’t matter—either way, I wasn’t planning on testing her skills.

I picked up the folder and tapped the corner against the table. “It’s a shame our plan didn’t work,” I said conversationally. “I almost had you fooled, didn’t I? Up until you asked Vicantha to confirm what I had to say, you weren’t sure whether I was lying—or whether I *could* lie.”

“You came close, yes. But you know what they say—close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.” Her smile thinned. “Now, I’m afraid I’m going to have to hurry this up. I do have another meeting, and it’s bad manners to keep someone waiting. I understand needing time to think over your options, but if you don’t sign in the next five minutes, we’ll have no choice but to—”

Her voice cut off with a startled gasp as I vaulted over the table. I grabbed her and pulled her to me, and placed one hand flat against her heart. Before she could demonstrate her promised combat skills on me, I undid the clasp of my watch with my other hand.

Her muscles tensed, readying for an attack. Her weight shifted subtly. Then her gaze flicked down to my watch. She didn't move.

"When you did your research on me," I murmured in her ear, "you missed a few things. Like the fact that I can lie."

My heart pounded in my ears as I slipped the watch off my wrist. I tossed it to Skye, who frowned in confusion, but grabbed it. In this iron-encased room, my magic felt slow and thick, like cold syrup. But I could still feel it, blazing under my skin, as soon as the metal lost contact with my body. And I had unleashed my magic in a room similar to this one many times before, often enough to know it shouldn't inhibit me in any meaningful way.

That was what I was hoping for. And what I was afraid of.

"Like the fact," I continued, my lips brushing Phoebe's ear, "that iron doesn't block my magic without skin contact."

I was speaking to Phoebe, but I kept my gaze fixed on Skye as my magic surged to life. The hand I was holding against Phoebe's chest started heating up. I pictured the Hawaiian beach, the heat beating down on my skin. Now all that heat lay inside my palm, like a miniature sun. Smoke rose up from Phoebe's crisp white shirt.

Through clenched teeth, I drew in slow, deep breaths. I needed to scare her. I needed to hurt her. But not too much. I couldn't unleash my magic here, not yet. Not in this iron room, built to keep someone like me contained, where all I would do was destroy a few pieces of furniture and give Arkanica a reason to retaliate.

But the memory of what had happened last night was still fresh in my mind. As soon as I had laid eyes on Skye, my magic had locked up. I had been too afraid of hurting her to do any real damage. It was the reason she had been taken.

I was counting on the same thing happening now.

Last night, my fear of hurting Skye had been a liability. Right now, it was the only reason Phoebe was still alive. The only reason the two guards, who had pressed themselves against the door and were looking at each other like they were each waiting for the other to be the first to flee, hadn't been smeared into a thin paste across the walls. But Skye's presence wouldn't be enough to keep the magic in check for long. My power strained and snapped against the invisible leash with every quick beat of my heart.

"The last member of the team you sent after Skye." This time, I raised my voice enough for both Phoebe and the two frightened security guards to hear. "The one who survived. Did he tell you what I did to the others?"

Phoebe didn't answer. But the way she trembled against me was answer enough. The two guards saw her reaction, and shot each other nervous looks.

“Get us out of here,” I ordered Phoebe. “If we pass anyone, tell them to let us go. If you don’t, I can guarantee that no matter what they do to us, they won’t be as fast as I will. Whether we live or die, you won’t survive. Do you understand?”

Phoebe nodded frantically. The security guards glanced toward the door. One of them reached for the doorknob.

I fixed each of them with my gaze, one by one. “I haven’t forgotten about you. You stay with us. If anyone decides to attempt a noble rescue of Phoebe here, it’s your job to make sure they don’t succeed. Unless you want to die with her.”

The one who had reached for the doorknob dropped his hand to his side.

I nodded in approval. “Good. You can start by leaving your weapons on the floor.”

One of them laid his gun carefully down. The other followed suit. From that alone, I knew they were hadn’t been adequately trained for this job. Either of them could have incapacitated me with their weapon—if they were fast enough. A gunshot wouldn’t kill me, but it would put me out of commission long enough for them to slap a set of iron cuffs on me and drag me off to wherever they were keeping the others. But either these two didn’t know that, or they didn’t have enough faith in their ability to get in a good shot before I turned my magic on them. Either way, the fault lay with the people who had trained them and stuffed them into those uniforms, not with them. Whoever it had been, I owed them a thank-you note.

But I could fulfill my etiquette obligations later. For now, my hand was growing hotter by the second, hot enough to melt the buttons of Phoebe’s shirt against her skin. She was biting her lip as hard as she could, trying not to cry out. I didn’t think that would last for much longer. And once my magic broke free of the glass cage I had it in, her life would be measured in seconds—and we would lose our hostage. And with her, as Vicantha would say, our leverage.

I marched her to the door. She tripped over her own feet in her efforts to hurry in the direction I was steering her. I jerked my chin over my shoulder at Vicantha and Skye, and they followed.

The two security guards led the way. I watched them carefully, waiting for them to try to make a run for it or press some hidden panic button. But all they did was march stiffly forward, casting anxious glances behind them at me every couple of steps.

At the door to the stairwell, Vicantha stopped. I held the door open for her with my foot, one eye on the security guards—who were only a few steps away from leaving my field of vision—and the other on Phoebe. The smell of burning flesh had joined the smoky odor of singed fabric. Even if Skye’s presence was

enough to hold my magic at bay until we made it out the door, there was only so much of this Phoebe could survive.

But Vicantha didn't move. She looked over her shoulder, down the hallway. Down toward where that scream had come from. "The prisoners. They have to be close. We might not get a chance like this again."

I shook my head. "We don't have time," I said tightly. "I can't keep the magic under control much longer." Even that brief break in concentration was enough to let a spark leap out from my index finger onto Phoebe's shoulder. She let out a strangled yelp.

"Then don't control it," Vicantha snapped. "Burn the place to the ground. I don't care. We're getting them out."

I answered her one terse word at a time, keeping my eyes locked on Skye. Reminding my magic of the reason it couldn't burst free. "Can't do that either. Too much iron on this level. It would keep the magic—" I broke off as my thumb went white-hot for a second, enough to sear Phoebe's flesh with an audible sizzle. "Would keep it contained. Too limited. Don't move!"

That last part was directed at the security guards, who had been about to turn a corner and slip out of sight. They stopped. Their guilty glances in my direction were enough to tell me I had narrowly avoided letting them raise the alarm, and costing us our only chance to get out of here.

With them frozen in place, and Phoebe's trembling turning into shocky shivers, I turned back to Vicantha. "We'd have to get to the prisoners, keep their guards from attacking or closing us into an iron room, and get out before my magic ran dry. Too many variables. And by then, we wouldn't have a hostage."

Phoebe let out a whimper at that, too badly hurt to hide her emotions any longer. She knew what I meant.

But Vicantha didn't move. She kept staring down the hallway.

"We can't do it." I was going to have to stop talking and start moving again, or we would lose our hostage long before we made it out of the building. "Let's go."

Vicantha turned back to me, accusation in her eyes. "You don't know that. We have a chance to try, and you aren't willing to take it. If it were the human trapped down here..." She turned those accusing eyes on Skye.

"It is her. She's in as much danger as your people are right now. And I am **not** losing my chance to get her out." I didn't have the capacity to play games with Vicantha right now, to find the diplomatic response, to pretend I hadn't come down here fully prepared to choose between Skye and the Winter Court agents. Not with my hand turning into a branding iron against Phoebe's chest, and well on its way to becoming a blazing torch. "Stay here, or follow me. Your

choice.”

I turned my back on Vicantha and jogged up the stairs, half-lifting Phoebe when her legs wouldn't keep up. The security guards hurried ahead of me, like I was the proverbial devil on their heels. On the way down, it had felt like we were walking forever. Now the floors blurred past in flashes of smoke and heat. My eyes stung as the ashy remnants of burnt fabric—and the skin beneath the fabric—blew into my eyes. Phoebe's breath came raggedly. She wasn't whimpering anymore. I didn't know whether that was a good sign or a bad one.

I risked taking my spare hand, the one not filled with burning power, off Phoebe long enough to grab Skye by the arm and pull her ahead of me. She jerked away, eyes filled with fear. “Stay there,” I ordered her, my voice so rough I barely recognized it as my own. “Ahead of me.” I needed her in my line of sight, if I was going to make it out the door without my magic escaping my precarious control.

She gave me another confused look, like when I had tossed her the watch, but she didn't argue. As we raced forward, faster with every step, she kept pace to stay ahead of me.

I would have kept my hand on her arm, if I hadn't known she would only pull away again. As it was, I kept my eyes fixed on her, afraid even to blink. The magic couldn't do what it wanted. Not this time. If it did, Skye would die. Again and again, I pictured her torn to pieces like the team in my apartment. That was the only thing that kept my magic from bursting loose and doing its best to shake this place off its foundations.

And still, it wasn't enough. As we grew closer to ground level, spears of flame shot out from my body. One hit the carpet just in front of my feet, leaving a blackened circle behind. The next struck the fake wood paneling, and added the smell of melted plastic to the cacophony of odors.

Footsteps at my back told me Vicantha had made her choice. I didn't know why I felt relieved at that, when rescuing Skye and leaving her behind would have freed me from her and Arkanica both. Luckily, I didn't have room to think about it, not unless I wanted to risk losing my single-pointed concentration on Skye long enough for my magic to burst free.

The guards pushed open a door. It opened onto the sunny hallway we had seen when we had first gotten here. I glanced out the nearest window, just to be sure. The scene looked right this time, aside from the sunlight that was too bright and too warm. We weren't staring down from an impossible height anymore; we were looking out on the side road that wound lazily past the building. A car chugged along at a leisurely pace, and stopped to let a pedestrian cross.

As the stairwell door fell heavily closed behind Vicantha, my magic abruptly

contracted, curling into a small, tight ball inside my core. The hand I was holding against Phoebe's chest went cold. She let out a faint, ragged breath of relief.

I didn't do the same, even though all of a sudden I no longer had to strain to keep the magic from breaking loose. Because I could feel what was happening—and what was about to happen. My power hadn't given up. It was getting ready. Inside me, that tight ball was growing denser and denser, an impossible amount of force crammed into that tiny point. It was a bomb, and in another minute—two, if we were lucky—it would explode. And I was fairly certain the explosion part would be literal.

I wasn't sure whether the security guards were still clearing the way for me, or just running for their lives. It didn't matter. We burst through the door into the lobby. The man at the desk sleepily glanced up from his phone—then did a comic double-take as he took in the sight of us. His hand crept under the desk.

"No," Phoebe snapped before he could hit whatever alarm he had been going for. "Let them through."

He opened his mouth to protest. Something in her face—or in mine—made him close it again. He rested his hands on the desk palm-up, fingers splayed out, as if to show me he didn't have anything to threaten me with.

I raced for the door, still holding Phoebe. Skye had fallen behind—which meant I couldn't see her anymore. As I pushed open the door, I saw traffic racing by, but I couldn't hear it. All I could hear was the roaring in my ears.

Ahead of us, people strolled down the sidewalk—a dog walker tugged along by four dogs, an elderly couple smiling and holding hands. My magic was hot in my chest, a star about to go supernova. If it escaped, everyone on the street would die. Skye included.

I spun and grabbed her. This time, I didn't let her pull away. She still had the watch clutched between her fingers. I snatched it from her, hard enough to draw a yell of protest from her lips, and slipped it around my wrist. I fastened the clasp.

Phoebe took advantage of my distraction to wrench away from me and run back toward the building. I barely noticed. All I cared about was that bright hot star within me. I felt it fading. Dying. The pressure in my chest eased. The roaring went quiet. Spots danced in front of my eyes as the familiar ache settled into my wrist.

It was Vicantha who looked over her shoulder at the Arkanica building, just as Phoebe disappeared through the door. She was the one who understood, before I did, what it meant for us to no longer have a hostage. "Run!" she yelled.

The air in front of us shimmered as she formed an illusion around us. I didn't

waste time asking her what disguise she was using, or how long it would last. I took Skye's hand and dragged her forward, and we ran.

Chapter 17

Someone had gone to a lot of expense converting the old mansion by the river into a bed and breakfast. Everything from the paintings on the walls to the feel of the sheets between my fingers whispered of money. I knew the difference between things that were expensive and things that were meant to look expensive; this place was the former. It had a Victorian theme, and although I didn't know whether the heavy four-poster bed or the lacy curtains obscuring the windows were authentic, someone had invested a lot of effort and considerable funds to make them appear that way.

I had barely gotten more than a glimpse of the owner of the place, a somber-faced woman who had said as few words as possible between greeting us and handing us our key. But I already knew one thing about her, or could at least make an educated guess. And that was that the amount of money she had poured into her passion project was the greatest regret of her life.

Up until a few years ago, this place had been a genuine tourist attraction, at least according to the online reviews. It had even drawn in people from across the Canadian border. In those days, it had probably brought in enough money to justify the expense of putting the place together. I couldn't find any indication of what had prompted its popularity—just another one of Hawthorne's rapid swings of luck.

I also found nothing about what had made it sink into obscurity as quickly as it had risen. We were the only guests here—and from the look of the place, the only ones who had come here for quite some time. We had spent less on the room than we would have for another night in the hotel. Insects had eaten holes in the sumptuous sheets; the gold leaf was flaking off the dresser. The room smelled like dust and mothballs. If I sat still, I could hear the chittering of rodents in the walls. Every so often, something in the ceiling creaked, like the whole place was minutes away from coming down around our ears.

We had rented the room under fake names—not one of my established identities, this time. The woman hadn't much seemed to care what name we used, or whether I had an ID to back it up, at least not once I handed over the stack of cash I had pulled from the ATM. A second, taller stack was payment in advance for her to turn away anyone who showed up asking about us. It disappeared into her rusted cashbox as quickly as the first.

Vicantha was still outside, setting up a complex web of illusions, the details of which I hadn't bothered to ask about. I had never had formal magic training—

Tristra had tried, briefly, and all it had gained us was a house fire and a better understanding of the inherent limits of human genetics—so I wouldn't have understood her explanation if she had given me one. All I cared about was that it held Arkanica at bay. While she did her work, I stood in the center of the room, trying not to hover while Skye dabbed hydrogen peroxide over the last of her injuries.

"I don't suppose you thought to bring your laptop?" she asked hopefully as she peeled open a plastic bandage.

"The laptop was destroyed," I said shortly. "Along with everything else in the apartment. Which is for the best, if you were hoping to use it for what I suspect you were. You almost died breaking into Arkanica's files the first time."

"And I want to know what I almost died for," said Skye calmly, as if this were a perfectly reasonable answer. "Which is why I have to keep digging."

There was no fear in her voice, and none in her face when she looked up at me. I didn't know what to make of that. Twice now, she had gotten an up-close demonstration of my power. I had saved her life; I knew what came after that. But so far, she hadn't pulled away, and she hadn't lashed out. She was treating me exactly the way she had before she had been taken.

Maybe she was so wrapped up in her rainbow-tinted delusions of the beautiful magical fae that it had blinded her to what she had actually seen. Or maybe she had been right, and she was the one human in seven hundred years who could see what I was without trying to destroy me. Regardless, I wouldn't be sleeping tonight.

For now, I shook my head, and kept on trying not to let her see how off-balance her reactions had left me. "You're not going near Arkanica again. Or near me, for that matter, once I find a better place for you. I've learned my lesson. I'm going to find a remote location far away from here, and hire security, and make sure there's no paper trail that connects the two of us. Which is what I should have done the first time."

"Relax," said Skye. "I'll be more careful this time. You really don't need to explain the danger to me, you know. I'm the one who went through it." She shuddered, and for an instant, her face went dark. "But that place... the screams..." She shook her head. "I can't stand by and do nothing."

"You will if you want to stay alive," I said. "Believe me, I understand the temptation to rush off on some noble crusade. But those only ever end one way. And if you think that ending is a happy one, you've been reading too many fairy tales."

Skye giggled. I glared at her.

"What, you don't think that's funny?" she said. "Fae? Fairies? Fairy tales?"

She met my stone face with a sigh. “Fine. I don’t really feel like joking about this anyway. After everything that happened to me, the firsthand proof they just gave me of how bad they really are, I can’t believe you want me to run off to some faraway hiding place and worry about myself when there are still people locked up down there.”

“The people locked up down there are fae,” I said. “Winter Court. Do you know anything about the Winter Court?”

Skye nodded. “Of course.”

“No, you don’t. Or about Summer, either. Not if you think the fae are gentle magical beings worthy of those awestruck looks you keep giving us. Back when the fae walked among humans, they saw themselves as humanity’s natural rulers. To the Summer Court, the humans were beloved pets. Summer was more than happy to coddle them and feed them treats from their hands—as long as they were willing to sit and stay and grovel on command. When they didn’t...” I shook my head. “That’s not the point. My point is that Winter was worse. The humans weren’t pets to them. They were toys. And if they played too roughly, and those toys broke? Well, there were always more where those came from.”

The expression on Skye’s face had turned to pity, which meant she wasn’t hearing what I was trying to tell her. “I know you’ve gone through a lot—” she began.

“This isn’t about me. Read the old stories—the real ones. Listen to the tales that have been passed down from generation to generation, by people still afraid even now to speak too loudly of what their ancestors faced at the hands of the fae. Or listen to me, and trust that I have no reason to lie to you. The prisoners in that building would kill you without a thought—quickly if you’re lucky, slowly if they’re bored. You’re not sentient to them. You’re a butterfly with wings ripe for ripping off. Those are the people you’re ready to die for.”

Skye shook her head, still wearing that pitying look. “And if I walk away, and let them suffer and die down there, then what am I?”

“Alive,” I answered. “Everything else is secondary.”

“Let’s say you’re right,” said Skye, although her voice told me we weren’t done with that argument yet. “What I saw in their files, before they took me... it doesn’t make sense. I need to understand what’s going on in there. I’m not going to be able to stop thinking about it until I do. If you don’t understand human compassion, how about simple curiosity?”

Before I could remind her what curiosity had done to the cat, the door creaked open. I spun, my hand going to my watch, but it was only Vicantha. “You found information?” she asked sharply, her eyes fixed on Skye.

“Um, yeah? I told you I got into their files, didn’t I? What did you think I was

doing all that time in the bedroom—cowering under the bed and looking for a teddy bear to hug? I heard what was going on out there. I knew they were coming for me. I knew I might not have long, so I wanted to get as much information as possible.”

She was made of stronger stuff than she looked like. Just like Ernest had been. I closed a mental door on the memory and snapped at Skye, more harshly than necessary, “Why didn’t you tell me you had learned something?”

She shrugged. “You didn’t ask. You were too busy staring at my cuts and scrapes and telling me to run away. At least **someone** around here knows how to ask the right questions.” Skye looked up at Vicantha and patted the bed next to her.

Vicantha looked at the bed, and at Skye. She raised an eyebrow and stayed where she was.

Skye gave up, and folded her hands in her lap. “First of all,” she said, her voice full of pride, “these guys are a big deal. I tried to figure out who’s funding them, but hit nothing but a ton of brick walls I couldn’t get around. And that takes some doing. I’m talking government security. CIA-caliber stuff. I wouldn’t be surprised if the actual CIA was involved. When it comes to their funding, all I was able to figure out was that they’ve got multiple sources, all heavy hitters. Government, corporate, you name it. All of them very invested in keeping the specifics of what Arkanica is doing a secret.”

But if that had been all she had to say, she wouldn’t have had a little smile playing on her lips. I asked the question she wanted to hear. “So what **did** you find?”

“Well,” said Skye, dragging the word out as that little smile grew bigger, “I may have figured out what exactly it is they’re trying to develop.” Her smile slipped; her brow furrowed. “Maybe.”

My fingers tapped against my leg. I glanced toward the door, making sure it was locked. “Not that you haven’t earned the right to show off, but the more time we spend playing games, the more time they have to find us. Say what you have to say. What are they involved in?”

“Weapons research,” said Vicantha impatiently, before Skye could speak. “What else could it be? Since the beginning of time, humans have been on one quest after another for a bigger and better weapon. Now they’ve decided to use my people to create one for them.”

Now that she said it, it seemed as obvious as she thought it was. But Skye shook her head. “That’s the weird part. I expected weapons, too. But no. Arkanica is a clean energy company. I read some of the information they have out there for potential investors. Which, I should add, is almost as well-protected

as everything else. You don't get the chance to invest in Arkanica until they're sure you'll say yes. But if they give you the chance, they'll tell you that with Arkanica's help, the entire planet can reach total independence from fossil fuels in the next five years." She looked from me to Vicantha. "Which, just in case you don't know that much about the human world, is impossible."

I blinked. "You're telling me they're at the center of a massive government and corporate conspiracy to... protect the environment?"

Skye flung her hands out toward me. "You see?" she exclaimed. "I told you it didn't add up."

"Let's not forget how they're doing it," Vicantha said sourly. "What do they want with the fae? And what is this 'faelight'?"

"That part, I couldn't tell you," Skye admitted with a sigh. "I couldn't find anything about magic or the fae or anything like that in what I saw. Not surprising, considering the intended audience. I doubt many corporate investors would be willing to throw their money behind anything that used the word 'magic.' I have no idea whether anyone funding them knows what they're really doing."

"Could the clean-energy thing be a front?" I asked. "We may not want to rule out the possibility of weapons research just yet. You have to admit, it would make a lot more sense."

"I mean, sure," said Skye. "That's the first thing I thought of. But what I keep coming up against is this—if they're going to set up such an elaborate cover, why go to so much trouble to hide the cover itself? It's already practically impossible to find out anything about what they're doing. Why would they need a whole extra layer of secrecy?"

"To protect against people like you?" I suggested.

Skye gave a half-shrug. "Yeah, that's fair. But this information is what we have to work with right now, so we should at least consider the possibility that it might be real. However unlikely it seems." She turned to Vicantha. "What kind of environmental knowledge do the fae have that Arkanica might be using? You guys are basically nature spirits, right? So this is right in your wheelhouse. This faelight stuff—is it a fuel source your people use?"

"And why Winter fae, specifically?" I mused. "I don't know anything about any fae fuel sources, but most of my dealings have been with Summer." I joined Skye in looking at Vicantha.

Vicantha stepped back, crossing her arms. "Whatever you may think, this is not our area of expertise. Humans are the ones obsessed with using technology to destroy the environment. That's never been a problem we've had, so we've never had the need to develop a solution. As for fuel sources, it seems to me that

everything humans refer to as fuel is nothing more than a poor substitute for magic.”

“Magic is obviously part of the equation somehow,” I said. “The question is how. When you say you use magic as fuel, how exactly do you do it?”

Vicantha’s look of contempt was almost a physical chill passing over my skin. It made me want to crank the thermostat up another few degrees. “You can’t expect me to explain the proper use of magic to someone who can’t control his own power. If you were capable of understanding how it was done, you wouldn’t have to wear that thing.” She wrinkled her nose at my watch as if I were wearing a dead rat around my wrist.

“I’m not talking about internal skill. I’m talking about...” I thought. “Do you have magical lamps in your world, that don’t need fire to burn?”

“Of course.”

“How do you fuel them?”

Now the contempt on Vicantha’s face was enough to send Hawthorne into its own private ice age. “With magic.”

“But how? Do you create something you put into the lamps to make them work? Some kind of energy, or magical substance?”

Skye leaned in, waiting for Vicantha’s answer. But Vicantha shook her head. “If we wish to light a lamp, we create light, and enclose it in a suitable container.”

Skye snapped her fingers. “Light. Faelight. Could they use that light for anything else? Burn it to make an engine run, maybe?”

That only prompted Vicantha to turn her contemptuous look on Skye. “Light has a single purpose: to illuminate. If we wished for movement, we would create movement. We have no need for some intermediary substance. Our minds and hearts are all that we require to shape reality to our will.”

“Then maybe they’re giving Arkanica raw magical power,” I suggested.

But Vicantha was already shaking her head. “The person I spoke with said the captive fae were making this faelight for Arkanica. Magic is not something we make. It is something we *are*. It is the sacred fire that birthed us. We do not create magic; the magic creates us.” Vicantha’s normally-sharp voice had gone soft and reverent. Her whole face changed, growing less guarded and more open. She looked almost prayerful.

Then she shook her head, and snapped herself out of it. The moment passed. The ice returned to her eyes.

“Then this is something new,” I said. “Either that, or Arkanica is forcing prisoners to work magic on their behalf. Although that seems inefficient, and doesn’t fit what the man from the Drunken Scarecrow told you.” I nodded in

Vicantha's direction.

Skye frowned. "Either way, if there are fae working for Arkanica, why wouldn't they just use their own magic, instead of going to the trouble of taking prisoners? It has to be something the fae wouldn't want to do, even the ones who are willing to work with Arkanica. Something that hurts them, or offends them on principle."

"Either that," I said, "or only Winter fae can do it, and no one from the Winter Court was interested in joining voluntarily."

Vicantha shook her head. "That makes no sense. Whatever they're doing, there's no reason Winter elements would be better suited for it than the ones associated with Summer."

"Well, winter equals cold, right?" said Skye. "They're trying to fight global warming. It fits."

"It doesn't work that way," said Vicantha, her voice growing impatient again. "We may thrive in the temperatures associated with our respective Courts, but that has nothing to do with our magic."

Skye looked at me like Vicantha had proved some kind of point for her. I didn't understand why, until she said, "See? We're not going to make sense of this on our own. This is exactly why we need to do more digging."

"Agreed," I said. Skye's face lit up, until I added, "But you won't be a part of it."

"I agree," said Vicantha, shifting so she was standing beside me. "You're too much of a liability for Kieran. We'll find an expendable human instead."

Skye frowned in confusion. "Expendable?"

Some small part of me that should have died long ago wanted to explain Vicantha's words away with an excuse, and preserve Skye's innocence. But I had already decided preserving her blinders wasn't the way to keep her safe. "She means one whose death won't cause problems for her," I said. "I told you what the lives of humans are worth to the Winter fae. If you're surprised, you weren't listening. So tell me, do you still want to put yourself at risk to save them?"

Skye let out a huff. "You know, you keep talking about how humans are bad and will kill you, and the fae are bad and will kill you. So let me ask you something."

"If you're going to ask me what I'm doing here, trying to rescue the same prisoners I told you not to care about," I said, "the answer is easy. Vicantha threatened my life. Then Arkanica threatened yours. If you were trying to catch me in a moment of hypocrisy, try again."

Skye shook her head. "That's not what I was going to ask. What I want to know is, why do you care about *me*?"

“I already answered that. I fought alongside your grandfather.”

“Aha!” Skye raised her index finger triumphantly. “Which means there’s at least one human out there you cared about. Cared about enough to put yourself at risk for my sake, almost a hundred years later.” She stared at me like it was my fault she couldn’t figure me out. “So why the doom and gloom? Clearly you don’t actually think humans are as bad as you say, and my guess is, the same is true for the fae. You two certainly seem to get along okay.” She pointed from me to Vicantha. “So why not just give it up already, and admit that your view of humanity—and the fae—doesn’t cover everyone?”

These questions again. At least the other night, I had been prepared. Today, I was still exhausted from trying to corral my magic, and my mind wasn’t working as fast as I would have liked. And I had thought this was a strategy session, not an inquiry into my past. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said in a low voice. “You’ve had seventeen years to see the truth of your species. I’ve had —”

“Seven hundred, I know,” Skye said, with a roll of her eyes. “You know what? I think maybe you just like the angst. Are you really a fae, or some kind of cliched vampire? You know, come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever actually seen you eat.” She leaned in toward me, squinting her eyes. “Open your mouth. Show me your teeth.”

I set my jaw instead. “You don’t want this explanation,” I said. “I promise you.”

Skye stared into my eyes, a challenge. “I don’t think you *have* an explanation. I think all you have is a few bad memories and a talent for moping. And hey, I’m not discounting what you’ve been through. What Arkanica did to me was bad enough, and they weren’t even trying to kill me. Seven hundred years of being hunted? I can’t imagine.” Her own jaw tensed to match my own. “But that’s no excuse to be a hypocrite. Especially when that means leaving innocent people—suffering people—to die.”

I was going to have to give her the full story. There was no other way. Well, if I had to do this, better to rip off the bandage and get it over with. “Vicantha,” I said, “leave the room.”

Vicantha gave me a dubious look. “If you hurt the human, we will have wasted a considerable amount of time and energy on retrieving her.” She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Although we did at least get a small amount of information from her. That’s something.”

“I’m not going to hurt her!” I wondered how long it would take before I was no longer caught off guard by the way her mind worked. I hoped we would part ways long before then. “But I don’t think she’ll want anyone else in the room

when I tell this story.”

“It’s okay,” said Skye. “She can stay.”

I ignored her. “Leave,” I repeated. “Give us half an hour.”

Vicantha gave each of us a long look, then nodded. “I’ll take the opportunity to patrol the nearby streets. I’ll sleep better tonight if I can be reasonably certain Arkanica hasn’t found us yet.”

She slipped out the door. Before she closed it behind her, she shot one last doubtful look at me. If I had to guess, she still wasn’t completely sure I didn’t intend to hurt Skye.

To be fair, she wasn’t entirely wrong. The damage wouldn’t be physical, but often the inner scars cut the deepest, and took the longest to heal. I was proof of that.

Chapter 18

I forced myself to sit down on the bed next to Skye. I didn't intend to have this conversation while looming over her, lecturing her like an overbearing parent. As soon as I sat, my body reminded me forcefully how close I was to a human—a human who had seen the truth of me, no less. All my muscles locked up at once. Restless energy flooded through my veins. The sounds in the room took on a perfect clarity—the ticking of the clock, Skye's rhythmic breathing, my own foot tap-tap-tapping the floor in a frantic rhythm.

I made my foot go still. "What I told you before was true," I said. "I fought alongside your grandfather. You remind me of him, you know. At first glance, he looked weak. Fragile. More than one person—his own family among them—said he didn't belong in the army at all."

"And that's what makes me remind you of him? Gee, thanks."

"But there were two things about Ernest that proved them all wrong. The first was that nothing could ever get him down. He could see someone die beside him, so close his own face was splattered with blood, and an hour later he'd be telling me an old joke from his childhood, trying to pull me out of whatever dark pit I had fallen in."

That brought a faint smile to Skye's face. "I remember his jokes. Not a single one of them was any good. Even as a kid, I knew they were terrible. But they always made me smile anyway. It was something about the way he told them. Like all he wanted in the world was to bring a little joy into someone's life."

Against my will, I echoed her smile. "Yes, exactly. And the other thing about Ernest was, he would never turn away from what he knew was right. He wasn't a fighter, and he knew it. But he saw a need, and he was helpless to resist." My voice softened, remembering. "The two of us were alike in that way. Although I was growing disillusioned even then. He helped to change that, for a while. We fought together—good versus evil. He reminded me of a time when life had been that simple. Through his eyes, I saw that it could be that simple again. It helped that the war felt like exactly the kind of conflict that had appealed to me all my life—a hopeless cause, the forces of righteousness against the forces of darkness. Those noble crusades I mentioned? There's a reason I know how the story always ends. I've been throwing myself at them headlong since I was your age."

"In the time of castles and dragons," said Skye dreamily.

The words didn't set me on edge as much as I expected they would. Maybe because I could imagine Ernest saying them, if we had ever had this much

honesty between us. “Not quite,” I answered. “I was in Ireland back then, and our little one-room hut was a far cry from a castle. But we did have dragons to fight, although not like you’re imagining. The enemy was the English, in those days.” My voice grew tight with memory. “They were the first ones to kill me.”

Skye frowned. “Kill you? I mean, you said they tried. But... you’re still here.”

“At a certain point, the distinction ceases to matter. I can come close to death. Close enough that I can feel my body simply... stop. But the magic inside me always brings me back. It would take—” I stopped myself before I could tell her my theory—that it would take a massive amount of iron to kill me, far more than for one of the fae. I wasn’t about to put that bit of information into the hands of any human. “It would take a monumental effort for someone to kill me permanently. And when a human sees someone die, even someone who has demonstrated uncanny powers, they usually don’t consider the possibility that death may be temporary.”

Sympathy flashed in Skye’s eyes. Sympathy, or maybe more pity. I hurried on. “But I’m not here to tell you the story of my life. This story is about what happened in the war. Your grandfather and I were close friends, closer than I had been to anyone in a long time. Sometimes, I saw the potential for something between us besides friendship. I saw him thinking it too. But neither of us acted on those thoughts. He was afraid, I think. Afraid of crossing a line he couldn’t come back from. And I was, as always, distracted by my cause.”

“This sounds like the lead-in to a tragic story where he dies in your arms,” said Skye. “But Grandpa didn’t die in the war. He lived to almost a hundred.” She stared down at her lap. Remembering his death, maybe, and the time leading up to it. She had been ten. Old enough to remember watching the only real parent she had ever known slowly fading in front of her, and not being able to do a thing to change the inevitable outcome.

“No, he didn’t die,” I said, trying to bring her out of her thoughts. Not that what I had to say would be any better for her. “I saved his life. On a scouting mission, we came across German soldiers marching on a small village. I don’t know what they thought they would find there—food, maybe, although it didn’t look like those people had any to spare. Or maybe they were hunting deserters, or escaped prisoners. It didn’t matter—the end result would have been the same regardless.”

“I know this story,” said Skye. “My great-uncle used to tell it. He always said Grandpa ought to toot his own horn a little, since he was a genuine war hero and all. Grandpa hated it, though. He didn’t want to think of himself as a hero. He always said he did what he had to do, and that was all there was to it.”

I swallowed at her words. It took me a moment to be able to speak again. “There were only six of us. Everyone else was too far away. We had two choices—we could go in ourselves, on what we knew would be a suicide mission, or report back and know we would be too late to do anything.” I paused. “I took the third option.”

I rubbed my watch, and the skin underneath. I had worn a plain iron band then, nothing this fancy. Ernest had asked me about it more than once. I had waved his questions away with talk of a lucky family heirloom and a superstitious mother.

Skye’s eyes followed the movement of my hand. “So you...”

“I let my magic free,” I said. “I destroyed the enemy.”

“All by yourself?” Her voice hovered somewhere between awe and skepticism.

I met her eyes levelly. “You saw me in the apartment, the night Arkanica came for you.”

“I didn’t see much of anything. I was hiding in the bedroom, remember? All I could hear was a bunch of thumps and screams. I knew everyone was throwing magic around out there, but by the time I came out, the place was already destroyed.”

“The fae who took you threw up some kind of shield,” I said. “The rest of the magic was all mine.”

Skye shook her head. “They fought back. I remember. You were bleeding.”

“That blood wasn’t mine.”

Skye shuddered. “What happened?” she asked hurriedly. “In the war?”

“They saw me,” I answered. “Your grandfather, and the others.” My fingers tightened on the watch, but not to loosen the clasp. I gripped the band like an anchor, tighter and tighter, until the sharp pulses of pain through my fingers reminded me where I was.

“Do you want to hear the rest?” I asked, as gently as I could manage. “We can stop now, if you like. It’s not hard to guess how the story ends.”

This time, when Skye shook her head, the movement was sharp, quick. Desperate. “They wouldn’t have hurt you. Not after you killed a bunch of Nazi soldiers and saved their lives.” But there was a question in her voice.

“They were afraid.” My throat was thick. For all my talk of ripping the bandage off, the words would only come slowly, one at a time, like coughing up razor blades. “Ernest walked up like he was trying to help me. He picked up the iron band I used to wear back then. But I didn’t see him holding it. All I could see was his smile. Right up until he fastened the band around my wrist and bound my magic again. He—” I paused, sucked in a breath. “They shot me.

When that didn't work, they moved on to more drastic measures. Hanging. Drowning. Burning. It was when they buried me alive that my body finally gave up. I felt my lungs fail, filled with dirt and stale air, there in the absolute darkness. When I didn't dig myself out again, I suppose they were satisfied. The story they told—the story I imagine you heard—is that we went in on that suicide mission together, and I died, while the rest of them survived against all odds as heroes.”

Skye was still shaking her head. “Are you sure he was a part of it? Maybe he didn't know what the others would do, once he put the thing back on your wrist. Or maybe they forced him to go along.”

This was why I hadn't wanted to tell her. “He fired the first shot.” I was trying to keep my voice gentle for her, but I didn't know how well I was succeeding. Not when it was all I could do to get the words out. “And he was right there in front the whole time. Holding my head underwater, lighting the—” My voice cut out. I swallowed again. “It's not the kind of thing you forget.”

“I knew him,” said Skye. “I *knew* him. He's the one who raised me. He rescued spiders, did you know that? Not just the friendly ones that eat mosquitoes, but the big poisonous ones with hairy legs. My great-uncle yelled at him for it once, because he thought I'd get bitten playing in the yard if he tossed them out there. He took the spider Grandpa had been about to set free, and squashed it on the kitchen counter. Grandpa *cried*. If he couldn't stand the thought of killing a big ugly poisonous spider, he wouldn't have done... all that... because you have magic. Magic you had just used to save his life.”

“I remember the spiders.” Despite the gravity of the conversation, the memory brought a faint smile to my face. “I may have raised my voice about it too, once or twice. Although I knew better than to squash one in front of him. He would never have forgiven me.” I let out a long, slow breath. “But he still had the same core of darkness and fear inside him that all humans do. You have it too, even if you don't know it yet. It's a hard thing to see, and harder to accept. I spent seven hundred years refusing to see it. Wanting to be some kind of champion of humanity. Wanting to believe there was such a thing as good and evil, and that I could defeat evil to preserve what was good. But the good people react the same way to me as the evil ones. Every time.”

“Not every time. I saw what you can do, and I haven't done anything to hurt you. And I won't.” Wetness glistened at the corners of her eyes. “I *won't*. You're wrong about us. And I think you're wrong about him, too, whatever you thought you saw. Memories can lie.”

So could the heart. And her heart had every reason to remember her grandfather fondly. But all I could do was give her the truth. The rest was up to

her. “That was the last cause I took up. After that, I decided it was long past time I started enjoying my life, instead of spending it suffering for people who didn’t want what I had to offer.”

“What about that Families of Veterans Fund thing?” Skye asked. “The one you set up to take care of me, after Grandpa died?”

“That was... a relapse. A brief one. I saw that Ernest had died, and went to his funeral, looking for... some sort of closure, I suppose. While I was there, I heard his friends—the last surviving members of our old squad—talking. I heard enough to figure out Ernest’s granddaughter was in danger. Your grandfather had been worried about you, before he died.”

Skye frowned. “What do you mean, in danger? I know he was worried about how I would cope, and about me having to move and change schools, but...”

“Do you remember living with your aunt and uncle?” I asked.

Skye shook her head. “I know I stayed with them early on, after he died, but I don’t remember it. It was only for a day or two, wasn’t it? And that whole time is a blur to me—just before he died, and just after. I barely remember my real parents, so he was basically the only parent I had. When he died, I just... shut down for a while.”

Her voice grew softer as she slipped into memory. “The only thing I remember about my aunt and uncle is that afterward, I was sure I was cursed somehow. It took Randall and Sheila a couple of years to get me over that one. I was so sure something was going to happen to them. I would wake up in the night, convinced the RV had crashed—even though we were parked—and I was the only one left alive. Can you blame me? First my parents died, then my grandfather, and I was with my aunt and uncle less than a week before their house burned down.”

“I can tell you for a fact that you weren’t responsible for what happened to your aunt and uncle.” Again, I fingered my watch.

Skye followed the movement again. This time, her eyes went wide.

I hesitated, trying to figure out how much to tell her. I decided on the truth. “Your uncle,” I said, “had an unhealthy interest in young girls. As well as a lucrative business catering to people with similar interests. When I investigated, and found out the truth, I couldn’t let you stay there.”

“Why did you investigate in the first place, if you had given up on helping people?” asked Skye. Her voice held a challenge, and her eyes a hint of triumph, like she thought she had finally backed me into a corner.

I sighed. “I have—as Vicantha puts it—a sickness. Like I said, I relapsed. That was all.”

“A sickness?” The corners of Skye’s lips quirked up. “You know it’s just

called being a good person, right?”

“A good person is just one who hasn’t been tested yet.”

“Then what do you call yourself?” The challenge was unmistakable now. “Considering you’ve saved my life, what, twice now?”

“Someone who spends his time and money enjoying life to the fullest,” I answered, “while the bad guys are—apparently—out there trying to save the world from climate change.” I couldn’t hold back a bemused smile. Albeit one with more than a little bitterness in it. “I faced my test. It took over six hundred years, but I finally failed, the same as everyone else. I’ve made my peace with that.”

“At peace with what? Giving up?” Skye studied me for a few seconds longer, then threw up her hands. “You know what? Fine. That’s your business. But I’m not walking away because you’ve seen one too many bad things in your life. Go ahead and tell me I’m just saying that because I haven’t been tested enough, if you want. Meanwhile, I’ll be doing some good in the world.”

“By saving those captured fae? You’ve seen me in action. You’ve seen Vicantha. You must know what we are by now. The ones in that building aren’t any better.” I placed a soft but firm finger at the edge of her jaw, and turned her head until her eyes locked with mine. “I’m sorry to be the one to break your illusions, but the magic you’ve been dreaming of doesn’t exist. Magic isn’t unicorns and rainbows and glittery wings. It’s cruel, and deadly, and it doesn’t want your help.”

Skye’s sharp bark of laughter suited her about as well as her rainbow-striped nails would have suited me. “You really think I don’t know there are bad things in this world? I spent the first ten years of my life watching one family member after another die, and you think I’m naive?” She shook her head, crossed her arms, and fixed me with a look of disdain I would have expected from Vicantha. “The difference between you and me is, I believe the bad stuff isn’t all there is to the world. And you know why I believe that? Because if I don’t, that means we all might as well just lie down and die. But don’t mistake that for ignorance. Especially not after what I’ve just gone through.” She pointed at one of the larger bruises on her arm.

“Believe what you like,” I said. “That isn’t my concern. Just like this fight isn’t yours. Not anymore. If you won’t go willingly, I have the resources to have you transported to the location of my choice until this is over.”

I could have sworn she rolled her eyes at me. She raised her index finger in the air. “One, if that was enough to keep me safe, you wouldn’t have brought me here to Hawthorne, right into the center of the danger. You wouldn’t have done that unless there weren’t any other good options.” A second finger joined the

first. “And two, wherever you have your goon squad take me, I **will** get my hands on a laptop. I may not be as innocent as you think, but I know what innocent looks like. You want to bet I can’t play ‘poor sweet pathetic soul’ long enough to get **one** person to give me what I want?” She theatrically batted her eyelashes at me. “And once I get my hands on that laptop, I’m going to keep digging. So it’s up to you whether you want me to do that where you can protect me, or where you won’t have any idea what I’m up to.”

I knew she meant every word. And not only because of the fire in her eyes as she said it. I knew because I remembered Ernest. Slight and thin and bookish, the man had belonged in a library, not in a war. But he had never been one to let anything keep him away from a righteous fight. Just like his granddaughter. Just like me, once. I knew a kindred spirit when I saw one.

In how many other ways was Skye like her grandfather? Would I someday see her once-gentle eyes staring down at me as I died, as I had once seen Ernest’s? That thought made me pause. If I believed she had her grandfather’s darkness in her, as much as his light, then why was I so intent on saving her?

There was something hiding underneath that thought. Something that made my stomach clench. Something my mind skittered away from every time I tried to look at it too closely.

So I stopped trying. I stared into Skye’s too-familiar eyes. “You tried to convince me this was about curiosity,” I said. “Would you be content with getting answers to your questions? Or will you refuse to leave this be until the captured fae are saved, and Arkanica is no longer a threat?”

Skye answered with a half-smile that looked too old for her face. “What do you think?”

She was right—I might as well not have bothered to ask. I gave her a short nod, and tried not to think too hard about what I was agreeing to. “Then I am too. I told Vicantha I would stay until you were safe. If the only way to keep you safe is to destroy Arkanica—because I have no doubt that you’ll keep going after them until they’re destroyed, one way or another—then I’m in this to the end.”

I reached for her hand. She took it. Her slender fingers were surprisingly strong as they clasped mine. Her eyes glowed with the joy of a righteous fight as she looked at me with Ernest’s smile.

Chapter 19

It took a while to get Vicantha on board with the idea of keeping Skye around. But once she knew Skye's presence would ensure that I would stick around to help her for as long as necessary, that went a long way toward winning her over. Not to mention the fact that, since I would feel obligated to check up on Skye wherever she was, Skye would actually be more of a distraction to me if she left. Vicantha didn't bother to pretend she was happy about the idea of a human liability tagging along with us, but after a grueling hour's worth of discussion, even she was forced to agree that it was our best option.

Also, Skye had gotten us information. That didn't just give us more to go on—it proved her competence. And if there was anything Vicantha respected, it was competence. I had a suspicion that Skye's refusal to be cowed by Arkanica's treatment of her did a lot to improve her standing in Vicantha's eyes, too. More than once, I saw Vicantha look from Skye's cuts and bruises to her determined face, and give a small, almost imperceptible, nod of approval.

So it was decided. For better or worse, Skye was in this all the way now. With that taken care of, all that remained was to figure out our next step.

The idea of following up on the clean-energy angle seemed obvious, at least to me. Yes, it could have been a smokescreen. But Skye had been right: crafting a lie to hide the truth, and then going to such lengths to hide the lie, seemed like a waste of a perfectly good deception. The more I thought about it, the more I suspected that if we followed that trail to the many places it led, we would eventually find the key to understanding Arkanica. The trick would be unearthing all the clues they had worked so hard to bury.

But there was also the Summer Court angle to consider—and in many ways, their involvement was the part that made the least sense. Why would the fae work with a human corporation? Why would they go to the trouble of hunting down and abducting Winter agents? What did they have the prisoners making for the humans, and how? That last was the central question—and Vicantha was of the opinion that the only way to find that answer was to investigate the Summer Court directly.

In the end, when it was clear that further debate wouldn't do anything but make all our moods deteriorate further, we decided to split up. Vicantha would cross back into the fae realm and talk to some of her clandestine contacts, and do her best to find out whether anyone had heard rumors of strange goings-on in the Summer Court. Meanwhile, I—along with Skye—would handle the human

angle.

That meant Vicantha would be trusting me to work unsupervised. If I decided to run back home, there would be nothing she could do to stop me. She didn't mention it, and so neither did I, in case it was something she had overlooked. It would be a refreshing change to be able to do something without her looking over my shoulder—and to keep the thermostat where I wanted it without anyone fighting for their right to live in a frozen hellscape.

Besides, I had a feeling Vicantha hadn't overlooked anything. She simply knew as well as I did that as long as Skye was still in danger, I wasn't going anywhere. She could grumble all she wanted about Skye being a liability, but I was sure it hadn't escaped her that the situation worked in her favor as much as it worked against her.

Vicantha didn't bother saying goodbye. By the time I woke up the next morning, she was gone. Skye didn't waste any time either, once I got her a new laptop in exchange for a promise not to do anything that ran the slightest risk of attracting Arkanica's notice. And so evening found me sitting at one of the coveted balcony tables of Hawthorne's single high-end Italian restaurant, sipping at overpriced wine that I could already tell would do nothing to blunt my nerves as I waited for my dinner companion. Supposedly, I was meeting a woman from one of the companies who hadn't covered their connections with Arkanica well enough to evade Skye's initial digging. But our reservations had been for half an hour ago, and I was still at the table alone.

I wished Skye had chosen a different restaurant. The lighting was dim and intimate, but all that meant was that the room held too many shadows, and not enough ways to see into them. The soft cello music, piped in through speakers hidden in the lush potted plants that dotted the balcony, was familiar from an album I often played in the background back home when I needed to soothe my nerves. It kept dulling my senses enough to make me forget to watch the door—and my back. Even the scent of basil and oregano and perfectly-cooked steak wafting up from below was beginning to grate at me. Despite Skye's brief suspicions, I did in fact need food to live, and it would have been bad manners to order before my guest arrived. Every meal that floated by, intended for another table, reminded my stomach all over again of how long it had been since lunch.

But Skye had done one thing right when she had requested the balcony. From where I was sitting, I had a perfect view of the door. Which meant that when the woman I was here to meet walked in, I saw her right away. I recognized her from the picture Skye had shown me. As the maître d' led her up to me, I bent over the menu, and tried to pretend I wasn't watching.

Now I would find out just how well my cover held up. This wasn't my usual

area. I knew the business of antiques and collectibles backward and forward, even if I had no interest in the field beyond the ways in which the relics of my personal history could add zeroes to my bank accounts. Corporate deals were another world entirely. I had instructed my assistant to have his sources set up a company that didn't exist, using enough back channels to hopefully outwit whatever Arkanica was doing to keep tabs on my false identities. On paper, I—or my new alias—now worked for a private military contractor. It would explain my desire for secrecy, and hopefully serve as a way to bait out information about Arkanica's weapons research, if it existed.

Assuming, of course, that Arkanica hadn't already figured out what I was doing, and alerted my dinner partner to the truth.

The woman slid into the chair across from me, and shot me a practiced smile as she smoothed out her skirt. "I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I had a last-minute call. Some people will never understand the concept of time zones, I'm afraid."

"The price we pay for doing business around the globe." I answered her smile with one just as polished. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Albrecht."

She waved away my words. "Please, call me Yanina." She flipped through the menu. "I admit, I was intrigued when you requested this meeting," she said, squinting to read the specials. "Especially considering the urgency of your request. Your area of expertise and mine don't have many points of overlap."

I understood why she was confused. Yanina Albrecht worked for an international property development company. Her industry didn't have much to do with the business of war. But understanding her confusion meant I was also prepared for it. "You would think that," I said, with a small, private smile. "But the two of us have... certain common interests." I leaned in closer, and lowered my voice. "I hear you've been doing business with a company calling themselves Arkanica."

She stiffened in surprise—but only for an instant. She covered it with a frown at the menu and a small sip of water. "I'm not familiar with them, I'm afraid."

"My mistake. I'm sorry to have wasted your time." I leaned back in my chair, the picture of unconcern. "I will, of course, cover your meal to compensate you for your trouble."

"I'm sorry I couldn't help you," she said, not sounding sorry at all.

"It isn't a problem," I assured her. "I have other sources. My contact with the Parquin Group has already said he'd be willing to answer my questions. I was hoping to go to a more reputable source first, but no matter. I know how to watch my back." I smiled.

This time, she didn't hide her sudden tension quite as well. "Parquin? What did they say to you?"

This time, I was the one to wave her words away. “Nothing of interest to you, if you’re not involved with Arkanica.”

“Those lying...” she muttered down at her menu. She looked up at me, and spoke through her teeth. “We were promised exclusivity.”

I tried not to let my smile broaden into a grin. “Promised in exchange for what?”

Yanina’s breath hissed out through her teeth. “I can’t go into it. I’m breaking more than one nondisclosure agreement just by sitting at this table with you right now, listening to you say their name.”

I shrugged. “And they promised you they wouldn’t go to Parquin, but here we are.” I opened my hands to her. “All we want to know is whether Arkanica is worth doing business with. If we decide to sign a contract with them, you’ll have given Arkanica more business, and all will be forgiven. If we don’t, no one will ever need to know this conversation took place.”

She closed her menu and studied me, her eyes guarded. “And what do I get out of this?”

I answered with another shrug. “I have friends in... unexpected places. Parquin is in the middle of negotiating a sizable deal right now, very hush-hush. If it falls through at the last minute, they’ll lose billions. I can make sure that happens.”

There was no such deal in progress, not that I knew of. I had no idea what the Parquin Group was up to—or, for that matter, anything about them besides the name and the fact that they were in direct competition with Yanina’s corporation. But that was the beauty of the lie—if the deal was a secret, she wouldn’t find it suspicious that she had heard nothing about it.

“I looked you up,” said Yanina. “And the people you work for. I couldn’t find any information. As far as the internet is concerned, your employer doesn’t exist, and neither do you.”

I imbued my nod with a hint of impatience. “Then my people have done their jobs well. I’ll be sure they’re suitably rewarded when bonus time comes around. Now, can we get back to Arkanica?”

Yanina took a long breath as she looked out over the balcony. When she turned back to me again, I could see in her eyes that she had made her decision, even before she spoke. “Faelight works, if that’s what you want to know. They promised us exclusivity in exchange for having us test the early versions for them. We were afraid it would come to nothing, and we would have wasted time and energy on a pipe dream. But if you ask me, we came out ahead on both ends of that deal. We got to see this stuff in action before anyone else, and when it finally goes to market, no one else in the industry will get a crack at it for a full

year.” Her jaw tightened. “At least that was what they led us to believe. I’ll need to have someone take another look at the contract.” She pulled out her phone and tapped something out.

“Faelight,” I echoed. “Arkanica’s new energy source.” I prayed I wasn’t far off the mark.

She nodded, and I let out my breath in relief. “The fuel is only part of it, of course,” she said. “They’ve given us a look at some of the projects they have in the works. We’re on the threshold of a new era. A leap in technological advancement that will surpass the level of innovation of the last one hundred years in one-tenth that time. But the fuel... that’s the real miracle. We can end our dependence on fossil fuels—not reduce, but eliminate, everywhere and for all time. Do you have any idea what that means? What it will do to change the course of history?”

“That sounds... improbable, to say the least.” My skepticism was only half feigned.

“That’s what I thought, at first. But they can do it. Yes, everyone says that, but they’re the only ones who have a chance. Wind, solar... they’re not cost-effective enough. And not... well, not *flashy* enough, for lack of a better word. They don’t get people excited. This, though... this is a game-changer like nothing we’ve ever—” She cut herself off abruptly as a faint blush spread over her face. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to gush.”

I answered with a bland smile as I said mildly, “I’ve heard it works like magic.”

I had set the bait. She responded right away. Her shoulders stiffened; the guarded look came back into her eyes. Then she gave a light laugh, a second too late. Those sharp eyes studied me across the table, searching my face for clues about how much I knew.

I dropped it, for now. “The fact that they inspire such devotion bodes well. You strike me as someone it’s difficult to impress.”

But she had retreated back into her initial suspicions. “They’ve earned every bit of the praise I can give them. But I’m still not sure why someone like you would be interested.”

Here was where things would get more challenging. “There’s no need to be coy,” I said, dropping my voice to an intimate murmur. “We already know about the defense potential of their work. You said you’ve seen the technologies they’re developing—you must know what I’m talking about.”

“I’m afraid I don’t.” Creases and shadows, deepened by the low lighting, replaced the blush on her cheeks. The shine disappeared from her eyes. If Arkanica was developing magical weapons, I was willing to bet Yanina didn’t

know about it—and she didn't like the idea, either.

I decided to push a little more. Just enough to turn over that rock and see what was lying underneath. “Any successful new technology is used first for pornography, then for warfare, and finally to sell us things we don't need. Isn't that how the saying goes?”

Yanina shook her head sharply. “This meeting was a mistake. You have some serious misconceptions about what Arkanica does. They—and those of us working with them—are in this to make the world a better place, starting with climate change. And if we can make a tidy profit in the bargain, that's just a bonus. Lessening the impact of climate change will reduce global conflict. Arkanica isn't going to turn around and sell you the tools to do the opposite. This is a chance for us to save ourselves, not for people like you to send the world deeper into hell.”

“All progress has its price.” Now it was my eyes searching hers. Asking her a silent question.

She drew in a sharp breath. “If you're asking about what I think you are... don't. Just don't.”

“What do you think I'm asking about?”

“I mean it.” She clutched the menu in both hands. The hard plastic cover bent and threatened to break. I didn't think she realized she was doing it. “That's not a road you want to go down.”

“Arkanica is doing the impossible,” I said. “You can't blame me for being curious about how they're doing it. What are we talking here, a deal with the devil?” I kept my voice light. I didn't take my eyes off hers.

“They're the only devils here. And I've signed on the dotted line with no regrets.” The sparkle in her eyes was long gone, but the fervor that had replaced it was every bit as strong. “Have you looked at the latest climate change projections? I have. If we want human civilization to survive, this is how we do it.”

“Be that as it may,” I said, “I'd like to have all the information in hand before I make a deal.”

“No,” said Yanina, “I don't think you do. Do yourself a favor—when you go home tonight, take a look in the mirror. Look yourself in the eye, and ask yourself what you're willing to do to survive. To ensure that the people you care about, and their children, and their children's children, will have lives worth living. If the answer is that you'll do whatever you have to do, that's all you need to know, and you can sign that devil's deal right alongside me and sleep like a baby. But let that be the last question you ask. I didn't have anyone to give me that advice. I asked one question too many. And not a day goes by that I don't

regret it.”

“Whatever is happening in that building,” I said, “I can guarantee you I’ve seen worse. And if you’re worried about how I’ll react to the... stranger aspects of what Arkanica is doing, don’t be. I have plenty of stories of my own that I could tell. More things in heaven and earth, and so on.”

“This isn’t the kind of story anyone willingly tells.” She pushed herself to her feet. Her chair scraped across the floor. “You know, I don’t think I’m hungry after all. If you need any other information, leave a message with my assistant.”

Before I could say anything else, she was gone.

Chapter 20

“I still have a few more names,” said Skye. “I can set up another meeting.”

We were back at the bed and breakfast. Skye was on the bed, which Vicantha and I had ceded to her by mutual agreement. She was lying on her belly, kicking her legs lazily as she chomped down on a chocolate chip cookie from a basket downstairs—a basket that had looked like its contents hadn’t been refreshed for at least five years.

I didn’t say anything about her culinary choices. Her stomach was her concern. I also didn’t mention the crumbs dropping onto the sheets with every bite. If she wanted to feel cookie bits scraping up against her skin as she slept, that was her prerogative.

I stilled my pacing to shake my head. “Anyone else I meet with is likely to give me another variation on the same answer. We might find someone willing to talk, but we’re just as likely to arrange a meeting with someone who doesn’t even have the information we’re looking for. The only reason Yanina Albrecht knew as much as she did is that her company agreed to do Arkanica’s testing for them. And if we keep setting up these meetings one by one, Arkanica is likely to get wind of what we’re doing long before we find someone who both has the information and is willing to talk.”

I started pacing again, pausing only briefly to look out the window at the dark water. I couldn’t see the park from here, but I pictured it in my mind, and wondered whether Vicantha was having any more luck than us. “Do you have any other ideas?”

“I could probably figure something out,” she said. “If I got another quick peek at Arkanica’s files.” She reached for her keyboard.

I snapped her laptop closed, almost catching one of her nails in the process. Today they were painted with bright cartoon flowers—roses, daisies, tulips. Or maybe the blooms were something else entirely, but roses, daisies, and tulips were as far as my flower knowledge stretched, so that was how I had been thinking of them. “Anything that won’t send up a beacon to them and get you captured again. We were lucky to get you out of there the first time. If they find us again, they’ll make sure our luck doesn’t hold.” I tucked the laptop under my arm, ignoring Skye’s frown.

“Not like you’re thinking,” she said, her eyes following the laptop as I strode across the room. “There’s no danger. Well, hardly any. Yeah, I’d be breaking into their files, but only a little.”

“I gave you a way out. You chose to continue fighting the people who almost killed you. You’ll forgive me if I don’t trust you to make an accurate assessment of danger.”

“They weren’t going to kill me. They needed me.”

“They don’t need you anymore. And they’ll be waiting for you to try to get into their files again, so they can track us down.”

“Haven’t we already been over the ‘choosing not to be a gloomy ball of angst doesn’t mean I’m stupid’ thing? I know exactly what’s going to happen to me if they get their hands on me again. And no one is more motivated than me to make sure that doesn’t happen. So when I tell you I can do this without putting either of us at risk, how about thanking me for giving you the idea you asked for?”

I tried to do what she was asking. But she wanted me to trust a human. That would have been difficult even if she hadn’t been a child. “No. We’ll find another way.”

Skye frowned in thought. Then she sat up and snapped her fingers, crumbling the remains of the cookie over the sheets in the process. I winced.

“When I was in their files,” she said, “I got a brief look at their employee records. I tried to memorize as many names as I could, but I was focused on other things at the time. A couple did stick in my head, though.”

My steps slowed as I considered the idea. Tracking down Arkanica’s employees could be useful, but... “No,” I said again. “We’re not trying this Vicantha’s way yet. Not unless we’re sure we don’t have another option.”

I wasn’t sure what had changed between that morning in the hotel and now. Then, I had been perfectly willing to let her do whatever she wanted. Maybe it had only been my fear for Skye driving me, masquerading as a revelation. Or maybe I just didn’t want Skye to see what I was capable of. Although after she had seen what I had done to the team who had come after her, I wasn’t sure how much there was left to hide.

“Grabbing an employee is too risky anyway,” I continued. “They’ve already shown how well they can track us down. We don’t want to give them any more incentive.”

Skye frowned in confusion. “What are you... I wasn’t talking about kidnapping anybody! I’m thinking of something strange I noticed. There was one particular name that stuck in my head, because he was mentioned in some places but not others. I didn’t figure out why until I was trying to fall asleep in Arkanica’s cell. It’s because he doesn’t work for them anymore.”

“So one of their employees left,” I said, not seeing the significance. “I would be surprised if he were the only one.”

“Not just any employee.” She grinned as she paused for suspense. “He was their lead scientist. I don’t know why he left—like I said, I had other priorities, and then I was rudely interrupted by the whole kidnapping thing. But there’s a chance he left on bad terms. And if so, maybe he’d be willing to talk.”

At the mention of the kidnapping, a shadow crossed her face, even though I could hear how hard she was trying to make light of it. She was having a harder time with this than she wanted to let on. I did her the courtesy of not mentioning it.

“Or else he still has regular lunches with his old buddies from Arkanica,” I said, “and as soon as we get in touch with him, he’ll call them up to find out what’s going on.”

Skye’s face fell. “Well, do you have any other ideas?” she asked sullenly.

I hated to admit it, but I didn’t. Anything we did would carry just as much risk, if not more. “Is he still alive?” I asked. “From what we’ve seen of Arkanica, if he did leave on bad terms, I wouldn’t be surprised if the severance package included a bullet to the head.”

Skye bit her lip. “I didn’t think of that.”

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“Dominic Valentino.”

I took out my phone. Then, just in time, it occurred to me that I shouldn’t be looking this guy up, not unless I wanted to send up exactly the sort of red flag I had warned Skye against. Meeting with Yanina Albrecht had been one thing. But from Arkanica’s perspective, she was one business partner among many. This man, on the other hand, was a former key employee who had left the company under unknown circumstances. Even assuming he was still alive, I wouldn’t have been surprised if Arkanica had been waiting for someone to approach him since the day he had left.

Instead, I started dialing a familiar number. “I’ll have my people look for him.”

“How long will that take?” asked Skye.

Too long. I threw her own question back at her. “Do you have any other ideas?”

“Well...” She drew the word out. “I *could* do some hunting myself. And make sure Arkanica doesn’t find out what we’re doing.” She gave the laptop under my arm a significant look. “What do you say? Are you ready to start trusting me?”

I started to shake my head. Then I thought about the time it would take my sources to track down Dominic Valentino—if they were even willing to do it, after what happened the last time I had asked them to look into Arkanica. And it

wasn't as if my way didn't have risks of its own. If Arkanica had found one of my unused aliases, who was to say they weren't watching my people?

I gritted my teeth as I held the laptop out to Skye. "Don't make me regret this."

* * *

The Hawthorne library was of a piece with the rest of the town. Books with loose pages and crumbling spines sat next to shiny new editions of the latest bestsellers. And while those bestsellers had a prominent place on the shelves, the overall selection was... eclectic. On the shelf in front of the table where I was sitting, a thick anatomy book from at least eighty years ago sat next to a romance novel with a shirtless pirate on the cover. Five minutes ago, I had watched a middle-aged man walk away with a book with a UFO on the cover and a title printed in Cyrillic. And while every library was quiet, in here the silence felt oppressive rather than peaceful.

But the smell was the same as any other library. And I had always found the scent of old books soothing. I found a strange comfort in books. Especially history. Books told history the way people wanted to remember it, not the way it had really happened. They offered a series of tidy stories with all the contradictions and ambiguities smoothed out. I envied people who learned history through books.

An old man with stooped shoulders, and thick glasses that made his eyes too big for his face, studied the shelves before grabbing the anatomical text. He walked over and settled into the chair beside me, although he didn't seem to notice my presence. He set the book down gently on the table, and blew a sheen of dust off the cover.

"Did you know," he said, "that Aristotle thought the heart was the center of human intelligence?" He still wasn't looking at me, but the table was empty except for the two of us. There was no one else he could have been talking to. "He thought the brain existed primarily to cool the blood."

"That's interesting," I said mildly. I kept one eye on him, and another on the door.

"One of the world's great thinkers, hobbled by ignorance," he said with a sigh. "Now schoolchildren have access to scientific information that the greatest luminaries of the past could never have conceived of. Although they won't find any of it in here." He tapped the book. Finally, he looked up. Those giant eyes regarded me solemnly. "If you're looking for information, a library is a good place to find it."

I turned away from the door to give him a sharper look. “Dominic Valentino?” I asked quietly.

He answered with a nod. “I figure you’re either the man I’m here to meet, or you’re here to kill me. And if it’s the latter, well, it’s long past time for that.”

“I’m not here to kill you.”

“I’d say that’s a relief, but some days, I’m not so sure.” His sigh was like a balloon deflating.

I glanced around at the milling people. No one looked interested in sitting at our table, but the place was far from empty. A mother with three children was browsing through a travel guide while trying to keep her toddler from ripping pages out of a cookbook. Two high-schoolers were having a spirited argument about the relative merits of a science fiction series and its television adaptation. And a man with a face generic enough to set me on edge was reading in an armchair. He hadn’t turned the page in at least five minutes. Maybe he was just a slow reader. Maybe not.

“Why did you want to meet here?” I asked. “A more private location would have been safer.”

“Maybe so,” said Dominic. “But I’ve always had the feeling that nothing truly bad can happen in a library. Besides, I still don’t know why you’re here, or whether you have good intentions. Better to keep things public.” His stooped shoulders gave a small shrug. “And if this is my day to die, there are worse places for it. I always did love libraries.”

“There are libraries everywhere,” I said. “So why are you still here in Hawthorne? I looked into you. You left Arkanica abruptly, and haven’t worked in your field since. It’s not hard to read between the lines and guess it wasn’t an amicable departure. In your place, I would have gotten as far away from this place as I could.”

“Believe me, I tried. But the plans always fell through. The house would disappear from the market, or the job would go to someone else at the last minute. This place isn’t done with me yet. It wants its revenge, I suspect.”

I leaned in toward him. “Revenge for what?”

He studied me through his lenses like I was a specimen under his microscope. “You haven’t told me why it is you’re poking around Arkanica.”

“Does it matter?”

“For you, yes. It’s too late for me. Even if they’ve decided to let me peacefully live out my days, they’ll always have their hooks in me. I can still feel it under my skin, you know. I know the last of it is long gone by now, but sometimes I still get the urge to dig it out. Sometimes I can’t help myself.” He glanced down at his arms. I had been so focused on his glasses, I hadn’t noticed

the scars. Thick, jagged lines crisscrossed the length of his forearms, like claw marks.

His eyes followed mine. I averted my gaze. “What did you do for Arkanica?”

He wagged his finger in my face. “I wasn’t finished. All of that is the fate I’ve earned, and it’s less than I deserve. But you... they haven’t gotten to you yet. Not unless I misunderstood your message. And you should keep it that way.”

“It’s too late for that,” I said. “They hurt someone I care about. I can’t let them do it again.”

“Then get that person, and yourself, far away from them while you still can,” Dominic advised. “Not that it will do you much good for long. Soon enough, there won’t be anywhere left to hide. They’re going to rule the world, you know. Oh, we’ll all think we live in America or Russia or Japan, but it’ll all be Arkanica underneath.” He absently scratched at his forearm. A dark red drop of blood welled up.

I grabbed his hand before he could do any more damage. I didn’t realize I had used my left until I saw Dominic staring at the steel watch, and the thick bracelet of scars underneath.

“An old injury,” I said shortly. I tucked my hand under the table.

“God have mercy,” Dominic whispered. A tremble ran through him, like a wave of cold air had come through the closed window at our backs. “You’re one of them.”

My right hand gripped the edge of the table. My body surged with the need to run, even as my limbs froze in place. I could hear the blood rushing in Dominic’s veins—and in the distance, the wail of a siren. I could feel every crease and seam in my new and ill-fitting clothes, replacements for the wardrobe I had left behind in the apartment. Even as I fixed my unblinking eyes on Dominic, a part of my brain was busy cataloguing the obstacles behind him, trying to guess how long it would take me to get out—and what he could do to me before I got the chance.

Speaking at all was a struggle. Making my voice sound normal was nearly impossible. But I did it. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He gave me a stare to match my own. “How are you lying?” he whispered. “You’re not supposed to be able to lie. But it’s a lie, no matter how you’re doing it. I know what causes scars like those. I’ve seen it before.”

He pushed his chair back. I remained frozen, caught between the need to put as much distance between me and Dominic as possible, and the necessity of ending his life before he got the chance to end mine. But he didn’t lunge toward me, or reach for a weapon. He didn’t even run. Instead, he fell to his knees on the dirty gray carpet. He bowed his head, like a condemned prisoner waiting for

the axe.

“I always thought my former employers would be the ones to kill me,” he whispered to the floor. “I should have known it would be one of you instead.”

I squatted to put myself on his level, even though the panicked animal in the back of my mind was still screaming at me to run. “I’m not one of them. And I’m not here to kill you.”

He didn’t seem to hear me. “I’m glad I was wrong. It’s only right that it should be you.” He looked up at me with those big eyes. They glistened with wetness. “All I ask is that you forgive me.”

“Forgive you for what?”

“I tried to stop it—please understand that. I tried to give them a quick end. But Arkanica was on to me by then. I thought they’d dump me in a shallow grave, but I guess they were too afraid of answering questions from the police. Back then, they didn’t have the same influence they do today. They don’t have to worry about that kind of thing anymore.”

I gripped the man’s shoulders as gently as I could, but he still flinched, anticipating that fatal blow. His body was stiff but unresisting as I hauled him to his feet. “Listen to me.” I kept my voice quiet, mindful of the crowd around us. No one seemed to be taking an undue interest in us yet, but if he kept drawing attention to himself, that wouldn’t last long. “I’m here for information, and that’s it. I need to know what Arkanica is really doing. And I need to know what faelight is.”

His eyes grew even larger. “You... you really don’t know.”

“I’m looking for a way to bring them down,” I said. “Would you like to stop spending your life looking over your shoulder, wondering if today is the day their mercy runs out? Tell me what’s happening inside that building.”

A thin, wheezy sound erupted from his throat. I thought he was having a heart attack at first, until I realized he was laughing. “Oh,” he managed, wiping his eyes. “Oh, this is glorious. When you find out, when you tell the others of your kind what we did in that lab in our early days, the justice you rain down on their heads will be a thing to behold.” His shoulders shook.

Then his laughter cut off, without so much as a gasp, as a bullet broke the glass of the window behind us to bury itself in his skull.

He fell forward onto the open book. Blood leaked out onto the pages, staining a diagram of the human spleen.

Around me, people were screaming. But I could hear them only faintly. All my attention was on Dominic. I shook his shoulder, even though I could plainly see there was no point—I was staring directly at the bullet hole in the back of his head. Still, I called to him, not willing to accept the reality yet. “Dominic.

Answer me. Dominic!”

He didn’t answer. As I shook him, his head flopped limply, giving me a better view of the ruin of his face. He wasn’t going to be answering any of my questions.

I turned and started for the door, forcing myself not to look at the crowd. If I paid attention to them, if I saw their curious eyes, I would freeze up again. And then I would never get out of here. I had to pretend they didn’t exist. Block them out, their screams and their stares, until I was safely away from here.

But the door opened before I could leave. And that was when I realized the siren I had heard, the imagined sound I had stopped paying attention to, had been more than my imagination this time.

Six police officers burst through the door. All of them had their hands on their weapons. All of them were looking straight at me.

“Don’t move,” snapped the woman at the front. “Show me your hands.”

I held my hands up. Her face twisted, her features seeming to melt under my gaze. She was Ernest. She was all of them. Every human who had ever come for me, locked me away, done their best to end my immortal life.

My heart fluttered in my chest like a hummingbird’s wings. For a moment, I thought it might burst under the strain, and earn me a few hours of dreamless oblivion while my body repaired itself. But although spots danced in front of my eyes, I stayed fully conscious as the police officer took one slow, measured step toward me after another, a set of metal handcuffs dangling from her fingers.

As best I could through my adrenaline-flooded brain, I weighed the odds of running and risking the bullets against those of staying and letting them take me. It wasn’t a hard choice. If they shot me, I wouldn’t die, but I would be incapacitated enough that running wouldn’t gain me anything in the end. All it would do was show them I was more than an ordinary human, and leave me helpless in their hands while I healed.

I glanced at my watch. If I set my magic free, I didn’t know how it would manifest, but the one thing I knew for sure was that it would save me. Every one of the officers would die, and I would be free to run. Once they put those cuffs around my wrists, I would lose my chance. I didn’t know whether I would get another.

I couldn’t reach over with my right hand to undo the clasp, not with my hands still raised. I bent the fingers of my left down to touch it, but didn’t loosen it. As hard as I was trying to ignore the crowd, my eyes kept darting to the mother whose toddler now had his face burrowed into her shoulder. The high-schoolers who were trying to creep toward the door, their faces white. The man in the armchair, who was staring at Dominic’s body, his face a mask of silent horror. I

had been wrong about him after all. That wasn't the face of someone who had seen death before.

They didn't matter. Just like I had told Vicantha, the day I had threatened her. I had spent centuries saving human lives, and I had seen where it had gotten me. Now it was time to save myself.

I pulled my gaze away from the library patrons. I focused on the woman with the handcuffs, and the other officers behind her, all of whom looked ready to attack at the slightest move from me. But I could slip off the watch before they knew what I was doing. They wouldn't see that as a threat. Not until it was too late.

I didn't loosen the clasp.

They probably fancied themselves heroes, the way I had once. They had come here to fight evil, to preserve what was good. A man was dead. They thought I was responsible. Did they deserve to die for that?

If they didn't, so what? Had I deserved any of my deaths? My fingers tightened on the clasp.

But I still didn't release it.

The woman crossed the last of the distance between us. I was out of time. I tried to force my fingers to undo the clasp. They wouldn't move.

The woman leaned in to murmur in my ear, too low for anyone else to hear. "Don't touch the watch," she said, "or we kill everyone in this room."

My heart stopped its hummingbird flutter to tremble, frozen, in my chest. I opened my fingers, letting go of my last chance for escape.

The woman grabbed my wrist roughly and yanked it back. The other followed a second later.

In a normal voice, she said, "You're under arrest for the murder of Dominic Valentino." She kept talking, but I couldn't hear her anymore. My body didn't feel like my own. As soon as the cuffs snapped around my wrists, twin bolts of icy pain shot up my arms—the cuffs weren't steel like my watch, but pure iron, designed solely to hold someone like me. But even the pain was muted. This was all happening to someone else, somewhere half a world away.

Chapter 21

Anyone would have been able to tell, after only a cursory examination of the evidence, that I hadn't killed the former scientist. The bullet had likely come from a sniper rifle, and I been sitting right next to him. And there was no gunpowder residue on my clothes, no evidence that I had been so much as holding a weapon. Anyone in that library could have confirmed that the bullet had come through the window, not from inside.

All of that might have mattered if these people had actually been the police.

The car they shoved me into looked enough like a real police car. But we didn't drive to the police station. Instead, we turned toward the other side of town, and passed down a familiar street into an underground parking garage. The Arkanica parking garage.

The woman pulled into a parking space near the inner door. Even in the middle of the afternoon, the lights were that end-of-the-world parking-garage yellow that made it perpetually feel like the darkest part of the night. She turned off the engine and looked over her shoulder at me. I was sitting right where she had put me, hands resting on my lap.

I knew there was no point in fighting. Not after I tried the door at the beginning of our drive, hoping to throw myself out of the car, and had found it securely locked. My best chance was to lull my captors into letting their guard down and wait for my opportunity. Still, I chafed at the look of satisfaction that passed over her face at seeing me sitting here obediently, not even trying to fight.

"I wish we hadn't needed to make that so public," she said. "It would have been easier for all of us if the scientist had chosen a more discreet location for your meeting. There's something inelegantly ironic about a cleanup effort that leaves so much mess behind. Fortunately, though, you provided us with a convenient scapegoat. Not to mention putting yourself into our hands at the same time you showed us, with that ill-advised meeting, that letting you live was too risky. That was courteous of you. It saved us the time-consuming step of trying to track you down."

She exited the car, and circled around to open the back door. She stood back at a safe distance, apparently not trusting my docility completely. "Are you going to come quietly?" she asked.

In answer, I stepped out of the car, my face a picture of defeat. Then, without breaking my silence, I yanked her toward the car and slammed the door on her as hard as I could. As she yelled, her knees buckling, I made a run for the ramp

leading up, and the light beyond.

I didn't get far before a burst of sound slammed me to the ground. The pain hit before I could begin to wonder how the noise had been enough to knock me off my feet. Then I had my answer. It had been a long time since I had been shot, but that wasn't the kind of pain a person forgot.

I got an up-close look at the woman's shiny black shoes as she strolled up to me at a leisurely pace. She stopped with her toes an inch from my nose. Apparently she wasn't worried about the threat I presented anymore.

I twisted my neck to see her looming down over me. "Just because they want you alive," she said, "that doesn't mean all physical damage is off the table. The convenient thing about fae regeneration is that it gives us a lot of wiggle room."

I tried to breathe through the pain. It felt like the bullet had hit just below my rib cage. Not enough to kill me, even temporarily, but enough to keep me from pushing myself off the ground and wrapping my cuffed wrists around her throat like I could see myself doing in my mind. My shirt clung to my back as hot, sticky blood spread from the wound. I could already feel my internal organs shifting, struggling to push the bullet out.

As she bent lower, I kicked out at her. My booted toes connected with her calf. She bit back a yelp, and her face darkened. She drew back her own foot, and slammed her heel directly into the center of my torso, where the bullet had hit.

My vision went white. I thought I screamed, but I wasn't sure, since the pain had taken over all the brain circuits I would normally have used to process sound. My hearing came back a second later, along with my sight, as the supernova of pain softened into a sharp agony that consumed only **almost** all my attention.

But it had done its job. I didn't have the strength to attack again as she bent over me. She clutched something small and thin in her hands. The light caught the sharp tip of a needle.

She stabbed the needle into my arm before I could pull away. A burning cold filled me instantly—first up and down my arm, then through my whole body. I thought it was from the metal tip of the needle, at first, until my vision began to blur. My thoughts slowed to a crawl as I blinked sluggishly up at the woman.

In the last moment before I lost consciousness, I didn't see the false police officer anymore. I saw Ernest standing over me instead.

* * *

I woke up to a light so bright it seared through my eyelids, washing me in a

curtain of red. I blinked my eyes open, and the red disappeared, replaced by a sharp white that made my eyes water and sting. A couple more blinks, and I could make out the shape of a florescent light set into the ceiling above me, and white tile walls beyond.

I was lying flat on my back, staring directly up at the ceiling. I tried to sit up, but something tugged at my wrists. I flexed experimentally; restraints around my wrists held me down, stronger than plastic but not iron. I stretched my head up as far as I could to get a look at my arms. As I had thought, the handcuffs were gone. The new restraints were made out of some shiny white material that was cold to the touch, but not with the toxic burn of the handcuffs. I was still wearing my watch, but in the space between the watch and my hand, my captors had slid a slim iron cuff onto my wrist. In case I managed to get the watch off, was my guess. They didn't want to take any chances.

The pain in my torso wasn't gone, but it had faded enough that it hadn't been the first thing I had noticed when I had woken up. Instead, I had to consciously look for it, and probe the area with my mind to assess the damage. It felt more than halfway healed already. That meant I had been unconscious longer than I was comfortable with, but it also opened up my options. Movement would be painful, but not so painful that I couldn't get up and run out of here if the opportunity presented itself.

The problem was finding that opportunity in the first place. I tested the restraints again.

The clothes I was wearing felt different—looser, softer. I swept my gaze over my body, straining my neck to keep my head upright. My clothes were gone; in their place was a loose shirt and matching pants. They reminded me vaguely of hospital scrubs.

A flash of movement next to me made me turn my head. Someone else was lying next to me, on what reminded me of an operating table, made out of the same white material as the cuffs. Specially made for those who couldn't tolerate iron, I was guessing. The figure on the table, a tall and slim woman with a shaved head, had the angular features of the fae. She wasn't moving. The movement that had caught my attention had come from the man in a lab coat who was leaning over her, muttering softly to himself as he adjusted something I couldn't see.

At first, I thought the woman was unconscious. Then she turned her head toward me. She wore a gauze patch over one eye. The other met mine in an unblinking stare. The soul-deep pain in her single eye was enough to make my breath catch. As the man continued his work, she flinched—the slightest movement of her eyebrows, the smallest twitch of her lips—but she didn't try to

move. Either she couldn't, or she simply didn't see the point.

The man straightened, allowing me to see what he was doing. He had placed an IV in the crook of her arm. But the tube didn't run to an IV bag; it snaked onto the floor and into a cabinet built into the far wall. He made a final adjustment, drawing another barely-perceptible flinch from the woman. Then he turned around—bringing him face to face with me.

The first impression I had of him was of a department-store mannequin, every line and crease precise, his face perfectly blank. His hair was slicked back, his face smooth-shaven with no trace of a five o'clock shadow. Everything about him was smoothed and crisped and at perfect right angles. He walked that way, too, with maximum efficiency in every step as he strode to my side.

He smiled at me. His smile was as perfect and soulless as an airbrushed model. "Good," he said, with perfunctory warmth. "You're awake. That means the sedative has cleared. Now we can see what use you'll be to us—although to be honest, I don't expect much."

With no more warning than that, he grabbed a length of rubber from a nearby counter. A tourniquet, I realized, when he tied it just above the crook of my elbow. I tensed, and silently strained against the restraints.

The man winced. "Please don't. That will only make things more difficult for both of us."

He grabbed something else off the counter—a syringe. This one was empty. That meant he wasn't about to inject me with another sedative, but that fact wasn't enough to reassure me. As the needle came down, I pulled my arm sharply in toward my body. The needle slid in at the wrong angle. I couldn't suppress a yell as it ripped my skin open.

The man's jaw tightened. When he spoke, even the illusion of warmth was gone from his voice. "My colleagues and I have had a lot of time to explore the relationship between fae regenerative properties and your unfortunate... let's call it an allergy. What that means for you is that we have several options to immobilize you that would be more effective and convenient for us, and far more unpleasant for you, than these restraints." He tapped my arm with a slender, elegant finger. "For example, we could break the bones of the limbs we need you not to move, and apply an iron solution to keep those areas from healing until we need them functional again. For more extreme cases, subdermal implants have proven most effective. Previous subjects have learned that cooperation is the easiest solution. I suggest you follow their example."

"I am not," I said through my teeth, "one of your subjects."

"You are now." He disposed of the syringe in a biohazard container, with an annoyed look toward me. "Our associates in the Summer Court wanted you alive

and unharmed if at all possible, once it became clear that your Winter companion wouldn't oblige their wishes by killing you. But now that you know the truth, letting you live would be too dangerous to our operations, and Summer understands that." He shook his head. "I told the others we should have taken care of Valentino long before now."

Arkanica must have thought Dominic had told me everything. Maybe I could use that to get some information out of this man, if I chose my words carefully. For now, I stuck with a simpler question. "What does Summer want with me?"

"I don't pretend to understand the reasons for anything. And they would never deign to reveal those reasons to us. They think they have us trained like dogs—sit, stay, save the world." His mannequin mask slipped enough to reveal a flash of seething resentment in his eyes, stronger than I would have expected. Although maybe I should have expected it, given that humanity and the fae had never had anything less than an adversarial relationship. One couldn't expect a single business partnership, no matter how amicable, to erase thousands of years of mutual antipathy.

The mask returned. "Oh, well. With any luck, one of these days we won't need them anymore, and then they'll see how the view looks from the other side of the glass. Then they'll understand who has the power in this relationship." He slid another syringe out of its sterile wrapping and hovered it over my arm. "Now, are you going to cooperate, or do we need to look into alternate solutions?"

I tested the restraints again. They still held.

I gritted my teeth and held perfectly still as the syringe slid under my skin. Aside from a slight pinch, it didn't hurt at all—there was no iron in the needle. That sent a shiver through me. How many needles did they use on the fae on a daily basis, for it to be cost-effective to custom-produce them?

"Good," the man said with an approving nod, as the syringe filled slowly with my blood. "You're more intelligent than I suspected, considering how you ignored all our warnings to leave us alone." He held up the syringe, and frowned at the blood within. "Hmm. This could almost pass for human. Which confirms my suspicions, I'm afraid. I don't think we'll be able to find much use for you, but I won't give up hope just yet."

He turned to the counter, and did something I couldn't see with the syringe. When he turned back to me, his hands were empty. He untied the tourniquet from my arm. "That should be enough for preliminaries. We'll have a look at this, see what we can do with it. I don't expect the concentration will be high enough, but if nothing else, it will be an interesting experiment."

"Concentration of what?" The question slipped out before I could consider

taking a more subtle approach. This all had me too off-balance. The light I couldn't avoid entirely no matter where I turned my head, the limp and silent figure across the room with her despairing gaze... and, to acknowledge the elephant in the room, the fact that I was cuffed to a table, ready to be used as a lab experiment. My heart was beating too fast, my breaths coming too roughly. I needed to get myself under control, if I was going to find a way out.

But I couldn't. Couldn't slow my heart down; couldn't stop staring at the doctor, as if a single blink of my eyes would give him the opportunity to slit me open with the scalpel I could just barely see at the other side of the counter. Not that he needed me to look away. Whether I saw him coming or not, he could take me apart anytime he wanted, and I would be helpless to stop him.

I drew in a deep breath. I had survived worse than this. I would survive this too.

But that didn't mean I would enjoy the experience.

"Magic, what else?" Either the man was oblivious to my fear and my efforts to control it, or—more likely—he simply found it irrelevant. "Studying your blood will make for an interesting morning. In theory, a half-fae like you should have a higher concentration of usable magic than a post-injection human subject. But given what Summer has said about your magic, I have my doubts." He leaned over me, peering at my face like he wanted to slide me under a microscope. "Your genetics are constantly at war with themselves, in ways that don't apply when we're talking about controlled dosages. Plus, given the hints Summer has dropped about the difference between elemental magic and whatever it is you have, I suspect there are actual genetic differences between..."

He kept going, but I didn't hear anything else he said.

"Blood." I didn't realize I had spoken aloud until I tasted the word, sharp and bitter, on my tongue.

The prisoners weren't locked away in some magical sweatshop, forced to produce some newly-invented fuel source. The fuel was their blood, and all they needed to do to keep on producing it was to keep breathing.

Why else would he be looking for magic in my blood? Why else would he care how much it contained? What else could it mean, this talk about injections and dosages? Whatever Vicantha might say about how magic wasn't a physical substance and couldn't be separated from the fae themselves, Arkanica had discovered otherwise. They had found it in the blood of their test subjects.

That was why Arkanica kept them alive. They were the geese with the golden eggs. As long as their hearts kept beating, Arkanica could keep drawing their precious *faelight* from their veins indefinitely.

I took another look at the fae woman on the other side of the room. The tube

running from her arm was now filled with a dark, thick blue liquid. It drained from her body and disappeared into the wall.

“Yes,” the man said, voice tinged with confusion and impatience, “what about it?” It took me a moment to realize he was responding to the word I had spoken. He was about to turn away; then something in my face caught his eye. He gave his head a slow shake. “Valentino didn’t tell you anything, did he? You had no idea what we were doing down here.” He heaved a put-upon sigh. “Do us both a favor, and don’t mention this to Summer. They don’t like being wrong.”

I was still barely listening. My mind was still locked in the horror of what Arkanica was doing.

With my watch around my wrist, not to mention the new iron cuff Arkanica had added, I couldn’t feel my own magic. Even so, I could easily call up the memory of it rushing through me. A force many times greater than me, like a hurricane bursting out from my skin, or a herd of wild horses trampling me under their hooves. Wild, uncontrollable. Probably almost beautiful, from a safe distance.

And humans were extracting that fierce, untamable force from the veins of their prisoners, and using it to turn on their lights and fuel their cars.

“This injection you mentioned.” I fought to keep my voice steady. Then I wondered what the point was. “You’re injecting fae blood into humans, aren’t you?” I remembered Dominic tearing at his skin, and the way the Arkanica employees had lined up at the front desk in the morning to have their fingers pricked. Testing for fae blood, like I had thought at first, but not the way I had assumed. “What are you trying to do, turn humans into fae? Give yourselves the ability to work your own magic?”

With another sigh, the man shook his head. “We did look into it. But sadly, we quickly discovered it wouldn’t be possible. The genetic differences are too great. Some say that’s for the best—the fae do have some inconvenient weaknesses. Personally, I believe the possibility of immortality would be more than worth the cost. But that’s neither here nor there.” He ran a finger along his arm. When I looked closely, I could see the faint dot a recent needle prick had left behind. “No, what we’re injecting is simple fuel, derived from your blood but stripped of the incompatibilities. The convenience of the storage mechanism will be one of our selling points, or so the marketing department tells me. Pay every two weeks or so for a top-off, and have the power to start your car and turn on your TV with a simple prick of your finger.”

The woman across the room was watching me again. Her gaze was expressionless. I couldn’t tell whether she was taking in any of what we were saying—or if any of it mattered to her. Only her steady blinks told me she was

still alive.

“What happened to her eye?” I asked, low and angry.

The man had already turned away to scribble something down on a notepad. “What?” he asked, in a distracted voice. He looked up, and followed my gaze to the other prisoner. “Oh, of course. That was one of our latest transplant experiments. No more successful than the earlier attempts, I’m afraid. We had hoped the recipient would be able to see magical energies, or possibly a wider spectrum of light. But he didn’t report any changes, other than slightly sharper vision in that eye. Which could still have implications for myopia treatment, I suppose. But that would hardly be cost-effective.” He studied the prisoner thoughtfully, eyeing her like she was a choice cut of meat. “We’re not shutting down that area of research quite yet, though. There are plenty of other avenues to explore—hands for dexterity, possibly certain organs for longevity... although it does seem as though parts that are removed entirely don’t regenerate, which means transplants would need to be priced accordingly. But there’s always someone willing to pay, even if only for the status symbol. And you know what they say up in marketing—fools and their money pay our bills.” His smile looked genuine this time. It chilled me more than the fake one had. “There’s a whole world of possibilities we’ve barely begun to explore. The future is bright.”

“Arkanica,” I said bitterly, remembering what I had seen on their empty website. “Building a brighter future.”

In the man’s cold eyes, I saw the reflection of every human who had ever killed me. They had all turned against me because they had feared my power. Now, humanity had finally found what they had been looking for every time they had tried to snuff out my life. They had found a way to control that power.

He read the look in my eyes easily. His smile broadened as his eyes grew colder. “Don’t expect your crocodile tears to earn you any sympathy. How long did your kind rule humanity? I know my history—the real history. The Winter Court played with us like cats with mice. The benevolent Summer Court gave us everything we could ever want, as long as what we wanted included the opportunity to bow and scrape and dance at the feet of their thrones. Now you’re the ones who need us—need us enough to sacrifice your own people. Do you expect us to shed a tear for you? Do you think you can wring a drop of guilt out of me?” He shook his head. “When I look at you lying there, a bag of skin filled with liquid gold, I think about stolen children, and curses handed down from generation to generation for the sake of a moment’s amusement, and lifetimes stolen away in a single night because someone was unlucky enough to step into a fairy ring. And all I feel is satisfied.”

I didn’t waste my time on anger. I was much more interested in something

else he had said. “The fae asked you to do this?”

He had said we needed them. We, meaning the fae. Needed them badly enough to hand over other fae as fuel sources. I had just assumed that if the clean energy thing wasn't a front, humans had been the ones to approach the fae, desperate for a way to protect the planet from further damage. Now it sounded like I had gotten it backward. What I didn't understand was why.

But the man had already turned away again. “We've done enough talking. I'm afraid I got a bit carried away—it does get lonely down here on my own. But I do have work to do, and workplace chatter is a distraction, as diverting as it may be.”

“Why would Summer—”

He turned back to me, lips thinning. “I believe in being proactive when it comes to reducing distractions. We have a trick for keeping the vocal cords from regenerating after they've been severed—that one is tricky, but it's been a lifesaver when working with certain subjects. Would you like a demonstration?”

I closed my mouth, and didn't answer.

He nodded in satisfaction and turned back to the counter. He scribbled down another note.

My questions were still circling around in my mind. I forced them aside, and concentrated on lengthening my breaths until they were slow and even. My heart slowed down a little to match—not much, but enough to give me a little space to think clearly. And to gather my strength.

I stared up at the ceiling, keeping my eyes averted from the light as best I could, while watching the man out of the corner of my eye. At first, he glanced over his shoulder at me every few seconds. Then he pushed his notes aside, and bent over a microscope. After one last look over his shoulder confirmed that I wasn't paying attention to him anymore, he lost himself in his work. Soon enough, he wasn't looking at me at all.

I kept taking those slow, deep breaths. I closed my eyes and pictured all the moments from my past I normally tried to hold at bay. All the deaths I had endured. All the pain I had survived.

I could do this. I had made it through far worse.

And I pictured Vicantha, that first day in my home. I called up the memory of the look in her eyes as she had walked straight into my knife.

I took one last deep breath, and held it. Then, in a single sharp movement, I pulled against the restraints again. But this time, I wasn't trying to break free. Instead, I pulled straight back, straining to yank my hands through holes designed to be too small for them.

Arkanica was used to full fae, and it had made them complacent. Any full fae

would have lost most of their strength at the touch of that slim iron band. Or maybe they had just thought I wasn't capable of doing whatever was necessary to break free.

They didn't know how hard I had fought for my freedom. They didn't understand what I would do to keep it.

Thick strips of skin sheared away from my hands. Underneath, muscles tore. On my left hand, the bone at the base of my thumb snapped. On my right, I felt something in the meat of my hand, underneath my smallest finger, snap and twist. I screamed. I couldn't hold it back. The sound tore at my throat like the cuffs had torn through my skin.

But I was free.

Next, I tugged at the iron cuff. But of course it wouldn't budge. I could see the tiny circle where a key was meant to go in, and hunting for the key would take time I didn't have. And the cuff was tight enough that the trick I had used on the restraints wouldn't work a second time, even if I thought I could stay conscious through a second attempt. Which I wasn't at all sure of. Already, my vision had gone gray around the edges. I had to keep myself from looking down at my hands, or paying too much attention to the limp flopping of my left thumb against my palm.

But I had endured worse. And the damage would heal. I held those two thoughts in my mind as the man whirled on me, reaching into his pocket for... a weapon? A sedative? A way to call for help? Whatever it was, I knew it wouldn't improve my situation.

I lunged for the scalpel I had seen earlier. He saw where I was going, and fumbled along the counter for it. By some miracle, I reached it first, even though my legs were weak from the pain and shock of what I had just done, and neither of my hands were fully functional.

In my head, I heard Vicantha's voice, telling me I wouldn't risk hurting a human. I let it fade into so much white noise. He wanted to hurt me, like centuries of humans had before him. This time, I had a chance to fight back. I wouldn't waste it.

With a clumsy, broken grip, I drove the scalpel through his throat, cutting off his cry for help. Severing his vocal cords. I allowed myself a brief, thin smile at that. Then I sawed through the muscles of his neck. This tool wasn't meant for this kind of work, but it did the job. A gap opened between his chin and his chest, and widened with every spurt of thick blood.

I tried to call up that sense of satisfaction the man had told me he felt, staring down at me with his cold eyes. As he clutched at the counter, then collapsed to the floor, mouth opening and closing like a fish flopping on a dock, I told myself

this was revenge for all my deaths at the hands of humans. But watching him gasp and struggle his way toward death only made me feel sick inside.

I turned my back on him. He wasn't dead yet, but he would be soon. There was nothing in this room I needed to bother with anymore.

Briefly, I considered digging through the cabinets for files, records, maybe a laptop—something that would shed more light on what Arkanica was doing. But I knew I didn't have time. I didn't think the man had managed to raise an alarm, but even so, it would only be a matter of time before somebody realized something was wrong. I needed to be out of the building before that happened.

A voice in the back of my mind told me to slow down. Put the scalpel down, wash the blood from my hands. Find something to wear—a spare lab coat, maybe—that wouldn't draw attention like my blood-soaked test-subject outfit. But even as I acknowledged that the voice was right, my feet carried me toward the door. I couldn't stop them. The adrenaline pounding through my veins told me I had to run, and this time, I couldn't resist it.

But with my hand on the doorknob, I froze. My heart beat out a panicked rhythm, and the sticky blood on my hands was a visceral reminder of what would happen if I didn't get out of here. But the same feet that wouldn't stop a second ago now refused to move.

I thought it was panic locking me in place, until I found myself turning around, and my conscious mind caught up with the part of me that had made me stop. The part I had inherited from my father. The sickness.

I was staring at the fae prisoner, who was still watching me in silence. And no matter how hard I tried to run, I couldn't turn away.

The prisoner still wasn't moving. She wasn't reacting. But the intelligence in her single eye told me she was aware of everything that was going on.

Cursing myself and Oberon alike, I rushed to her and fumbled for her restraints with my damaged hands. But of course I didn't have a key. And even if I had been certain she would want me to pull her free the way I had freed myself, my single desperate burst of strength was long gone. Between the trembling in my arms as my body tried to catch up and process what had happened, and the state of my hands themselves, I knew I wouldn't be able to do anything but cause her a great deal of pain for no reward.

I glanced over my shoulder at the exit. I tried to run. Tried to tell myself I had done my best, and there was simply nothing I could do for her. But my legs didn't obey me. Even as I ordered myself to leave her behind, I was already bending over the man's body, slipping a hand into his pocket.

One pocket was empty. In the other, I found something clutched in his stiffened, cooling hands. Not a key. Instead, it was a small button, like the end of

a retractable pen.

It took me only a second to realize what it was for. He had managed to call for help after all.

Even as I had the thought, I heard footsteps. I had no chance of rescuing the prisoner now, not with the key still hidden. I would be lucky if I could save myself.

This time, my body listened. I picked up the scalpel from where it had fallen—since I had no time for subtlety or disguise, any weapon was better than none—and ran for the door. I turned back just long enough to murmur an apology to the prisoner. Her expression didn't change. I didn't know if she understood, or if she had even heard me.

Then I threw the door open.

It took me only one glance to know I was too late. At least six security guards stood in the hallway. And they all looked a lot more confident than the two who had escorted me and Vicantha to our meeting with Phoebe.

But they hadn't expected me to be ready for them. That bought me a slight advantage. In the space of a breath, one of them was on the ground bleeding, his throat opened like the man inside the room. A second clutched his bleeding arm, cursing, his weapon lying useless on the floor.

That was two of them. But there were still four more. No, six, I realized as they closed in around me. And they already had their guns trained on my heart.

I could let them take me now, or suffer the pain of a second gunshot wound and wake up to find myself in their hands again anyway. There was only one real choice. I raised my hands, and let the scalpel fall.

Chapter 22

I expected them to cuff me to another table. It was a mark of how dire my situation was that I found myself relived when they tossed me in a cell instead.

The walls were iron. So was the floor. The small cot in the corner of the cell at least let me put a little distance between the floor and my bare feet. But the cell was smaller than my basement room back home. I suspected the iron was thicker, as well. Whenever I closed my eyes, I could feel the walls drawing in closer, squeezing me between them, until when I opened my eyes I was surprised to find they hadn't moved at all. Even with my limited iron sensitivity, the pain thrummed within my veins like a second heartbeat, and I felt like I was thinking through thick syrup. I didn't know how a full fae could take it without losing their mind.

The front of the cell was a lattice of iron bars, which let me see the rest of the room. There were other cells next to me and across from me. Most of them were empty. But the three cells directly across from me had prisoners in them, one apiece. Two women and a man. Even if their presence here hadn't been enough of a clue as to what they were, they all had the slim alien look of the fae, and their shaved heads made it impossible to hide their pointed ears.

The women looked similar enough to Vicantha to be, if not sisters, at least cousins. The man was cast from a different mold—stocky and muscular, at least for one of the fae, with a fuzzy dusting of white-blond hair. But he had the same cold winter eyes as the others.

All three of them were huddled on their cots. They had stirred a little when the guards had tossed me into the cell, but none of them had given me more than a single look of curiosity, let alone a word of welcome. Now, hours later, I couldn't tell whether they were awake or asleep—or something in between. I wouldn't have been surprised if the constant battering of the iron against their senses had been enough to drive them deep within their minds, until they were barely aware of anything that happened around them. Which, in this place, might have been the kindest thing.

I didn't want to disturb whatever small measure of peace they might have found. But I needed to talk to them. I had wanted to wait until they were ready, but I didn't know how much longer I had before another man in a lab coat came for me.

I cleared my throat. "Is anyone awake?"

No one answered. No one moved. But I thought I saw the blond man blink his

eyes slowly.

“You’ve all been here longer than I have,” I said. “I need information on this place.” I glanced up at the camera in the corner of the room. I didn’t know whether Arkanica could hear us, or just see us. There was a chance their security was listening in on everything we said in here. But I needed the information regardless.

No one answered.

“I need your help getting us all out of here.”

Still no answer. Not even a flicker of movement. I thought back to the prisoner who had been with me in the lab. The stillness of her body, the despair in her gaze. Maybe the fae in this place were too broken to even consider the possibility of escape.

Or maybe the man in the lab coat had done to them what he had threatened to do to me, and made it impossible for them to move or speak.

“I’m here on behalf of Vicantha,” I said. “Right hand of Mab. Exalted Knight of the Winter Court. She crossed into this world to rescue you.”

One of the women stiffened. Her eyes flew open. The other had to fight to drive a sudden look of hope off her face. The man made a small, wordless noise as his breath caught.

They could hear me. And they understood enough to recognize Vicantha’s name. That was something, at least.

“She wants to get you out,” I said. “So do I. But I need your help to do it.”

Nothing. They had all gone back to their stillness and silence. Only this time, I knew they were doing it by choice.

My fingers tried to curl into a fist. I had the sudden urge to punch the wall. But that wouldn’t have been a smart idea even if the walls hadn’t been iron, and even if my hands had finished healing. As it was, as soon as I tried to tighten my fingers, I had to bite my lip as a sudden flash of pain shot up my arm. Normally, iron didn’t affect my healing unless it was touching my skin, but the concentration in the cell was so high that it was no surprise my wounds were healing at half their normal speed.

I took a deep breath, and softened my voice. “I won’t hurt you. I’m here to make sure no one can hurt you again. But you need to work with me. I know you can hear me, and I know you understand. So please, if you want to get out of here, tell me everything you know.”

The woman in the middle cell pushed herself up from the fetal position. She stared at a point slightly above my head as she folded her legs under her. When she spoke, her voice was the rough creaking of ice on an unsettled lake. “We do not speak with humans.”

My fingers tried to tighten again. A second bolt of pain raced up my forearm. I unclenched my jaw and answered, "If I were human, would Arkanica have put me in this cell?"

Her lip curled. "Call yourself whatever you like. But we know who you are. Oberon's son, the abomination who refuses to die."

"I know you think humans are barely sentient," I said, trying to keep my voice to something more civil than a growl, "but I think you can agree that you need every bit of help you can get right now."

This time, it was the man who spoke, without bothering to sit up or stop staring at the ceiling. "Yes, it's true that the humans are useless. But your limitations are not what concerns us. We are imprisoned by humans, in human territory. You are half-human, and a champion of humans. We have no reason to trust any hand you extend." With that, he turned to face the wall.

I wondered how many centuries it would take before my old reputation stopped following me. "Even if I were still that champion, Arkanica imprisoned me, the same as you. I'm not on their side."

But no one answered me. The woman in the middle cell lay back down and closed her eyes.

I could have kept trying. But I knew they wouldn't answer me. So I stopped talking. There was no sense in wasting words on people who wouldn't let me help them.

Instead, I sat, and I waited for whatever was coming next. I even managed to sleep a little. I dreamed of buildings falling on me, and boa constrictors squeezing me to death. I woke in a cold sweat, barely biting back the scream on my lips. When I checked my watch, I saw that less than two hours had passed. The feeling of the walls closing in on me hadn't let me sleep any longer than that.

As soon as my consciousness returned, so did all the questions I had been trying to avoid since I had been taken. Where was Skye? Was she safe? What would she think when I didn't come back from my meeting with Dominic? I hoped she would have the sense to use her skills to run and create a false trail for herself, instead of searching for me. But I doubted it. I knew her breed of irrationality. I had stared at it in the mirror for centuries.

Which meant I needed to get out of here before she got herself killed trying to save me.

As if summoned by my thoughts, a pair of guards strode in, slamming the door shut behind them. Their shoes squeaked with each heavy footstep. I forced my hands not to clench up and send another burst of pain through me as the closer guard's fingers fumbled with a key. I wasn't sure which would be worse—

if they were here for me, to take me who-knows-where, or if I was going to have to watch them drag away one of the captive fae and hope whichever victim they chose wouldn't lose anything more permanent than a few pints of blood.

The guard with the key turned to my cell. He slid the key into the lock, and the door popped open. He swung the door open the rest of the way, with a quick glance to make sure the iron cuff was still fastened securely around my wrist. The second guard silently motioned me forward.

Either I was due for more experiments, or those cameras had sound after all and they wanted to get me away from the others before I convinced them to cooperate. Although I could have told them there wasn't much chance of that.

I gave the guards a quick once-over, just enough to note that they were each carrying both a gun and at least one iron knife. I glanced down at my hands, which had regrown their skin but still jolted me with tiny bolts of lightning when I tried to move them too fast or flex my fingers in the wrong direction. Reluctantly, I ruled out the idea of fighting. Accumulating further injuries wouldn't help me get out of here.

As soon as I stepped out of the cell, the first guard drew his gun and pressed it to the back of my head. Apparently Arkanica didn't trust me to have enough of a sense of self-preservation to know when I was outmatched. I couldn't blame them—I would be the first to admit it wasn't something I was known for.

I let go of my last vague ideas of snatching one of their weapons away. A bullet wouldn't kill me, even if it tore through my brain. And I would get a small stretch of oblivion in the bargain, which sounded like more of an upside than a downside right now. But I had experienced having parts of my brain destroyed before. It had been three centuries, but the hellish confusion of my consciousness slowly coming back online still made regular appearances in my nightmares. I had no intention of going through that again—least of all in enemy territory.

So when the guard prodded me through the door, I went where he wanted me to go.

I shot a last look over my shoulder before the door closed behind me. As I had expected, none of the fae prisoners showed any kind of reaction. I recognized their silence and stillness for what it was now—not the next best thing to oblivion, but seething rage encased in ice.

Then the door slammed shut, cutting off my view of them. I faced forward again, and followed the guard in the lead. The guard behind me prodded me forward, his gun still pressed firmly against the back of my head. I tried not to look at the windows, but caught one brief glimpse of the impossible view of the city far below us, and had to fight back a wave of dizziness.

I expected them to take me back to the lab, or another room like it. Instead,

the featureless iron-lined room where they brought me reminded me of the cell I had come from, only bigger. Even more than that, it reminded me of the room I had in my basement back home. Despite the renewed sense of claustrophobia as the iron pressed in on my body again, stepping inside gave me a pang of homesickness. My fingers itched to go through the familiar ritual of slipping the watch from my wrist and letting my magic slam against the iron walls while my wrist did its best to heal from the damage the watch had done to it.

But my basement back home didn't have that single chair at the center of the room, with shiny white restraints ready to snap shut on the wrists and ankles of anyone who made the mistake of sitting down. Nor did it have an IV stand next to the chair, its bag filled with thick brown sludge.

And back home, Phoebe wouldn't have been leaning against the wall, smiling as she saw me walk in.

"Put him in the chair," she ordered, "and go back to your stations. I can take it from there."

Now, finally, I fought. I spared no thought for the gun to my head as I slammed an elbow back into the guard's belly, while thrusting my head forward to catch the other guard across the forehead. The one I had hit in the head stumbled and stepped back, but quickly recovered, going for his weapon as stars danced in front of my eyes. I darted out an arm to pull him against me, but he dodged to the side, and my hand—the part that had snapped—hit his shoulder at the exact right angle to undo several hours of healing. I staggered back, into the arms of the second guard, who was waiting for me with an iron knife to hold against my throat.

I slammed my entire body back against his bulk, not caring if he followed through on his threat. Nothing good would happen if they got me into that chair. I knew that with nauseating certainty, even though I had no idea what Phoebe had planned for me. A knife to the throat, a bullet to the heart—I had survived both. And would gladly do it again, if it meant avoiding the reason they had brought me here.

But he didn't need to slit my throat. A single prick of the steel knife was enough to make me go stiff with pain. Those few seconds cost me any advantage I might have had. By the time my head cleared, the two guards each had hold of one of my arms, and were dragging me inexorably toward the center of the room. A sharp punch to the belly doubled me over, and did half their work for them as they folded me into the seat. They snapped the restraints shut before I could surge to my feet, and when I tried, I learned two things. One, they had learned from their earlier mistakes. These restraints were tighter, tight enough to leave bruises, tight enough that no amount of willpower would let me pull my

hands and feet free. And two, the chair was bolted to the floor. I wasn't going anywhere.

Phoebe gave me a once-over, just enough to be sure I wasn't going to be able to break free. Then she waved the guards away. They disappeared back through the door, closing it behind them. Once they were gone, she stood in front of me, arms crossed. Her shirt was buttoned up to her neck; I couldn't see the spot on her chest where I had burned her. But judging by the small creases around her eyes that grew more pronounced every time the fabric shifted, I was guessing she was far from healed.

I forced myself to meet her gaze, and tried to regain my composure. "Interrogation after using me as an experiment?" I asked. "Isn't that the wrong order? What if your scientist had done a little too much damage—where would you be then?"

"Interrogation?" Phoebe frowned and tilted her head to the side. "Oh, it does look like a setup for a round of questioning, doesn't it? I admit, we *have* used this place for information-gathering before. But in your case, we already know everything we need to know."

"Then why am I here?" I tried to keep my eyes on her, and not on that bag of sludge at my side.

"We've had several meetings about you over the past few hours. Which has been quite disruptive to our operations, I might add. We had to push back two different meetings with potential investors just to figure out how to deal with the problem that you present. But, I'm sorry to say, we've come to an agreement." She didn't sound sorry at all. The corners of her lips curled in a smile. "After the death of our lead scientist, you're too dangerous to keep around, even in a cell. And one of the other scientists just finished his analysis of your blood. I'm afraid the science team's original instincts were correct. Your blood is useless to us."

One of Phoebe's purple nails tapped the IV bag. "Liquid iron," she said. "Intended for the treatment of severe anemia. This is, needless to say, an off-label use. Iron weapons do the job well enough, but it's never easy to tell just how much damage one of you can recover from, even when iron poisoning becomes a factor. This method is much less ambiguous, not to mention cleaner. It will also leave your body intact for study afterward, which the science team specifically requested."

She was talking as if they had done this before. But I had seen four fae prisoners. Those four, plus the man Vicantha had killed, made a total of five. Vicantha had come here looking for five missing fae, and we had found them all. So who had they used their iron concoction on?

There had been others, before those five. Ones that Vicantha didn't know

about. Probably the ones they had done their original experiments on—after all, their operations were too advanced to have started only six months ago, when the Winter agents had disappeared. Those were the ones Dominic had worked on, the ones Yanina had asked too many questions about. This batch of prisoners was batch number two—at minimum. The ones they were using to refine their ideas.

How many had there been?

I thought about that because it was easier than letting myself think about what was going to happen next.

I had survived so many deaths I had lost count. But even though I could handle iron better than a full fae, I wasn't immune to iron poisoning. I had long suspected that, as with the fae, it was the only way to kill me permanently. Against my will, I cast a quick glance up at the bag. It was full, with only a thin sliver of empty space at the top. How much pure iron was that? Enough. More than enough.

"Of course," said Phoebe, "it's hard to know how it will affect you, given your higher tolerance. And the fact that you're half-human muddles things further. The human body is more than capable of processing this stuff, even if not in these amounts. Besides, we've studied the stories about you. We know you've survived things you never should have walked away from."

She took a step closer. Cold fingers held my arm steady. I tried to pull away, but the restraints were too tight. With deft fingers, her nails doing nothing to impede her, she readied the needle and slid it into my vein.

"Which is why I'll be here," she said, "watching to make sure you don't survive."

I turned my head away. I didn't need to see the process. I concentrated on breathing, and on watching for an opening. But she didn't give me any. She kept clear of the body parts I could still move well enough to do damage, a list that was limited to my elbows and my head. I did what I could. I tried to snap the chair free from the floor, but it didn't budge. I tried to rip my arm away, like I had done in the lab. But her grip was too tight for that, and by the time I could move my arm freely, it was too late.

She stepped back. Her face told me she had already stopped seeing me as a person. Her malicious satisfaction was gone. In its place was a look of distant curiosity, like my death was a machine she had set in motion and all that remained was waiting out the clock.

"It's all right," Phoebe murmured, checking her watch. "It will be over soon." If she said anything else, I didn't hear it.

The world whited out. Fire crawled up my veins, followed half a second later

by a deep, searing cold. The muscles in my arms stopped responding to my commands. When I tried to flex my hands, the fingers wouldn't move. A few seconds later, I couldn't feel them at all.

The fire spread up my shoulder, then down my back. When it hit my heart, the muscle convulsed, but refused to stop. It thrashed in my chest like a wounded animal, pumping poison through my veins.

"There's no sense in fighting it." Phoebe's voice was faint, like she was speaking from the other end of a long, dark tunnel. "Deep breaths. Relax. That will let it take effect faster. That's the best you can hope for right now."

A rough scream almost drowned out her last few words. Until I tried to swallow and realized my throat was scraped raw, I didn't understand that the scream was my own.

I had been burned alive before. But this was different. This time, the fire came from inside. I had drowned, fighting against the hands that held me under the surface until my lungs sucked in water against my will. But now my lungs refused to open even though there was nothing in them but air. I had been buried alive, had blinked away dirt falling into my eyes only for the next shovelful to steal my vision away for good. But this time, the darkness creeping across my vision had nothing to do with anything outside of me.

The muscles in my neck went lax as ice burned down my spine. My chin slumped to my chest. I tried to raise it, to meet Phoebe's eyes in one last stare of defiance. My head refused to move. I forced my lungs open long enough for a single desperate sip of air. I wheezed it out, and tried to pull in another. My body wouldn't obey me even that much anymore.

My racing heart caught in my chest. It stuttered to a halt, and didn't start up again.

Through the high-pitched whine in my ears, I heard Phoebe's shoes tapping across the floor. Her fingers, burning hot against my frozen skin, rested gently on my neck. A few seconds later, her hand retreated. "It's done," she reported. "You can collect the body anytime."

The whine grew louder, erasing anything else she might have said. Then even that disappeared, leaving me in perfect silence.

I couldn't die here, a last faint scrap of consciousness protested. Skye. The captured fae. If I died, no one would save them.

Then even that tiny spark of thought was swallowed by the black.

Chapter 23

The first breath was always the worst. After getting a vacation from the constant effort of pulling air in and pushing it out, my lungs resented having to get back to their job. Invariably, the only reason that first breath didn't make me scream was because I didn't have the air to do it yet. It always took a few breaths before I could fill my lungs completely again, and another few before the sharp shooting pains in my chest receded enough to let me assess the rest of my body.

At least I wasn't underground this time, with several feet of dirt above me. Or floating facedown in the water—that first breath was unpleasant enough without sucking in a lungful of rancid pond scum instead of air. But the first thing I noticed, once my nerves started coming back online, was the cold. Goosebumps rose on my torso first, then my arms, and finally my legs, always the last part to start working again. The shivers came next, uncontrollable, and strong enough to make my teeth rattle. I had barely gotten sensation back in my fingers and toes, and already the tips of both were starting to go numb.

My senses never came back all at once, which was why it took me a moment to realize I couldn't see. The iron—had it done permanent damage after all? That would explain the pain. I was still alive—or alive again—which was more than I had expected, but even though I was lying on my back, and thus clearly no longer in that chair, I still felt like I was trapped in the iron room, feeling the walls close in.

I sucked frigid air into my lungs, trying to hold back panic, as I rubbed my eyes. It didn't help.

I tried to put it out of my mind. Wherever I was, I doubted it was safe. Which made getting to safety the highest priority. And I didn't need vision for that, if I thought things through. I tried to sit up—

And slammed my forehead against a metal wall. It rang with the impact. Or maybe that was just my brain rattling around inside my skull.

I stretched my arms out as far as I could, to feel above me. That wasn't very far. There was barely more than a foot of space between me and the ceiling. Next, I reached out in both directions, with the same result.

Maybe I wasn't blind, then. Maybe I was just trapped somewhere without light. I tried not to get my hopes up as I felt out with my feet. I hit another wall—but this one had a little give to it on one side. My guess was, it wasn't a wall at all. I had found the door.

I pulled my legs in toward my body, then thrust them out as hard as I could.

Hinges squealed, and I heard a metallic snap. Wheels turned under me, and the surface I was lying on shot out into the light. I squeezed my unprepared eyes shut, but not before the brightness seared into them like a burst of flame.

Little by little, I eased my eyes open. I craned my neck in all directions. The first thing I did was scan the room to make sure nobody was here. Once I was sure I was alone, I allowed myself time to make sense of my surroundings. It took me a moment to understand what I was seeing. The metal table under me, the small doors that lined the wall... I was lying on a morgue slab.

I sat up and hopped to the floor. Or tried. My weakened legs gave out under me, and I fell to the floor in a heap. The movement made my vision lurch sharply to the left; my stomach followed a second later. I leaned over and vomited up thick black liquid. I didn't know what it was—I hadn't eaten anything since before I was captured. I probably didn't want to know.

It took me a moment to feel like I could stand. I pushed myself shakily to my feet, and swayed from side to side. Without the steel slab at my back, I could think a little more clearly. But my brain still wasn't one hundred percent yet. There were too many gaps between my thoughts. I could feel time passing around me too quickly; I couldn't keep up.

I was in a morgue. I had died again, and stayed that way long enough for Arkanica to bring my body here, satisfied that I wouldn't recover. But why had they been so confident that they had risked leaving me unguarded, without so much as a set of iron cuffs holding me in place? They knew what I was. They knew what I could do.

Did they, though? Or did they only know what the fae could do?

I tried to force my sluggish neurons to fire. Maybe that had been Phoebe's mistake. She had seen the fae regenerate, and she had watched them die when their regeneration had failed. But my combination of fae magic and weak human body meant I didn't regenerate exactly the same way as the fae. Their bodies didn't get the chance to fail entirely before their magic healed them, but my healing worked more slowly than theirs. If Arkanica's files hadn't mentioned that I could lie, they probably also hadn't mentioned that I could die.

And I couldn't blame them for their misconception. I hadn't expected to survive this time around, either. I had seen the amount of iron solution in that bag. A single syringe full would have been more than enough to kill one of the fae.

But I wasn't fae. Like Phoebe had said, my body knew how to process iron. I had the red blood of a human, or something near enough to it. And apparently they hadn't used quite enough to override my body's familiarity with the substance, or to knock out my regeneration entirely. Although going by the way

I felt, it was a near thing. Only an immense effort of will was keeping me standing. I didn't know what would happen if I tried to walk.

This was the second time Phoebe had assumed I functioned like one of the fae, and the second time she had lost because of it. That would have felt like more of a triumph if not for the fact that her mistake was the only reason I was alive at all. Strength hadn't saved me. Skill hadn't saved me. Luck—that was all it had come down to, in the end.

I couldn't stay here. Even with my mind as clouded as it was, I could see that. I tried to take a step, and stumbled into the wall. The shock of the cold wall—thankfully not iron this time—made me abruptly aware that I wasn't wearing any clothes. Even the metal cuff they had placed around my wrist was gone.

The cuff was gone. And so was my watch. Dread rising in my belly, I held my breath and waited for my magic to erupt.

Nothing happened.

Slowly, my thoughts caught up. If my magic were going to surge, it would have happened the second I had freed myself from the iron prison of the drawer. I closed my eyes and sent my senses inward. I couldn't feel my magic. Not even the smallest spark. As far as my body was concerned, the watch was still fastened firmly around my wrist.

It made sense, when I thought about it. The small amount of iron dust from that knife had knocked out my magic for a good few hours. And that had been a tiny fraction of what Phoebe had poured into my veins. Somewhere, somehow, enough of my magic had remained to bring me back to life. But it had exhausted my resources, and I didn't see that changing anytime soon. It would take my body a long time to clear out the last of the poison from my system. It would probably leave me sick for days—slow, weak, and devoid of magic.

But I wouldn't let myself think about that right now. I stumbled drunkenly around the room, searching for something I could wear. Maybe a spare set of clothes someone from Arkanica had left lying around, or—more likely—something they had stripped from the dead.

I found something even better. A plastic box, neatly labeled with my name and the date I had been captured. Inside, in individual vacuum-sealed bags, I found the shirt and pants I had worn to my meeting with Dominic. His blood was still spattered across the shirt. I didn't care. At least the only corpse whose clothing I would be wearing was my own.

At the bottom of the box, I found my shoes. And below them—my breath caught. Yes, that was what I thought it was. They had saved my watch. Probably intending to use it for some experiment or other, along with the rest of the box's contents. I slipped it onto my wrist. A second later, I almost regretted it when the

ache in my arm returned. Almost. But the familiar weight of the metal loosened a little of the tension in my shoulders. My lips parted to let out an involuntary sigh.

I slipped on the clothes. They smelled of dried blood, along with some sharp chemical I didn't recognize. But they would keep me covered, and that was good enough for me.

I continued my search. In a small closet, I found the final thing I was looking for—a spare lab coat. I slipped it on over my shirt. It could work as a rudimentary disguise, unless someone looked at me too closely. After all, nobody would be watching for me—they thought I was dead.

Time to go. I didn't know how much time had passed since my death, but the one thing I did know was that it had been too long. I had to tell someone what I had learned—and keep Skye from doing something stupid.

I reached for the door, then paused. What was my plan? Make a beeline for the front entrance, steps fast and head ducked, and pray I wasn't noticed? It was my best option—anything more complicated than that increased the risk of discovery. And I knew better than to think they would be so careless with me a second time.

But... the other prisoners. I couldn't leave them here, knowing what I knew.

I knew those thoughts were just the sickness rearing its head again. Not the iron sickness, but the other. That wasn't the only reason I hesitated, though. Rescuing the prisoners now, instead of waiting, would be to my advantage. If I got them out, I would be halfway done. My obligations to Vicantha would be satisfied. After that, I would only need to find a way to destroy Arkanica entirely, in order to take care of the Skye half of the equation.

Right. Find a way to destroy the place that had just killed me and stripped me of my power. That was all.

Everything in me—my selfish rationality and my diseased, inconvenient heart—rebelled at the idea of leaving without the captured fae. But I knew, deep in my aching bones, that if I tried to get them out now, I would end up in a cell alongside them. I had no magic. No weapon. If I was lucky, they would let me live. If not, they would bring me back to that iron room, and Phoebe wouldn't make the same mistake a second time. Or maybe it was the other way around. I wasn't so sure staying alive in this place would constitute any sort of luck.

If I died, I would have no chance of getting the prisoners out. That was what I told my father's heart as it protested from within me. The prisoners would die. Skye would die. Vicantha... she would live, out of pure spite. But she would never find out what had happened to the fae she had come here to save.

So I opened the door, and hurried down the hallway to the stairs, one hand on

the wall. I dragged myself up flight after flight, turning my head away when anyone passed. I didn't look back.

I got occasional brief glances from passing humans or fae, a few wearing lab coats like mine, others carrying stacks of files or tapping out messages on their phones. I tensed every time, and tried to convince my wet-noodle legs they could get me to the door if I had to run. But nobody stopped me. One fae woman with summer-green eyes stopped to give me a long look of concern, when she entered the stairwell to find me bent over the railing, struggling to find the strength to take another step. But my wan smile was enough to reassure her, and she passed without saying a word.

I emerged from the stairwell and stumbled toward the door to the atrium. The hallway was busier now, but still no one gave me a second look. The Arkanica scientists must not have gone to cut up my body yet and found it missing.

I kept my head angled away from the front desk as I passed. There was a woman at the desk this time; she gave me only a perfunctory glance. It made sense—her job was to keep people out, not keep them in. Still, I had to fight to keep from letting out an audible sigh of relief as I hurried past her.

The light from the doors beckoned. I strained toward it, and tripped over nothing as I pushed myself to go faster than my legs could handle. I barely noticed, my eyes fixed on those squares of light. Daylight—real daylight. Not the false warmth from those enchanted windows.

I had to stop myself from breaking into a run. And not just because it would have attracted attention. My legs were having enough trouble with this measured pace, and falling on my face wouldn't help me get out any faster. Instead, I took labored step after labored step, and finally reached the outer doors. I pushed them open and flung myself out into the light, stooped and trembling, like an aging warrior after his final defeat.

I didn't let myself look back.

I ditched the lab coat in a trash can a block away. Out here, the disguise would make me more conspicuous, not less. My legs were still weak and trembling, my breathing harsh and ragged, but my body held on long enough to get me back to the bed and breakfast. I still didn't know how long it had been. I had been taken prisoner in the afternoon, and spent a couple of hours unconscious from the bullet wound. Then another few hours in the cell. Then... I didn't know. Was it the next day? Or the day after? Or maybe longer. A week. A month. I shook my head sharply, trying to clear it of those thoughts. If a month had gone by, it didn't matter what I did next. Skye was already dead.

The owner of the bed and breakfast was nowhere in sight as I heaved himself through the door and up the stairs to our room. Or what had been our room when

I had left. I hesitated, hand raised, afraid to knock. What if no one answered? What if someone opened the door, and I found myself staring into the face of a stranger, a new guest who had never heard of Skye?

But I hadn't dragged myself all the way here to stand in the hallway until I starved to death. I knocked.

The door opened a crack. A single eye peered out. The eye looked familiar, but I didn't dare to hope.

Abruptly, the door flew open. "Kieran!" Skye screeched. She grabbed both my hands and yanked me into the room. I pulled away out of reflex, adrenaline flooding my overtaxed muscles. She didn't notice. Her arms were already around me, squeezing the life out of me as she made muffled happy noises against my chest.

My body had only just gotten used to living again. It wasn't prepared for this kind of assault. But it wasn't the pain that made me pull away. It was the touch of a human. Having her in my space had been bad enough before. Now, though... humans had just killed me all over again. Humans were what they were, always and forever, and they had proved it to me one more time.

Skye frowned as I drew back. She met my eyes, then hastily dropped her gaze and took a step back. "Kieran?" The joy was gone from her voice. Now she sounded nervous. "What happened?"

I wondered how I looked to her, with my blood-spattered shirt and my eyes that had stared into the face of my murderer only a few minutes ago—at least by my internal reckoning. "How long?" I croaked.

"Since you disappeared? Almost two full days. I didn't know what to do. The sun went down, and you didn't come back from your meeting, and Vicantha was still on the other side of the portal. It wasn't like I could go to the police. All I could do was stay locked away in here and imagine what they..." Her voice got higher and higher, locked in a tight spiral, then trailed off.

At least she *had* stayed locked away in here, instead of going out looking for me. If Arkanica hadn't found her yet, there was a good chance she hadn't even given into the temptation to break into their systems again looking for clues about my disappearance. I had to admit, I was impressed. Maybe she cared more about keeping herself alive than I had given her credit for.

"She shouldn't be the one answering questions here," said a sharp voice from the corner of the room. Before my sluggish brain could process what I had heard, Vicantha strode toward me. "I returned half a day ago. You weren't here. Your human was moments away from returning to her previous work and drawing Arkanica to us again. I have been here in this room, trying to calm a hysterical human, for *hours*." Her normally-sleek hair was tangled around her face. She

brushed it away as she stared at me with crazed, furious eyes. “*Where have you been?*”

“I was *not* hysterical,” Skye protested before I could say a word. “My reaction was totally justified, after I saw his face on the news as a murder suspect!”

At the words “murder suspect,” Vicantha’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, you owe us an explanation for that, as well. Why did you kill someone in broad daylight and attract the attention of human authorities? And after you dared to lecture me about secrecy?”

“I didn’t,” I said shortly. I stumbled to the bed and sat down before my legs could give out under me. “Arkanica did. Then they posed as cops—or maybe the real cops were working with them, I don’t know—and took me away. That’s where I was. With them.”

Even that terse explanation was enough to bring the memory of the past two days crashing down on me. My voice tightened. My hands—finally healed, along with the rest of me, in the surge of magic that had brought me back to life—curled until my nails dug into my palms.

Skye caught the motion. “What did they do to you?”

“I know what Arkanica is doing,” I said, in lieu of an answer. “They’re not forcing the Winter fae to work magic for them. Or to create some magical substance. Instead, they’re cutting out the middleman.”

I took a breath, trying to figure out how to break the news to Vicantha as gently as possible. Then I decided it didn’t matter. This was ugly business. It was fitting for it to have an ugly explanation.

“This ‘faelight’ is fae blood,” I said. “The ultimate in renewable energy—it regenerates as long as the source is alive. They have their prisoners locked in iron cells, and take them out every so often to drain another few pints from their veins.”

I didn’t get a chance to tell her about the transplant experiments. Or about the fae across the lab from me who had been too broken to make an effort to fight. “Say that again,” she said, every word precise. She stood as still as an ice sculpture. The only color in her face came from her eyes, shining like cold flames.

“They’re using the prisoners’ blood,” I said. “They—”

I didn’t get any further than that before Vicantha whipped her daggers out. Moving faster than my eye could follow, she sliced open a pillow with deadly precision. Feathers flew everywhere, like a fat bird had exploded in the center of the room.

Then she spun to face us, vibrating with tension, clutching her weapons in

front of her chest.

“Magic is sacred.” I had thought I had seen Vicantha angry before. I hadn’t even come close. “It is the innermost being of the fae. The thing that separates us from the animals—including humanity. And now those same humans dare to profane what they cannot hope to understand, by drawing it from our bodies to fuel the very technology that forced us into exile?” Another slash of her daggers sliced a curtain in half on the diagonal. Light flooded into the room as fabric puddled to the floor. “They took our world from us. But that wasn’t enough. Now they want to reach into our bodies to take that which is so far beyond them they should fear to simply touch it?” Her voice, which had started out low and dangerous, escalated into a scream.

Skye started to speak. Vicantha whirled on her, daggers raised, and for half a second I thought I would have to throw myself between them.

But she didn’t attack. As Skye clamped her mouth shut, face white, Vicantha turned to me. “The prisoners. Where are they?”

“Exactly where you thought they were,” I said. “Locked in iron cells, underneath the Arkanica building. I shared their prison, for a few hours. They’re...” I tried to find something encouraging to say about their condition, and failed. “They’re alive,” I finished, knowing she would hear it for the pale consolation it was.

My words only seemed to make Vicantha angrier. Her eyes narrowed to slits. She took a slow step toward me, without lowering her weapons. “You were there with them,” she said, not quite a question.

I answered anyway, with a nod. “I talked to them. I told them you were coming.”

“You *told them I was*...” Vicantha’s arm whipped past me. The second pillow exploded. “You were there. You saw them. And then you escaped. So tell me, Oberon’s son, hero and protector, *where are they*?”

“I wanted to save them.” I tried to meet her eyes, and couldn’t. I knew it had been the right decision. Even so, the sickness in me told me I deserved every bit of anger in her gaze. “I couldn’t.”

“Couldn’t? Or didn’t try?”

“From what I saw of them, they wouldn’t have lowered themselves to accept help from me even if escape had been a sure thing. And even if they had, more likely than not, none of us would have made it out. I wouldn’t have survived—not without my magic. And I had to get out of there, if I was going to tell you what Arkanica was doing, and if I was going to—” To save Skye. I cut myself off before I could finish the sentence. Vicantha knew my priorities. She had seen me sacrifice her people for Skye once before. But for the sake of the rest of the

furnishings, I wouldn't remind her of that fact.

"You wouldn't have survived?" Vicantha spat. "That never stopped you when you were saving humans. Again and again, for hundreds of years, you've died for them."

I couldn't argue with what she was saying. Not when a voice in the back of my mind whispered that it was true. So I said nothing.

Tension thrummed through Vicantha's body. Her daggers quivered. For a second, I thought she would lunge for me. Then, abruptly, she turned away and strode to the door. "I'm leaving. Come if you like. It isn't my concern. Your work is done."

I doubted she was getting ready to retreat through the portal. "Are you going back to Arkanica?" I pushed myself up off the bed to block the door, shaking my head. "We're not ready. I haven't told you anything about the building yet, and what I do know won't help us much. And... I don't have my magic." I hurried to continue before either of them could ask questions. "We'd never make it to the prisoners, let alone make it out again."

"Maybe not." Vicantha stepped forward, until her weapons were less than an inch away from my chest. "But we can at least kill the humans responsible."

"We won't even make it that far." I called up an image of the building in my mind, trying to figure out Vicantha's odds of getting the futile revenge she was craving. But my imagined version of the Arkanica building grew and grew, casting an oversized shadow like the castles Skye had imagined from my past. In my memory, that place was an endless maze of iron and pain.

Vicantha studied my face, like she was trying to decide whether I was telling the truth. She set her jaw. "Then I will take my revenge on the humans I *can* reach." She shot an arm out past me, going for the doorknob.

I shifted before she could reach it. She studied me through slitted eyes, like she was weighing her chances if she decided to attack. I regretted telling her I had lost my magic.

Before Vicantha could make a move, Skye walked up to stand beside me. "What are you doing?" she asked Vicantha, with what I could have sworn was genuine confusion. "You must know that won't help anything."

"Move, human," Vicantha growled. "I have no more attachment to you than to the others of this city. It would not burden my conscience to carve the blood price out of your flesh along with every other human who calls Arkanica their neighbor."

I shoved myself between Skye and Vicantha, so quickly that one of Vicantha's daggers ripped a jagged line through my shirt before she could yank it back. "Is that your plan? Forget about Arkanica, and instead kill every

innocent human you can? Have you given up on rescuing the prisoners, then, or do you just not have the self-control to wait for a real plan?" I let her hear every bit of the cold contempt I was feeling. I had been through too much today to worry about sparing the feelings of a ruthless Winter fae.

I tried to focus on that contempt. It was easier than letting myself feel the fear that lay underneath. Looking at her, at the fierce lines of her jaw and the gleam of the daggers in her hands, I could believe her words were literal, or close to it. Maybe she couldn't kill everyone in the city, but she could make a decent try. She was Mab's right hand. I was willing to bet most of the humans in Hawthorne had never even fought a fellow human before. How many would die, if she forced me away from this door? Dozens? Hundreds? Caught in the blast of her cold stare, I believed the answer could be thousands.

And despite everything I had told Vicantha since she had first found me, I ached to save every single one of them.

Vicantha knew it, too. Her mouth twisted into a cruel sneer. "Do you fear for the lives of these humans, son of Oberon? Are you searching for a way to save them? You could have done it, by saving the lives of my people. But you would never risk your skin for the fae."

"These humans are responsible."

"That doesn't make them worthy of survival. Isn't that what you believe? Humans are rotten to the core—your words. So why shouldn't I remove them from this world, before they can prove their nature the way all humans do?"

I wanted to argue. But I had no rebuttal to her words. Everything she was saying... it was true. Yes, maybe most of the people of Hawthorne still had unstained hands. But like I had told Skye, that was only because their test hadn't come to them yet. And it was coming. How many of them, once Arkanica's miracle technology went public, would use it without a second thought, or reason themselves out of their guilt the way Yanina had? How many would hook me up to that iron IV themselves, if the opportunity presented itself? How many would drown me, burn me, bury me?

"Wait," I said, "and we'll make a plan to save them. If you're back so soon, that means you must have learned something. Whatever you found, we can use it."

"Wait for what? You won't do anything to save them. Not if it means risking yourself. Twice now, you've run instead of trying. I'm not giving you the opportunity to let me down a third time." She closed the last tiny distance between us. The edges of her daggers rested lightly against my shirt. "I tried it your way, as we agreed. I'm done. Tonight, the humans will be reminded of why they once prayed to avoid our regard."

“They’ll kill you. There’s a city full of them, and only one of you.”

“Maybe so.” Vicantha bared her teeth. “But not before I show them the fae are still a threat to be feared.” She pressed her weapons a little harder into my chest. Not hard enough to do damage, just enough to remind me that they were there. As if I had needed reminding. “Will you stand aside?”

Beside me, Skye looked up at me uncertainly. Her gaze shifted to Vicantha’s weapons. Slowly, she edged back, away from the door.

I could have done what Vicantha asked. It wouldn’t have cost me anything. The people of Hawthorne were nothing to me—nothing but thousands of potential threats. And if Vicantha got herself killed out there, that meant one less obligation to worry about. I could forget about Arkanica’s prisoners with a clear conscience, and focus on helping Skye shut down their operations instead.

Instead, I locked eyes with her. I curled my fingers lightly around the dagger blades, careful not to break the skin. “I promise you,” I said, “that if you do not harm the humans in this city who are not affiliated with Arkanica, I will do everything I can to help you rescue Arkanica’s Winter Court prisoners. Even if it means risking my life.”

The verbal contract settled around me like the bars of Arkanica’s iron cell.

Vicantha went still. “Why?” The question was barely more than a whisper.

I didn’t know how to answer her. Not when I wasn’t sure of the answer myself. Maybe I had done it to save the city. Maybe to save Vicantha. Or maybe because, deep in a corner of my heart I hadn’t quite managed to lock away, I knew I wasn’t promising to do anything I wouldn’t already have done.

“Do you want my help?” I asked brusquely, instead of answering. “Or would you rather die without doing the thing you came to this world to do?”

Vicantha took a long breath. “Do you think we have a chance?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Either way, if hundreds of years of suicide missions have taught me anything, it’s that taking on odds like this is never a good option.” I paused. “But I think we have to try.”

The pressure left my chest as Vicantha lowered her weapons. She turned and stumbled across the room to sit heavily on the bed, looking as weak and sick as I felt. She didn’t let go of the daggers, or tuck them away. Her knuckles went white as she clutched the weapons even tighter. But now they were resting in her lap. Her eyes were full of fury and pain.

I let out my breath slowly. I had her on a leash again. For the moment.

At the cost of binding myself.

Skye started toward Vicantha, but stopped before she had taken more than a couple of steps. A kaleidoscope of emotions crossed her face. The color still hadn’t come back to her cheeks.

I wished I could say something to help Skye feel better. But this moment had always been looming in her future—the moment when she learned that the magic she had dreamed of wasn't what she thought it was. I had tried to tell her, but there were some things in life you had to learn for yourself.

Anyway, I had other business to attend to.

I tried not to think about the weight of the promise that was already pressing me more tightly to the earth. "If we're going to make a plan," I said, "let's start with your trip to Faerie. Did you learn anything?"

Vicantha took a deep breath. Slowly, she loosened her grip on the daggers. "Yes," she said. "I did."

Chapter 24

I sat in the small parking lot behind Black River Park, watching the sun go down from behind the wheel of the car I had rented an hour before. Another iron cage. But I barely felt it. The lingering poison in my veins meant I had been feeling the bite of iron all through my body since I had woken up in the morgue. A little more didn't make that much of a difference. Besides, it only added to the low-grade hum of wrongness that came simply from being this close to the Faerie portal.

The haze of dusk made the trees cast strange shadows. Or maybe it wasn't the dusk, but something else. When I wasn't looking directly at them, the shadows on the ground didn't quite match the trees they had come from. Outside the car, an owl hooted—no, not an owl. I had never heard an owl with a voice so high, or a call that went on for so long. The odor of the river—algae and dead fish—reached me even here in the car, reminding me of the first time I had drowned. Every so often, I thought I caught a hint of rotting flesh underneath, but that was probably my imagination, fueled by the memory of the last time I had been this close to the river.

It had been a day and a half since I had woken up in the morgue and stumbled out of the Arkanica building. I could walk farther now without steadying myself against the wall; I could eat without being afraid I was going to vomit. But I still felt sick and weak, and the couple of times I had risked slipping my watch off my risk to test my magic, I hadn't felt the slightest glimmer of power.

Ahead of me, Vicantha was crouched between the trees. I could barely see her—she was nothing more than a still, tense shadow. Past her, in a clearing barely visible from the parking lot, the air shimmered, the only hint I could see of the illusion she was weaving. It wasn't aimed at me, so there was no sense in her wasting energy by making it possible for me to see the whole show.

Yesterday, Vicantha had explained what she had learned on her trip to Faerie. She had gone hunting for rumors of any Summer Court fae who had gone conspicuously missing. It hadn't taken her long to find one. The Lady of the Balance, she had told us, with a slight curl of her lip. One of the obscurely poetic titles the Courts liked to hand out. All fae nobility had a specific role in their Court, given to them along with their title and their land. Vicantha wasn't Lady of anything, she had explained a trifle defensively, because she needed to spend her time at Mab's side and wherever Mab needed her to go, not be tied to a parcel of land and a household. But she was an exception. Most of the duties in a

fae Court were tied to noble titles—the Lady of Shadows was Mab’s spymaster, the Lord of the Saddle was her horsemaster, the Lady of the Clouded Mirror was her seer. To name only a few.

The Lady of the Balance wasn’t anything so interesting. At least the way Vicantha explained it. Instead, she sounded like the consummate bureaucrat. Her job was to protect her Court, which made her similar to Vicantha, at least in theory. But Vicantha’s role meant she spent her time doing things like, for example, rooting out and hunting down assassins who had designs on Mab. The duties of the Lady of the Balance ran more toward protecting her Court by stopping a feud between two farmers at the edge of her Court’s territory that could, in one or two generations, escalate into something that ran the risk of claiming the lives of one of their children and thus depriving the Court of a soldier.

The missing Lady wore eyeglasses, or so Vicantha had heard—almost unheard-of among the fae. Probably from ruining her eyesight staring down at paperwork all day for thousands of years, Vicantha had opined. And that length of time was no exaggeration. She had a reputation for being more ancient than anyone knew, and set in her ways even for one of the fae. Not the type of person anyone would expect to go wandering between worlds. But the fact remained that she was missing, along with a good number of her subordinates, and no one had a satisfactory explanation for where they had gone.

I swept my gaze across the parking lot over and over, while staying leaned back in my seat to look as inconspicuous as possible. Even so, I almost missed them. They didn’t come in from the road. Instead, they came from the other side. My first sight of them was when they crossed into the trees on their way to the clearing.

I counted. One, two, three... there were six of them. All fae—I couldn’t see their ears, which were tucked under black caps along with their hair, but their lithe, not-quite-human build was emphasized by their form-fitting black stealth outfits. Six—more than we had hoped for, but not more than we had planned for.

Silently, they crept toward Vicantha’s illusion. Vicantha moved back a little farther into the trees, even though, with her illusions active, they shouldn’t be able to see her. None of them looked like the woman Vicantha had described last night. Not that I would have been able to see the silver streak in her hair, since they all had their hair tucked away. But none of them were wearing glasses. Also, it made sense that she wouldn’t have come herself. Good bureaucrats always believed in delegating wherever possible.

But it didn’t matter whether she had come herself or not. The fact that her people were here meant she had taken the bait.

Skye, under Vicantha's direction, had set up a trap the Lady of the Balance would find irresistible—at least according to Vicantha. She had seeded mentions around the internet of a scientific team who had taken an interest in the portal. According to the information she had planted, the researchers had heard of an unusual number of disappearances around what was now the park since the area had been settled, and were trying to study the anomaly by releasing tagged guinea pigs and seeing how many disappeared—and, if they reappeared, whether their time away had made a noticeable impact on their physiology.

I hadn't understood the reasoning until Vicantha had explained it. If humans could cross through Faerie portals accidentally, as had happened all throughout history, shouldn't it also have been common for animals to cross over? And if some of the guinea pigs did disappear, would it really prove anything, especially since the only way for crossing through a Faerie portal to drastically change someone's body was if one of the fae took enough of an interest in them to bestow a curse or a dubious blessing?

But the bait, Vicantha had informed us, wasn't the scientific team. It was the guinea pigs. Most creatures in this world had close analogues in Faerie. The guinea pig was an exception. Not only was there no fae equivalent, the creatures of Faerie wouldn't go near the things, even the ones who should have found them edible. Which meant they had no natural predators. Four hundred years ago, a city on the edge of Winter territory had dealt with a guinea pig problem. It had taken the better part of a century to clear the creatures out, and although Vicantha hadn't specified the methods the fae had used, she had mentioned that it had taken another century for the area to become inhabitable again.

The guinea pigs were supposedly being released tonight. If the Lady of the Balance was here in Hawthorne, Vicantha had insisted, she would send one of her people to stop it. As it turned out, she had sent six. The Lady of the Balance, it seemed, took guinea pigs very seriously.

The shimmer in the air grew stronger. Five of the black-clad fae, nudging each other and leaning their heads together to whisper things I couldn't hear, sped up as they continued toward it. The sixth, on the other hand, started walking in the other direction. Directly toward the parking lot. Directly toward me.

Good. Vicantha's plan was working.

The others didn't seem to notice her disappearance. All their attention was on the clearing ahead of them. Meanwhile, as the sixth headed toward me, the air all around her shimmered as brightly as the clearing. She didn't seem to notice anything was amiss.

I sat back up in my seat and tensed, getting ready. The new knife I was

wearing felt alien at my side. I knew the basics of how to use human weapons, of course, but I had rarely needed to put those skills into practice. I was used to being able to rely on my magic. And I couldn't remember the last time I had practiced with a physical weapon, except for a perfunctory five minutes here and there in my basement.

As the fae stepped into the parking lot, Vicantha crept behind her, a living shadow. The plan was for her to distract the others long enough to lead one of them away with an illusion. She would lead the bewitched fae to my car—which I had rented under yet another fake name—at which point I would knock the prisoner unconscious, stuff them in the car, and drive away. I wasn't in any condition to be out here, and we both knew it; nevertheless, I was the driver, because I was the only one who could both legally drive a car and do it without being crippled by pain. This amount of metal, so close, would have rendered Vicantha barely functional.

Since the Lady of the Balance had trusted all these people enough to send them out to take care of this for her, there was a good chance they would all know something about the Lady's whereabouts and her business on this side of the portal. It would have been better, of course, if the Lady herself had come, but we had never expected that. Meanwhile, the other five would shortly be forced to flee from a major human military force that had captured the sixth—or so they would think.

Once the prisoner was subdued, and we were safely away from the park, Vicantha would see whether she could weave an illusion strong enough and complex enough to trick the prisoner into talking to her—something she had managed before, she had said, but not every time she had tried. If it didn't work... well, the two of us would make sure Skye wasn't around while Vicantha got the answers we needed another way. That part of the plan made me feel sick in a way that had nothing to do with the iron poisoning. But I didn't have any other ideas. Vicantha was right—we had tried this my way. We had failed. It was time to try something else.

Vicantha's chosen fae squinted into the distance as she walked steadily closer to the car. I wondered what Vicantha was making her see. Vicantha sped up, until she was less than an arm's length away from our future prisoner.

I unlocked the car doors.

I tensed at the barely-audible click. Most likely, the fae woman wouldn't hear anything Vicantha didn't want her to hear. Still, I watched her for hints of confusion or startlement, just in case.

She didn't stop, or frown, or look around for the source of the sound. I let myself relax a little at that. The car had enough iron in it that Vicantha hadn't

been sure she would be able to hide it with her magic. Three feet away from the car, the fae woman stopped, brow furrowed as she stared out at something I couldn't see.

I cracked the car door open. Vicantha raised an arm to strike.

The fae woman whistled sharply through her fingers.

Just like that, the other five fae came into view. They didn't turn around and rush back to us from the clearing. They appeared out of nowhere, to either side of Vicantha's chosen prisoner, where there had been nothing but empty space a second ago. At the same instant, the five fae who had been creeping toward the clearing melted away.

An illusion. And it had been aimed at me as well as Vicantha. I stayed where I was, with the car door half-open. I kept one hand on my knife, and the other on the keys, which were still in the ignition. I didn't know whether I would need to fight or start the car and squeal out of the parking lot. So I kept myself prepared for both.

But none of the six came after me. They didn't even look at me.

Hastily, I revised my assessment of the situation. The illusion hadn't been aimed at me. It had been targeted at everyone in the vicinity, just in case the person who had set the trap had brought backup. They didn't know that I, specifically, was here.

But they were all too aware of Vicantha.

As I watched, they subtly shifted their positions until they were surrounding her. She reached for her daggers, but didn't yet draw them.

Then, at the far end of the parking lot, a seventh fae appeared. Still no glasses. Not the Lady of the Balance. But I was willing to bet she was the one responsible for the illusion.

She held out a hand, and the air around Vicantha began to swirl. It didn't tear at her skin like my cyclone had done to the Arkanica team. It didn't do anything but send her hair into her face and make her clothes flap in the sudden breeze. But when she tried to reach for her weapons, the swirling grew stronger, and her arms clamped back down to her sides. The newcomer was holding her in place with nothing but targeted motions of the air around her—a subtle use of air magic, and not one I had seen before.

A Summer fae with air powers—rare, but not unheard of. Unless she was Winter, but the cornsilk blond of her hair and her blue-green ocean eyes said Summer to me. That confirmed it for me—she had been the one to shield the other six from Vicantha's illusion, and create the illusions that had fooled the two of us.

She strode across the parking lot, and stopped just outside the circle. She said

something to Vicantha. In response, Vicantha lifted her chin and gave a sharp, fierce response. I couldn't hear it through the wind. I wished I could.

Whatever she had said, it was enough to make the illusionist's face darken. She flicked her fingers up in a sharp motion. A gust of wind swept past her subordinates to send Vicantha sprawling to the pavement. A second rush of air, slower and more subtle, raised Vicantha to her knees.

Vicantha's eyes blazed with cold fire. She started to struggle to her feet—but before she could, one of the other fae sent a miniature quake through the ground directly under her, cracking the pavement. The broken pavement turned to liquid and flowed over Vicantha's legs. It hardened again immediately, locking her into place.

The illusionist reached down into what looked like empty air. She pulled something out of a container I couldn't see. Her whole body tensed as she grasped the object—a small, featureless wooden box. She held it out ahead of her at arm's length, like it was a bomb or some kind of biological weapon. I tightened my grip on the knife, but didn't move yet. Seven against one, and me without my magic. I wouldn't survive.

But what were they about to do to Vicantha?

The illusionist handed the box to one of her subordinates. The reluctant recipient drew back, and touched the box only with her fingertips. Another of the fae opened it, leaning as far back as possible as she did. She reached in and, with the tips of two fingers, pulled out something that gleamed in the moonlight.

At first, all I saw was two circles. Then my brain caught up with me. It was a set of iron cuffs, identical to the ones the false police offer had used on me.

Vicantha had been staring straight ahead, doing her best not to react. But as the fae grabbed her wrist, she turned her head in a tiny motion, just enough to catch my eye. In a motion almost too small to perceive, she jerked her head toward the exit. The message was plain. She wanted me to leave her here.

It occurred to me, then, how strange it was that they still hadn't seen me. Vicantha had to be maintaining one last illusion, one the seventh fae hadn't spotted yet. They hadn't noticed me because they couldn't see me. The logic made sense—it was better for one of us to be captured than none. And the way I had worded my promise, even her death wouldn't free me from the obligation to follow through. No matter what happened to her, she could be certain that I would either rescue the prisoners or die in the attempt.

If she was telling me to leave, that meant she was confident that her illusion would keep me shielded long enough to get me out of the parking lot. But I only had a few seconds, at most. That had to be why she had risked drawing attention to me by looking my way. Once they snapped those cuffs around her wrists, her

magic would stop working. And I would be exposed.

The fae holding the cuffs knelt behind Vicantha, her face creased in pain. She took hold of Vicantha's wrist.

I tried to turn the keys in the ignition. My hand wouldn't move. I tried to tell myself it was another symptom of the iron poisoning—a weakness in my hands, a slowing of my reaction times. But I knew better.

Vicantha risked another look in my direction. This one was less subtle, and more angry.

What other choice did I have but to leave? All I had to fight them with was my knife. A single knife, a weapon I hadn't adequately practiced with in over a century, against the magic of seven trained fae agents. Yes, the knife was steel—I had made sure of it—but even so, I wouldn't be able to disable all of them before they ripped me apart.

The fae holding the cuffs pulled Vicantha's wrist back in slow motion. Every second became an hour.

Despite the scene playing out mere feet away from me, I didn't feel the adrenaline of battle rushing through my veins, or the sharp, tense fear of an immediate threat to my life. My mind was clear. Clear enough to know that Vicantha's logic made sense—if we couldn't both make it out of this, one of us had to. Clear enough to know that if I tried to save her, knowing I would fail, I couldn't blame it on the heat of the moment. It would be a conscious choice.

If I made that choice, I would know, once and for all, that I was the same person I had always been. I would lose all hope of ever escaping the deadly prison of my nature.

I turned the key. The engine roared to life. None of the fae reacted, but the tension went out of Vicantha's shoulders.

I slammed the car door shut. I floored the gas and sped toward the exit—then squealed the tires in a sharp turn and plowed toward the knot of fae.

I mowed two of them down before a third threw up a stone barrier. I hit the barrier at full speed, and jerked forward, landing hard against the steering wheel. The hood crumpled. Smoke rose up from the ruined car.

Vicantha took the opportunity to take a magic-fueled leap free of the encasing pavement, half a second before the cuff could close around her wrist. I tried to follow her movement, but a spear of stone hurtling through the windshield toward me forced my attention away. I dodged just in time. The spear caught the sleeve of my coat. Fabric tore as I yanked my arm free.

The attack distracted me enough that I didn't see the lance of fire until it hit.

I looked down at my body, expecting to see myself burning. But I didn't see any flames. And, I realized a second later, I didn't feel the familiar sensation of

my nerves cooking and dying. But the air was growing hotter by the second, too hot even for me.

The fire attack hadn't hit me. It had hit the car.

As soon as I realized what had happened, I opened the car door and flung myself out. A glance behind me at the car showed me the underside was already burning. I didn't know how long I had before the whole thing exploded, but I wasn't going to risk it.

Which, of course, had been the attacker's intention. As soon as I left the car, the fae were waiting for me.

But before I could figure out whether to draw my weapon or make a run for it and hope for the best, a violent slash of wind drew their attention away from me. One second, they were eyeing me like a side of beef, weighing where to make the first cut. The next, they were windmilling their arms against the force propelling them inexorably toward the burning car. I was at the very edge of the wind; I could feel it, but it was easy to resist. But then, Vicantha's attack wasn't aimed at me.

Vicantha faded back into the shadows before they could retaliate. It looked like she had decided sticking around to make another attack wouldn't end well for her. But she had given me an opportunity, and I wasn't about to waste it. It was time to take a cue from her, and run. I glanced toward the woods, then toward the road. It would be easier to lose myself in the trees.

As I watched, a branch curled in a strangely human gesture, like it was beckoning to me. I had a feeling that was a summons I didn't want to answer. Yes, Vicantha was in the woods somewhere, but she was fae. Whatever magic those trees held, I doubted it presented any threat to her. I couldn't say the same for myself.

I looked over my shoulder toward the road. The fae would be reluctant enough to attack in full view of humans—at least I hoped so. And even if the trees were only unsettling, and not outright dangerous, I couldn't say the same for the Faerie portal that was hidden somewhere in there. And if there was one thing all the stories of the fae had in common, it was that Faerie portals made it all too easy for the unwary to slip through to the wrong side.

Vicantha made the decision for me when she appeared at the entrance to the parking lot—apparently she hadn't vanished into the woods after all. She ran for the entrance to the parking lot. She motioned over her shoulder toward me. With relief, I turned my back on the trees to follow her.

Behind us, the car groaned. The groan turned into a roar. That was the only warning we had before the explosion. The force sent me sprawling to the ground, but I was far enough away that the flames hadn't reached me, and

neither had any of the flying shrapnel. From the screams behind me, the fae hadn't been so lucky.

Vicantha, ahead of me, hadn't even been knocked down. She glanced over her shoulder. When she saw me lying facedown on the pavement, she backtracked and reached a hand out to me.

I shook my head, already struggling to my feet. "Run," I managed to force out, although the fall had knocked the wind out of me. "I'll catch up." The sounds behind me told me the fae hadn't come out of the explosion unscathed—but also that at least some of them were still alive. And Vicantha had been right earlier—better for one of us to make it out than neither of us.

"So noble." Vicantha's mouth twisted in a sneer. "I see the stories about you are true."

Between one beat of my heart and the next, Vicantha stopped being Vicantha. The face above me was now that of the seventh fae, the illusionist. Her turquoise eyes sparkled.

I forced myself to my feet. I reached for my knife, even as I risked taking my eyes off the fae to scan the area for the actual Vicantha. I didn't see her.

I raised my weapon. She smirked.

"You stink of iron," she said, wrinkling her nose. "But at least it means your mind has no defenses left." She leaned in to whisper in my ear. "**Sleep.**"

I tried to take advantage of her closeness to drive the knife through her heart. But my arms wouldn't obey me. The weapon fell from nerveless fingers.

A second later, I followed it to the pavement. I was asleep before I hit the ground.

Chapter 25

There were no bright lights this time. No cold table under my back. The lighting was a soft, gentle yellow, the closest thing to candlelight that electric bulbs could create. The air was warm and humid. I drew in a long, grateful breath. I had thought I had gotten used to Hawthorne's weather. But for the first time since I had stepped off the plane, I finally felt comfortable. I felt like I was home.

Another breath brought the scent of some sweet, exotic flower to my nose. I looked around, and found myself surrounded by plants and trees. My horticultural knowledge may have been limited, but I knew enough to tell that not all these plants were native to the same area, and I highly doubted any of them were native to Hawthorne. At first I mistook the room for a greenhouse, but then I saw the stone walls, and the single skylight overhead that showed the pink of an early dawn sky. Water bubbled softly in the distance; through a tangle of showy orange flowers, I caught a glimpse of a multi-tiered fountain. Birds warbled above my head.

Belatedly, I looked down at my wrists, then my ankles. No restraints. I turned in a slow circle, and saw nothing but greenery. If this was a cage, it was a more luxurious cage than I had ever seen.

I took a step forward—and thick iron bars shimmered into being in front of me. I stopped short, half a second away from slamming directly into them. I made that slow circle again. This time, the view was very different. The rest of the room was real enough, or at least it hadn't changed. None of the plants had disappeared. The air still felt like home. But between me and the green luxury of the room was a circle of iron bars, each wrapped in thick barbed wire.

"I wasn't sure if it was overkill," came a crisp and sophisticated voice from the direction of the fountain. "I know what Arkanica did to you—they did it on my orders. I admit, I didn't expect you to survive, but now that I've revised my estimates, I have a reasonable idea of the side effects you're likely experiencing. With that amount of iron lingering in your veins, you shouldn't be a threat to anyone. But considering your reputation, I decided an overabundance of caution was better than the alternative."

I took a step back, and the cage disappeared again. As long as I didn't get too close to the bars, I could let myself believe I was in paradise. I stepped forward again, and breathed a sigh of relief as the bars reappeared. The truth might have been unpleasant, but lies were deadly.

"How did you hide this place in Arkanica headquarters?" I asked. Was this

one of the floors I had passed on the way out of my prison? I took another glance at the skylight. Was it as false as the windows in the Arkanica hallway? The sunlight looked real enough, but I knew better than to trust it.

“I didn’t,” the voice answered. “This is my private sanctuary. I quickly found that I would need to create a taste of home for myself, if I was going to maintain my sanity while working in this world long-term.”

On the last word, a woman stepped into view. She was tall and slim, her chin as pointed as her ears. Her face didn’t suggest any particular age, but her eyes, framed by silver eyeglasses, held lifetimes’ worth of knowledge. The auburn of her hair, tied back in a severe bun, was broken by a silver-white streak.

“The Lady of the Balance,” I said. It wasn’t a question.

The fae woman inclined her head in acknowledgment. “You may call me Iliana. I think we have a close enough relationship by now to use our proper names, after all the problems you’ve caused me.”

“Don’t try to blame me for this. I didn’t know you existed until Mab’s enforcer came after me. And I would never have involved myself if I hadn’t needed to prove to her that I wasn’t responsible for the objections. I have a pretty good idea who planted the evidence that gave her that impression.”

With every word I spoke, her limbs loosened, and subtle lines disappeared from her face. I didn’t understand, until I did. When I realized what she was hearing that I wasn’t saying—what about my words had set her so at ease—my fingernails dug into my palms.

My voice was rough, weak. The iron poisoning, still, plus the aftereffects of the unnatural sleep. Maybe it was the disorientation of finding myself in a jungle when I had expected a prison, but I felt like half my mind was still caught in that limbo where the illusionist had dropped me with a single word. And the iron all around me wasn’t helping.

When I spoke, she heard weakness. She heard the voice of someone who wasn’t a threat. I straightened my back, and raised my chin, and took another step forward. A second later, though, I reconsidered. Yes, her visible relaxation had wounded my pride. But if I wanted to get out of here, maybe it wasn’t entirely a bad thing for her to think of me as incapable of fighting back.

I let my shoulders slump, and lowered my eyes. I focused on the throbbing ache of the iron all around me, and the jagged shards of pain still floating around in my veins, until I could feel my face crease with it. I raised my eyes just enough to see a little more tension leave her face. Internally, I smiled. But I didn’t let it show on my face.

“You weren’t involved yet,” she said. “But you would have been. I know your reputation. As soon as you found out what was happening, you would have

charged in to stop us—and if we hadn’t taken action, it would have happened on your timetable, not ours.” She leaned back, crossing her arms. “Also, presenting you as a target gave us a way to either hand Mab’s knight an easy, satisfying victory, or send her to her death. At least that was the intention.” Her arched brows drew together.

“Your information about me is out of date,” I said. “I haven’t charged in to rescue anybody in seventy-five years. And even if I was still in the hero business, I would never have heard about a company in Hawthorne from all the way in Hawaii.”

“You would have eventually. We plan to put our technologies to use around the globe. Did you genuinely not know that? I thought you had done your research.” She gave a sharp, precise shrug. “It’s immaterial. Regardless of the specifics, you were a wild card. Better to get you out of the way early, we thought. It may have been a miscalculation.”

“Speaking of miscalculations. I was out cold for a while there. You had the opportunity to take another stab—so to speak—at what you wanted to do back in the Arkanica building. Without me awake enough to fight back, you could have gotten it right this time.” I raised my head enough to look her in the eyes, although I tried to make sure a glimmer of fear shone in my gaze. This close to that barbed wire, it wasn’t hard. “Why am I still alive?”

“That... is a simple question with a complicated answer.” She paced to a bed of tall purple flowers, then spun and walked the other way. “You are a vexing problem, Ciarán. Sending Vicantha against you didn’t work. Threatening the human girl’s life didn’t work. Killing you... well, we can both see how well that worked.”

She stopped her pacing, and studied me with such intensity that I imagined myself back in the lab, under the scientist’s microscope.

“I find myself intrigued by... alternate possibilities,” she said. “Ones that don’t involve a loss of the potential you represent. Your unfortunate human blood may have made you a pitiable creature, just self-aware enough to be able to understand your own limitations, but I’ve always maintained that the smallest of effects—and the smallest of people—can change the balance.”

I tried not to react to her words. It didn’t matter what she thought of me, or of my blood. Her blood was all that mattered—namely, getting out of here so I could liberate it from her body.

“Are you talking about recruiting me,” I asked, “or using me as a guinea pig? Either way, you may as well not bother. I’m certain I can make myself more trouble than I’m worth.”

She flinched at the mention of guinea pigs. “Hear me out first. From the

earliest years of your life, your driving motivation has been to protect humans. Even though they despise your existence. Am I wrong?"

If I said she was, we would both know it was a lie. "I gave all that up." But I wasn't so sure that was the truth, either. Not after all I had done to save Skye. Not after I had made the decision—with a cold, clear mind—to get myself killed trying to save Vicantha's life.

Iliana dismissed my words with a gesture. "You can't give up who you are. Our nature is our nature, for better or for worse. Yours compels you to save human lives, in defiance of all reason. And I'm offering you a chance to help humanity on a grander scale than ever before."

"I know what your help involves. I'm not interested." This time, I was the one to turn a studying gaze on her. "But while we're on the subject of helping humans, why have *you* gone into that business? Don't try to convince me the Summer Court is benevolent and good-hearted. I was alive when the fae were still an active force in the world. Yes, you were magnanimous rulers—when you chose to be. That's not the same as being on humanity's side."

"You have it right," she said easily. "This has nothing to do with helping humans, at least for me. This is about Faerie. The world humanity forced us to retreat to, when their numbers and their iron drove us out of this world." The soft persuasion in her voice disappeared. "You are aware that this world shapes that world, yes? So then what effect do you think your 'climate change' will have on Faerie?"

It seemed obvious, once she said it aloud. Vicantha had told me, hadn't she? Oh, she hadn't said anything about the rising sea levels. But she had told me how the human world affected the other. The TV shows, the crosswalks. The way human events echoed in Faerie landscapes. Why should environmental damage be any different?

Internally, I ground my teeth. On the outside, though, I didn't let Iliana see me beating myself up for missing the obvious answer. Instead, I exaggerated my surprise—widened my eyes, took a stunned step back. The more she thought she could surprise me, the more she would imagine she had the upper hand.

"We've been searching for solutions for years," she said. "The task fell primarily to me—and, I assume, my counterpart in the Winter Court, although they've resisted my overtures toward coordinating our efforts. After years of fruitless study, I came to the controversial conclusion that climate change can only be averted by working with the humans, sub-sentient as they are. There is simply no way to address this problem without addressing the root cause—your world, and your species."

"I'm not one of—"

She cut me off, as if I hadn't said a word. "So we did what we had all expended so much effort trying to avoid, and reached out to a small group of humans."

"And offered them fae from your rival Court," I finished.

"We did have other, more palatable sources for test subjects at first, but we exhausted those more quickly than expected. At first, we weren't sure what to do after that—would we be forced to ask some of our own people to sacrifice themselves for the humans' experiments? But then my spies in the Winter Court alerted me that several Winter agents had crossed through the portal. It was even the closest portal to our headquarters—not surprising, since it's one of the biggest on this continent, but it did make things more convenient for us. The opportunity was too good to pass up."

"And what happens when Arkanica runs out of Winter agents?"

"They won't run out," Iliana assured me. "I already have my best people working out strategies to keep a steady supply coming, without the need for any Summer fae to sacrifice their lives. And if you mean to imply that Arkanica will turn on us eventually... well, they know the dangers of that." Her lips curled up in a smile cold enough to belong to Winter. "We don't stay close to our human colleagues because they need our help. They don't, not anymore. We stay close so they know we're always watching."

"What happens if I don't agree to help you?" I exaggerated the pain in my voice, and shied away from the barbed wire.

She gave another shrug. "Probably exactly what you're imagining. First, I'll find out from you where Mab's knight is hiding. Then, as you said, I'll end your life permanently, and do it correctly this time." Her smile grew, but didn't get any warmer. "After that, I imagine I'll bring your body back to Faerie with me, so both Courts can see someone who has spent her life behind a desk succeed where they have spent centuries failing." Bitterness twisted her cold smile into something sharper. Clearly, Vicantha wasn't the only one in Faerie who looked down on what the Lady of the Balance did.

I paused for a long few seconds, finger to my chin, pretending to be deep in thought. Then I raised my head and took a deep breath. I let my breath catch in my throat. With any luck, she was seeing exactly what I wanted her to see—the noble condemned prisoner who wasn't quite as brave as he thought he was.

"Then you'll have to kill me," I said, adding a wobble to my voice. "I won't sacrifice lives. No matter the benefit."

"Even fae lives?" she asked hopefully. "Your heroism was always limited to humans, after all. I had thought you might not have as much allegiance to the fae. At least not to Winter, since you have Summer blood in your veins."

“Winter, Summer, it makes no difference to me,” I said. “And I’m as much fae as I am human.”

Iliana sighed. She stepped closer, sizing me up, like she was already busy figuring out the best way to kill me.

As she walked slowly up to the bars of the cage, I pictured my mansion. My sanctuary. Homesickness sent an ache through my heart worse than the feeling of the iron cage all around me—but I hadn’t brought the image to mind so I could think about how much I missed my home. Instead, I was thinking about the last day I had spent there. I was thinking about Vicantha facing me across a knife blade as I threatened her with my own blood.

And I was thinking about what Vicantha had done next.

I moved too fast for my thoughts to catch up. I never would have been able to do it otherwise. Both my arms shot out between the bars. The barbed wire tore into my skin, and left bloody, blackened scratches up my forearms. White sparks darted across my vision, like tiny falling stars. My world was jagged cuts and needle stabs. My body was blood and cold and pain.

I screamed. But not as loudly as Iliana did, when my hands closed hard around her bicep and, before she could pull free, slammed her forward into the barbed wire. The barbs pierced her flesh in a dozen places, from arm to cheek. Black, blistered circles rose almost instantly wherever the barbs had gone in.

I didn’t need to exaggerate the pain in my voice this time. “Our nature is our nature,” I echoed her. “I have the weakness and corruption of the humans. The cruelty and viciousness of the fae.” I leaned into his in her ear. “And I’m going to use it all to bring Arkanica down.”

She tried to pull free, but the iron had already stolen her strength away. My stomach twisted at the sound of her animal shrieks. I breathed in—slowly, calmly—and reminded myself of who I was. I was human, and I had known from my earliest years what humans were capable of. And I was fae—like Vicantha, who had come within seconds of massacring an entire city. Like the woman I was holding against the barbed wire, who had handed her fellow fae over to an eternal lifetime of torture and living death without a backward glance.

I eased her back, ignoring the pain it caused me as the barbed wire ripped into my arms all over again. It wasn’t as if it could do worse damage than Arkanica’s IV had. So maybe I would come out of this with a few more scars. Scars could be useful reminders. And at least I would be alive.

The barbs popped free of her skin, one by one. I made sure to stop before the last of them came loose. I left a couple in place, so she wouldn’t regain enough strength to fight me. Although, looking at the rot spreading over her skin, a mottled black smeared with oozing blue blood, I suspected it wouldn’t matter

even if I pushed her clear of both me and the barbed wire. The damage had been done. She had enough iron in her blood now that chances were good she would never get the chance to correct her mistake and kill me properly, no matter what happened next.

“And you,” I finished, my face a fraction of an inch away from the bars, “are going to tell me exactly how to destroy them.”

Iliana gave her head a spasmodic shake. Her mouth opened and closed, and a wordless moan came out. It took her a couple of tries to form actual words.

“This... will save two worlds,” she gasped. “It’s more important than me. You understand that, I’m sure.” Her eyes, dark green like a forest in late summer, held mine. “You understand sacrificing your life for what’s right.”

I pulled her forward again—not all the way, just enough to tear another shriek from her. Then I pushed her back, giving her another moment of partial relief. I barely noticed the new scratches on my arms anymore, or the blackness creeping across my skin—a fraction of what I could see on hers, but still a sign that something was very wrong. The sensation had already faded into the background, the pain becoming just one more immutable fact of the universe. It reminded me of the moments before death, which always seemed to last an eternity. Always, before my body failed, there were a few seconds where the pain and panic were so all-consuming that I couldn’t remember life being any other way.

I wasn’t anywhere close to death this time. This amount of iron wasn’t nearly enough to kill someone with human blood. But I had that same feeling now. This time, though, it worked in my favor. It let me forget there had been a time not so long ago when I would never have considered what I was doing now. It let me keep my voice steady as I said in her ear, “I didn’t say I would kill you.”

I tried to summon Vicantha’s ice. Her ability to consider slaughtering the inhabitants of an entire city without blinking. It had to be in me somewhere. Given how many of the fae had come after me, given how many times I had died for nothing worse than trying to help somebody, there had to be a voice inside me that wanted to see them bleed. Or at least didn’t care.

Iliana would give me answers soon. Then I could be done. “What will it take to shut Arkanica down?”

She responded with an incoherent mumble. But a shake of her head told me it had been a refusal. In response, I pulled her up against the bars again, and held her in place as an animal scream wrenched itself from her throat. This time, I didn’t push her away until her body started to twitch and jerk against the bars, and her eyes began to roll back in her head.

I knew what she was feeling. It had only been a couple of days ago that I had

gone through it myself. On her orders.

I wished that made me feel better about what I was doing. I wished it felt like retribution. It should have been satisfying. At the very least, it should have been easy. I was human. I was fae. I knew what both those things meant.

I pushed her back a little further, until none of the barbs were touching her skin. There was no risk of her regaining enough of her strength to escape, not anymore. Her eyelids were drooping, her skin turning a sickly gray. Her breaths were thin and shallow. I would be lucky if she didn't die before she told me what I needed to know.

"What do I do to destroy them?" I shook her shoulders, as if I could jar the answers out of her. "Do I take apart that room where they drew my blood? Kill every scientist in the place? Level the entire building? Whatever it is, it had better be something I can do, because I'm not going to accept that this is impossible."

She sucked in a breath, giving herself just enough air to answer with a strangled, broken laugh. "Of course you won't," she wheezed. "You always fight past the point of rationality."

"Last chance." I pulled her forward a little, not enough to impale her with the barbed wire again, but enough for her to recognize the threat. "Give me an answer."

With eyes that wouldn't quite focus, she looked at the wire, stained blue with her blood, then up at me. "The lowest level. Not where they were keeping you. Under that. That's where the work happens—not the experiments, the real work. Destroy that, and you destroy the heart of Arkanica."

That was vague enough that it could have meant anything. But there had to be some grain of truth in what she was telling me. I knew because she was fae. She couldn't lie to me.

I nodded in acknowledgment. "Thank you."

A shudder ran through her. Regret? Relief? I couldn't say. "Please..." she gasped out.

Was she going to ask me to let her go, on the slim chance she could still survive? Or did she simply want me to kill her quickly? I spoke again before she could finish. "One more question." As her eyelids drifted lower, I shook her again, this time to keep her awake. "How do I get past the blood scanner at the front desk?"

She shook her head. "You can't," she whispered.

She was fae. She couldn't lie. "Give me a better answer than that. Why not? Whose blood do I need?" I didn't realize how rattled her answer had left me until I heard myself shouting. I tried to lower my voice. "Does it have to be from one

of the Winter fae? Because I've got that. Does it need to be someone Arkanica recognizes? Because I have plenty of yours right here."

This time, her weak laugh held a note of triumph. "It doesn't matter whose it is. It only matters that it's fae blood. The scanner will let one of the fae in, or a human who's had an injection. But not you."

She managed to open her eyes enough to meet my gaze with a last shred of defiance. "Your magic isn't concentrated enough. They did a test..." She paused as she ran out of breath. It took her a couple of tries to suck in enough air to continue. "They tested your blood, when they were done looking at it under the microscope. A simple lightbulb test. A human after an injection..." She paused again to breathe. "They can keep a bulb lit for hours with a single drop. Our blood can keep it lit for days. Yours turned it on for five seconds, before it flickered and burned out." Her chest heaved in what I thought was meant to be another laugh. "You, Ciarán, are the only person in two worlds who can never get through that scanner."

Her words rang with truth. She couldn't give me anything less.

"Thank you," I said again. My voice was as rough and broken as hers. I sounded as defeated as I had pretended to be a few moments ago.

For a moment, I just looked at her. She had started shaking uncontrollably, like I had when I was sitting in that chair, poison flooding into my veins on her orders. Then I looked down at myself—at my torn and bloody arms, with cold black streaks running up and down my flesh.

I lowered my eyes. I didn't want to look at either one of us. "Do one last thing for me," I said, "and then you'll never have to see me again."

She looked at me, waiting, her eyes a question. I had a feeling, at that moment, that she would have done anything I asked.

"Open the cage," I told her.

She tried to reach into the pocket of her skirt. Her shaking arm jerked down in a series of movements that look like they were barely under her control. But at last, she managed to slip her fingers in, and pull out a slim key.

She fumbled for the lock. She might have had an easier time without me holding onto her shoulders, but I didn't let go. Even in her current state, I didn't trust her not to try to flee without the threat of the barbed wire. Or, more likely, fall to the floor and simply give up.

Three tries, and the key turned in the lock. A door, wider than I had expected, swung open. I watched it warily to make sure it wouldn't close again. It didn't. But I let go of her shoulder with one hand to pluck the key from her fingers, just to be sure.

"Thank you," I told her, one last time.

Then I pulled her forward one more time.

The barbs sliced into her all over again, opening brand-new wounds up and down her body. I pulled her as tightly against the cage as I could, until the bars themselves seared into her skin, leaving lines of blisters up and down every bit of exposed flesh they touched. Blisters bloomed across her face, swelling one of her eyes shut. The other stared at me, wide and betrayed, as she let out a thin whine that was the closest thing to a scream she could produce.

“You...” she managed. “You... can’t break...”

“My promise?” I finished for her, voice heavy. “I didn’t lie. You’ll never see me again. Me, or anyone else.”

This time, I didn’t push her back and give her a temporary reprieve. That would only have been an added bit of cruelty. Instead, I held her steady against the bars, and waited.

A weapon of pure iron, driven deep into the body of one of the fae, could give them fatal iron poisoning even if pulled out right away. The odds with steel weren’t much better. The longer the weapon remained in their body, the less likely their survival. If it stayed in for more than a minute or two, survival was nothing more than a distant hope.

The tiny barbs didn’t bite nearly as deeply as a sword or knife would have. But they had given Iliana dozens of tiny pinprick wounds, all over her body. And the longer I held her in place, the more iron would make it into her blood. Would that make up for not being able to drive them deep? Would she die, and die quickly, or was I doing nothing more than suspending her in a limbo of pain?

I hoped, with everything in me, that it was the former. Because if not, I was torturing her for nothing.

As my arms burned with cold, and my fingers grew numb with the effort of holding her up, her weak struggles became unfocused trembles, then deep, full-body shudders. Her eyelids fluttered as she jerked. Her breasts came unevenly. Her voice was the thin cry of a wounded animal.

After longer than I wanted to think about, she gasped out a tiny breath, and didn’t draw in another.

I waited another minute. Then another five. I had to be sure.

When I was certain she was dead, I let her body fall to the floor. She landed in a crumpled heap, her blistered face twisted toward the ceiling.

Letting her live hadn’t been an option. She would have told Arkanica I was coming, and let them know exactly what information she had given me. They were already certain to have suspicions when she didn’t show up for work. But there was nothing I could do about that.

I looked away from her body. A few seconds later, my gaze found her again,

as if pulled there by gravity.

I would have killed her cleanly, if I could have. I wished I could tell her that. Not that it would have been any comfort to her.

Still, I wished I could have given her that much. Or, better yet, that I hadn't needed to kill her at all.

But there was no point in wishing for things I couldn't have. If wishes were good for anything, I would have wished for her not to have taken me prisoner in the first place. I would have wished the captured fae free, and Arkanica destroyed.

I would have wished myself back onto the beach, where I could bask in blissful ignorance.

I stumbled out of the cage, trying to think past the frozen agony in my arms. I had to make a plan. First... what did I need to do first? Dispose of the body. That was it. Then clean this place up, to get rid of any evidence in case Arkanica came poking around. Then hurry back to the bed and breakfast, and hope Vicantha was waiting there.

I made it two steps across the stone floor before black dots filled my vision. I hurried to the nearest wall so I could steady myself against it, only to slide slowly down the stones as my consciousness fled.

Chapter 26

When I woke up, the skylight showed the sun high in the sky, and my arms were still raw and oozing blood. Iron wounds always healed more slowly than other injuries. Plus, the remaining iron in my bloodstream had to be slowing down my healing. But that didn't matter. Because I was still here, right where I had passed out. And when I pushed myself to my feet and took an experimental step forward, the iron bars I had been half-expecting didn't appear. I was still free. Despite how long I had been unconscious, no one had found me.

I searched the room until I found my phone. Iliana, or one of her subordinates, had placed it in one of those wooden boxes like the one they had pulled the cuffs out of last night. The box had some kind of magical shielding on it—my fingers tingled when I touched it. But it didn't seem to have had any effect on my phone. If anything, it had made the battery last longer—it was still almost fully charged.

With one eye on the door—no one had come looking for Iliana yet, but I knew better than to trust that my luck would continue indefinitely—I gave a quick call to Skye, letting her know where I was and that I was all right. Vicantha had made it back. I could hear her in the background, demanding to know what had happened and where I had been. I hung up without giving her an answer. There would be time for that later. For now, I needed to get out of there.

Disposing of the body took me longer than I would have preferred. I had planned to scrub the blood off the floor when I was done, to make sure I didn't leave any evidence behind. But I reconsidered when I took another look at the state of the barbed wire. There was no way I would be able to clean that, and Arkanica could take a sample of my blood from the wire as easily as from the floor. Not to mention, the fae at the park last night had all gotten a good look at my face. Chances were at least one of them could put a name to it. Which meant they would know who was responsible for what had happened here, no matter how hard I tried to scrub away my sins.

So I left the room the way it was. Hopefully the lack of a body would make them waste some time searching for the Lady of the Balance. Aside from that, I would just have to make sure I took care of Arkanica before they could come after me again. For now, with Iliana's body safely buried, I hurried back to the bed and breakfast.

It didn't take me long to get back. Iliana's hideaway, no matter how remote it looked from inside, was just a few minutes off the highway that led to

Hawthorne. I had discovered that when I had searched for a place to hide her body. She had helpfully left her car parked in the driveway, too—a new model, the kind that was more plastic and aluminum than steel. But I didn't want to make it any easier for Arkanica to find us by driving it back to the bed and breakfast. I took a cab instead, and pretended I didn't notice when the cabdriver's eyes lingered questioningly on the shredded and bloodstained sleeves of my shirt.

Back in the room, Skye and Vicantha weren't nearly as shy about staring. I tucked my arms behind my back as I summarized the events of the past few hours and explained what I had learned. I left out most of the gore, but Skye still looked sick.

Vicantha, on the other hand, just looked angrier and angrier with every word I spoke.

After a few minutes of watching her face darken, I subtly shifted until I was between her and the door. But this time, she didn't try to leave. Or go for her daggers, or say anything about taking revenge on the humans of Hawthorne.

It took me a moment, after my explanation was done, to figure out that was because she wasn't angry with the humans this time.

"They sold us out." Vicantha was a statue in the center of the room, fury etched into every line of her body. Her lips were the only part of her that moved. "The Summer Court sold us out."

"What she said about climate change—is it true?" I asked, although I knew it had to be. Not only did it make sense, but she couldn't have lied to me. The only way she could have given me false information was if she had misunderstood the situation, and I doubted that was the case. But I asked anyway, because it meant delaying the moment when we would have to figure out what to do next. "Is it a problem for Faerie?"

It took Vicantha a moment to pull herself out of her anger long enough to answer. "We've been noticing small effects for some time now. The snow no longer falls year-round in yeti territory, making them range farther for food. Winter lost a couple of small villages that way, before Mab sent in her soldiers to take care of the problem. The kraken have been restless—the undine ambassador keeps asking Mab to do something to drive them back. But that's never been my area of expertise. I didn't know it had reached the point where Faerie itself was threatened."

"Then you don't know what plan Mab has for dealing with it?"

Vicantha shook her head. "I told you, not my area. But why is this relevant right now? Summer is the issue here."

"I'm wondering if it has anything to do with why she sent those agents here,

centuries after Faerie officially sealed itself off from this world.”

Vicantha’s brow furrowed. “That explanation is... plausible,” she finally said. A deeper anger, one tinged with hurt, flashed in her eyes—but only for a second. “Whatever her reasons, I intend to uncover them. But that’s a question for another time. For now, are you certain the Lady of the Balance is dead?”

I remembered the long, slow process of getting her to that point, and shuddered. “Yes,” was all I said aloud.

“Then we only have one thing left to do,” said Vicantha. “Destroy Arkanica, and make sure their work can never continue.”

“Agreed,” I said. “And the sooner the better. They probably already know something is wrong, with the Lady of the Balance gone missing. The question is how we’re going to do it. You saw how outmatched we were the last time we set foot in that building—and we’re no closer to a plan now than we were then.”

Vicantha frowned. “What do you mean? Now we know exactly where to strike.”

“That doesn’t do us any good if we can’t get inside.”

“We know how the scanners work now. All I need to get in is the blood in my veins.” Her eyes gleamed with a hint of what I had seen in her the night she had almost taken her revenge on the humans of Hawthorne. She rested her hands against her waist, where her daggers lay.

“But not me,” I said, before she could sink too deeply into her daydreams of vengeance. “I told you what the Lady of the Balance said. I’m the only person in this world or the other who can’t get in.” I tried not to sound bitter about that. It wasn’t easy. We had come so close, only for my blood—an unchangeable fact—to hold us back.

“Which only means *you* won’t be going in,” Vicantha said impatiently, like I was failing to keep up with her basic reasoning. “The scanner will let me through, and I’ll do what I came to this world to do. The two of you can go back home. You’ve helped all you can.”

I strode across the room to stand in front of the door, as if Vicantha were ready to push past me right then and march straight to Arkanica. For all I knew, maybe she was.

Vicantha tilted her head in confusion. “Your work is finished. In a few short hours, your human will be safe. And once I’ve returned to my world, I’ll follow through on my promise. I would have thought you would be pleased.”

“Pleased?” I pressed my aching arms back against the door. “This is my fight now. You dragged me into it. I bled for it; I *died* for it. Now you want me to go home, while you try to take on all of Arkanica by yourself?”

“Not all of Arkanica. Only the bottom floor. If you’re concerned that I’ll die

before I have a chance to plead your case to Mab, I can send a message home before I go.”

“You forced me to help you. Then you wanted me to stay badly enough to bribe me into doing it. It’s too late to change your mind.” Maybe I would have been happy to take Vicantha’s offer if Arkanica hadn’t killed me. Or if I hadn’t been forced to do what I had done to the Lady of the Balance in the name of Vicantha’s cause. But even if I believed Vicantha could do this on her own, even if I were certain Skye would be safe as soon as Vicantha walked through Arkanica’s doors, this fight had cost too much for me to walk away now.

“I didn’t change my mind,” said Vicantha. “You served your purpose, and did it well. You have my gratitude. And my respect.”

As if either of those meant anything, next to the possibility of her dying in that iron room while Arkanica continued to do their work and Skye remained in danger. “I said I would walk away until Skye didn’t need protection anymore. She won’t let go of this until Arkanica is gone for good. That means I’m not going anywhere.”

“And when did she say that?” asked Vicantha. “Was it before she learned my true feelings toward humanity? Was it before she listened to you describe torturing a fae noble to death? Ask her how she feels about the fae now. Ask her how much she wants to save us, now that she’s learned the truth.”

She turned her gaze on Skye. “Do you understand now, little girl? Have you finally accepted that we are not the creatures of your imagination, who inspire your people to believe in wonder and reward you for your faith? We are your rightful rulers, driven from our place, and those who seek to use our magic for their purposes will receive only one reward—and not the one they sought. You’ve seen our true face now. So tell me—would you still risk your life to save ours, so we can take our revenge on humanity when the time is right?”

My eyes followed Vicantha to Skye. Through the whole conversation, Skye hadn’t said a word since I had first walked in the door, when she had told me she was glad I was okay and then demanded to know what had happened. Somewhere along the line, she had moved away from us to sit cross-legged on the bed. She was bent over her laptop, pretending to stare at the screen. But her hands weren’t moving on the keyboard, and I didn’t miss the way her eyes darted up to look at us before hastily dropping back down.

I wanted to go to her, but I couldn’t risk leaving the door unguarded. And after what Vicantha had said, I wasn’t so sure approaching Skye wouldn’t do more harm than good. “Is she right?” I asked, from where I was. “Are you ready to go home?”

She kept her eyes fixed on the screen, but didn’t bother pretending she hadn’t

heard me. “I said I wasn’t leaving until we brought Arkanica down.”

“That was before—” I couldn’t make myself repeat Vicantha’s words. “You should go home.”

“Is Arkanica gone? No? Then I’m not leaving.” Skye snapped the laptop shut. She surged up from the bed, her eyes blazing with a fire warmer than Vicantha’s, but no less intense. I had seen that fire in Ernest’s eyes a handful of times, whenever his father or his brother had written to him and begged him to come home.

“Maybe half the fae would kill me for trying to stop Arkanica. Maybe the other half would kill me just for being human.” She shot a quick glance toward Vicantha at that. “But that doesn’t change who I am.” This time, her eyes landed on me. “Even if it did for you.”

“When you’re older,” I said, “when you’ve had a chance to see what taking up a cause will get you, you’ll understand.”

“In that case,” said Skye, “I guess I’d better hurry up and do as much good in the world as possible before that happens.” She forced a smile.

I answered with a stern glare. “If you keep going down this path, you’ll die before you get the chance. And unlike me, you won’t have the choice to start over.” My gaze softened as I studied her. Half of me wanted to make her understand, whatever it took. The other half wished I could preserve her under glass, keep her idealistic innocence intact forever, the way I hadn’t been able to do for myself.

I tore my eyes away. “Vicantha is right. You’ve done your job. You’re going home.”

Skye crossed her arms. “Go ahead—try and stop me. And then see how far you get with multiple warrants out for your arrest.” Now her smile was a weapon, aimed directly at me. “Among other things.”

I clenched my teeth. As much as I wanted to believe she was bluffing, I knew better. But at least her stubbornness made it easy to make my case to Vicantha. “You heard her. She’s not leaving. Which means neither am I.”

Vicantha answered, not with the argument I expected, but with a brisk nod. “Very well. She will help me prepare, by using your skills to make Arkanica believe I work for them. Can you do that?”

Skye nodded. “I can put you into their employee files. I can’t get you an ID, though. I don’t have the right equipment.”

“Good enough.” She turned to me. “You will stay here and keep her safe. I will handle Arkanica.”

“We’re not having this argument again.”

“You’re right. We’re not.” Vicantha’s eyes narrowed. “This is my mission.

My people to protect. You don't care about saving them. And you don't care about the larger threat to the fae. All you care about is Skye. Isn't that right?"

I wanted to say yes. Even though it would do nothing but strengthen Vicantha's argument. I wanted to believe I was the person I had so badly wanted to be, the new identity I had carefully crafted for myself in the wake of the Second World War. But the memory of driving the rental car straight into the fae who had threatened Vicantha, instead of escaping to safety, was still fresh in my mind. And I hadn't forgotten my last thought before I died. In those final seconds, I hadn't regretted the loss of my life of luxury. I hadn't even thought only of Skye. I had fought that last futile fight against the encroaching darkness because of the fae prisoners. Because they needed somebody to save them.

"You know it's not," I said through gritted teeth.

Vicantha shrugged her dismissal. "Your sickness is your own concern. If it's finally leading you to feel guilty for your inaction, that's too little too late, and not relevant to this problem. Whether you've decided you care about the fae or not, you have no way to get inside, and I don't intend to limit my own options to accommodate your need to appease your conscience."

"Then we'll make another plan," I said. "One that involves you going inside, while I do something to back you up from the outside." I held up a hand before she could speak. "Something besides sitting here and pretending to make myself useful. Doesn't that make more sense than cutting me loose entirely?"

"I've made my decision. Now move aside—I have preparations to make. Unless you would rather start a fight you can't win, and force me to waste my strength on you instead of saving it for Arkanica."

I didn't move. "You would turn down a potential ally because you don't think I care enough? What does it matter how much I care, or what my motivations are, as long as I'm doing what you need me to do?" I shook my head. "You value competence. Results. I've shown you I can get you those results. So why force me out now?"

For a long moment, Vicantha studied me, with an expression I couldn't read. I thought maybe she wouldn't answer. But then she spoke. "Because you are human," she said quietly.

"I'm not human."

"You share their blood. You share the world they stole. You've spent your entire immortal life fighting for them. Whatever else you are, son of Oberon, you are human—and humans are the enemy."

"I have nothing to do with Arkanica. I might as well say you're the enemy because the Lady of the Balance helped them."

"Do not compare me to that traitor." Vicantha's eyes flashed. "She and those

who followed her here are nothing but a handful of idealists overtaken by a brief, deadly madness. I will see to it that they die before their ideas can spread. Humanity, though... humanity has been the enemy for a very long time. Arkanica's actions are only the latest volley in a war that spans centuries. Be grateful you've earned enough of my trust, and enough of my gratitude, that I'm willing to leave you at my back instead of slitting your throat before I go."

In those last words, I could hear everything she had been keeping tamped down since I had stopped her from taking her revenge. I hadn't known how close her anger was to the surface, even now. She was still walking that edge—and the slightest nudge could push her over.

"You don't have a problem accepting Skye's help," I pointed out. "Why not mine?"

"Because I need what she can give me. Anything you can offer, I can do better for myself—especially given your current condition. Sometimes one has no choice but to trust an enemy, but I prefer to limit my trust to as few enemies as necessary."

"So now I'm your enemy," I said. "Funny—a few days ago, you were standing in the same position I'm in now. Blocking the door, keeping me from leaving. Because you needed my help. You were ready enough to trust me then. I would have been content to lie on the beach and watch the clouds, but you woke up the thing inside me again—the part of me that can't see someone in danger without rushing in to protect them. Oberon's sickness, you said. Whatever you want to call it, you can't push me and push me until it comes back to the surface, then complain what I want to do what it demands."

"Which brings up an interesting question." Vicantha gave me a thin, satisfied smile, like she had won a battle I hadn't known we were fighting. "Do **you** want to save those prisoners and stop Arkanica? Do you even care about protecting Skye? Or is it only a compulsion you've inherited from your father?"

I open my mouth—and paused.

Inside my mind, some part of me shouted that of course it was who I was. The rest of me knew better. I had seen too much of the humans, and too much of the fae, to think they were worth protecting. A long time ago, maybe I had been that hero. Now, though? Now I was willing to believe it really was a sickness that lived in my blood. When I looked at Skye, I had no way of knowing whether it was my fond memories of Ernest that drove me to protect the granddaughter of the man who had killed me, or whether the magic in my blood was twisting my thoughts, even with the steel watch fastened securely around my wrist.

Vicantha read my answer in my expression. "I'm doing you a favor," she said, more gently than I would have expected. "You don't want this—not really. Stay

here. Protect the human girl for as long as you feel is necessary. Then return to your life of luxury, and forget.”

She perched on the edge of the bed and leaned in toward Skye. Skye froze. She swallowed, and visibly forced herself not to pull away.

“What I asked you to do for me,” she said, “can you do it without being detected?”

Skye nodded. “I think so.”

She nodded. “Good. In that case, we won’t need to plan our timing based on our ability to defend against an attack. Start right away, then.”

“Why are you helping her?” I asked. “This isn’t a good plan; you have to know that.”

“Because she’s going to do this whether I help her or not,” said Skye. “If I want to stop Arkanica, my best chance is to make it more likely for her to survive.”

“How soon can you be done?” asked Vicantha.

Skye thought for a few seconds. “It shouldn’t take longer than an hour. Maybe two. And that’s the absolute maximum. I should be able to do it in fifteen minutes.” She paused. “That still doesn’t solve your ID problem, though. We saw how it worked at the front desk—they had to show an employee ID along with the finger stick.”

“Jimmy from the Drunken Scarecrow can handle that,” said Vicantha. “I’ll make sure he has an incentive to work quickly. I’ll visit the Arkanica parking garage on the way, and lighten the wallet of an employee, to give him a model to work from.” She raised a hand, and a soft gust of wind brushed against my own pocket, as if to demonstrate how she intended to make that happen. “I’ll plan to go in tomorrow morning. Be ready by then. If I’m captured, Arkanica may decide to track you down and retaliate.”

“And why does that matter to you?” I couldn’t resist asking. “We’re the enemy.”

Her lips thinned. “You’re also useful,” she said, more sharply than I thought was necessary. “The Winter Court considers it wasteful to be careless with useful things.”

I looked from Vicantha to Skye. If Vicantha hadn’t changed her mind by now, she wasn’t going to. And now she had Skye on board, too. She had been right—if I stayed here in front of the door, I would only be forcing her to use strength she couldn’t spare on a battle I couldn’t win.

Still, I gave one last try. “A few days for me to recover. That’s all I’m asking. In a few days, we can figure out a way to get around the scanner problem. You know we’ll have a better chance against them with both my magic and yours.”

When Vicantha turned her gaze on me, it was as if all the heat had been sucked out of the room. “Give me a reason you truly want to save them. *You,* not the sickness.”

I couldn’t answer. And because she knew it, she didn’t bother giving me time to formulate a response before she started walking toward the door. “Move aside,” she said again. “I need to hurry if I’m going to be ready in time.”

This time, I did.

Chapter 27

The sun set, and then rose again. I didn't sleep. I thought Skye had, until I got a look at the dark circles under her eyes when we both dragged ourselves up with the dawn.

We ate breakfast downstairs in silence, alone at the long wooden table except for the owner at the other end, who stared dourly at the morning paper in silence. Today she had prepared a plateful of scones, dotted with shriveled purple berries I couldn't identify. We each choked one down, neither of us saying anything. When we were done, Skye pushed her chair in and started back toward the room. She glanced over her shoulder at me with a questioning look. I followed her. What else were we going to do?

As soon as we were upstairs again, Skye glanced down at her laptop, which had spent the night on the pillow next to hers. I shook my head. "Don't."

Skye gave me her best big-eyed innocent look. "I wasn't going to do what you're thinking. I was just looking for something to pass the time. A round of chess, maybe. Want to play?"

That look might have worked on me if she hadn't threatened to use it to escape any security I assigned her. I intended to say something to that effect, but what came out was, "I should be there."

"I hate to say it, but Vicantha wasn't wrong," said Skye. "About your recovery, I mean. Not the other stuff. You still don't have your magic back, do you?"

I unclasped the watch and slid it off my wrist, just long enough to answer her question for myself. For a second, I thought I felt a small spark, deep in my core. Then nothing. I slipped the watch back on and shook my head.

"Plus, there's the scanner problem," said Skye. "You can't get in. And..." She hesitated.

"And what?" I asked, even though I wasn't sure I wanted the answer.

"And every time you do this stuff, you die." The words came out in a rush. "And that's when you *are* at a hundred percent. Look at your arms—I still see the scratches. And when you took off your watch, the building didn't come down around us, which is a pretty good indicator that you're not back to your old self yet." She tried for a smile.

"You've forgotten part of the story I told you," I said. "Your grandfather killed me, yes. But do you remember what happened before he did? I stopped those enemy soldiers. I saved that village. What happened afterward doesn't

change that. I died—but before I did, I *won.*”

I listened to my own words in disbelief. Had I really regressed so far that I was willing to die again, for a cause that wasn’t even my own? And less than a week after I tasted death again. Had I forgotten the pain so quickly, and the futility that had come with waking up weak and defeated and no closer to victory?

“Vicantha is some kind of scary trained fae operative, isn’t she?” said Skye. “She can do this. She probably has more of a chance than either of us. All we have to do is wait here, and keep ourselves from going stir-crazy.” She grabbed the laptop and held it out to me. “So... chess?”

I barely heard her. I should have been there. Fighting alongside Vicantha.

No. I should have been at home, where I belonged. I shouldn’t have let Vicantha get me involved in the first place.

Skye shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

* * *

“Think the creepy lady downstairs will charge us extra if you wear a hole in the carpet with all that pacing?” Skye asked from the bed. She was lying on her belly, painting her nails a glossy blue.

I didn’t respond. I kept walking. Seven steps, door, turn. Seven steps, window, turn.

Skye shrugged. “I guess if she does, you can afford it.”

I glanced at my watch. It was exactly thirty seconds later than it had been the last time I had checked. “It’s past noon. She should be out by now.”

“To be fair,” said Skye, “neither of us exactly has a frame of reference to figure out how long it takes to raid a secret magical-research facility.” She painted a yellow circle into the center of one blue nail, then another.

“I know that if it’s taken this long, she’s either dead, or she’s been captured. Only battles between armies last hours. In this amount of time, she would have either killed everyone there is to kill, or died herself. Or else she was caught before she reached the point of doing either.”

Skye blew on her nails. She added two black dots to one of the yellow circles, and a curved line. A smiley face. “Or she needed to hide somewhere before she could sneak downstairs. Or Jimmy needed more time to make her ID than she thought. Or... you get the idea.”

“Both those scenarios involve Vicantha waiting patiently. Do you see that happening?”

With a huff, Skye stood up, nearly upending the three jars of nail polish in the

process. “That’s it. I’m not listening to you anymore. I’m going to take a bubble bath.”

I stared. “Now?”

“Well, after my nails dry. But they should be fine by the time the bathtub fills up.” She shrugged. “I live in an RV, remember? It’s been years since I’ve had the opportunity for a real bath. And there’s a bottle of bubble bath right there in the bathroom, even if it is old-lady scented. Not to mention, I’m going out of my mind with nerves—no thanks to you—so I’d say this is the perfect time for a nice hot soak.”

As she opened the bathroom door, she looked over her shoulder. “I wasn’t kidding about the carpet, you know. It’s going to show up on your bill if you’re not careful.”

* * *

The darker the sky outside grew, the more the cold sank into our bones, as if the grumbling radiators didn’t exist. Or maybe it was just me. But looking at Skye, watching her withdraw further and further into herself, I didn’t think so.

Her hair was still wet. But her cheerful mood had disappeared along with the sunlight. She hadn’t filled in the other smiley faces on her nails. Instead, she was hunched over her laptop, browsing through pictures of what looked like baby koala bears.

She must have sensed me looking at her, because she raised her head. She tried the big-eyed look again. “I could just take a quick peek.”

“You’ve taken too much of a risk already just by creating that employee file for her. You’re not taking any more. Especially when...” I didn’t finish the sentence. But I was sure she knew what I meant. Especially when there was a good chance they would be watching for us, since they must have discovered Vicantha’s attempt to break in.

“I could look and see if her employee file is still there,” Skye offered. “It would just take a second. If they’ve found her out, they will have cleared her from the system, first thing. And if it’s still there, you could stop worrying.” She said those last words in a cajoling singsong tone.

“You mean we could stop worrying,” I said. “Don’t pretend it’s only me.”

“All right, **we** could stop worrying. One peek, and then we’d know.”

I strode to the bed and snapped the laptop closed. “I said I would protect you.” I hadn’t meant to jump down her throat, but she flinched. I tried to soften my voice. “As you pointed out, there’s nothing else I can do right now. So I’m going to keep on doing it. Whether you like it or not.”

* * *

“We don’t even know for sure that she was even planning to come back,” Skye pointed out, as she carefully picked shards of yellow off her thumbnail. “For all we know, she’s already rescued the prisoners, brought them back to Faerie, and left this world behind forever.”

I looked at the box of pizza lying open on the bed. It had been Skye’s idea to order in. She had said we could use the fuel—we had both forgotten about lunch—and neither of us wanted to leave the room for even a few minutes, in case we missed Vicantha. It had taken some doing to find a pizza place that was open this late. Our order had gotten here an hour ago, but despite all that work, neither of us had touched a single slice. I reached toward the box, but pulled my hand back when my stomach did a backflip in protest.

“No,” I said quietly, in answer to Skye’s hopeful theory. “She didn’t make it.”

“We don’t know that.” But she sounded less sure this time.

I didn’t respond. But yes, I did know it. We both did.

* * *

Skye stared down at her laptop. She reached a tentative hand out toward it, then pulled back. Then, with a furtive look at the wall where I was sitting, she snatched the laptop and pulled it into her lap.

“I’m doing it,” she snapped, with a challenge in her eyes. Daring me to defy her.

I started to shake my head. Then, with my mouth half-open and the *no* already on my lips, I stopped. “All right,” I said. “Do it.”

Skye blinked. “Really?”

“If you don’t, we’ll be sitting here forever. Wondering.” And if she did get bad news—which I was certain she would—we could pack up and leave before Arkanica tracked us here. “We can’t stay in limbo for the rest of our lives. One way or another, we have to know.”

* * *

“Check again,” I ordered.

The pizza still lay on the bed, untouched. The traffic sounds outside the window had long since quieted. This late, all I could hear was the unearthly howling of the wind, and the clanking of the radiator like a ghost dragging its

chains.

Skye looked down at the close laptop, but didn't open it. "It's only been half an hour. It won't have changed."

"Check again," I repeated.

"Weren't you worried about the risk?"

"I'll hold them off if they come for us," I said, even though I wasn't sure I could do any such thing. All I knew was that I needed this situation to make sense.

Skye flipped open the laptop. The glow turned her face a pasty white. She bent over the screen, fingers clacking. After a few minutes, she shook her head.

"Nothing. Just like I told you."

"Nothing at all? That can't be right."

"Which is exactly what you said last time. But that doesn't change what I'm seeing." Skye turned the screen to me. "See? There's her employee file, right where it's supposed to be."

Nothing amiss. But if Vicantha had succeeded, if they hadn't captured or killed her, she would have been back by now. "Look harder."

"All right, I might be able to..." She chewed her lip as she turned the laptop back to her. Her fingers tapped busily.

A few minutes later, she turned the screen to me again, even though I didn't know what I was looking at. "Here you go. No security alerts. The last entry in here is from two days ago, and it turned out to be a pigeon that flew into a window." She hesitated. "I said it before, but have you considered the possibility that she might just not be coming back? You heard her—she didn't exactly sound happy about having to work with us. I wouldn't be surprised if she decided to put the human world behind her as fast as possible."

"No security alerts," I echoed. "If she got into that building and destroyed an entire floor, don't you think there would be *something*?"

Skye's brow furrowed. "I guess I should have thought of that."

"She failed," I said flatly. "And I need to know what happened. Can you dig deeper?"

"I could." But Skye didn't turn the laptop back around again.

"What are you waiting for?" Impatience made my voice harsh.

"If you're right... if she did fail..." Skye picked another flake of yellow off her nail. "I just don't know what that means for us. What does it change, except that I might catch Arkanica's attention like you were so worried about a couple of hours ago? You can't fight them in your condition, and I sure can't fight them, so what's left? Wave a white flag and hope for the best? Start prepping our speeches for Vicantha's funeral, or whatever it is the fae do?" She shook her

head. "I'd rather hold on to hope for a little longer."

I didn't say anything. Instead, I held her gaze until she looked away.

"Okay, fine," she muttered, spinning the laptop to face her. "Has anyone ever told you you're scary when you want to be?" Her fingers started up their rhythm again. It lasted longer this time, and was punctuated by even longer pauses. After what felt like several days, even though when I looked out the window the sun somehow hadn't risen yet, she looked up.

This time, the pallor of her face came from more than the laptop screen.

"What did you find?" I forced myself to ask.

"Arkanica has..." She took an unsteady breath. "They have one new experimental subject."

That didn't mean it was her, an inner voice tried to persuade me. But she had gone to the Arkanica building and hadn't come back, and now they had a new fae guinea pig. I knew how to connect the dots. Still, I allowed myself to hope as I asked, "Any information on this subject?"

Wordlessly, Skye turned the laptop around. A picture of Vicantha, head newly shaved and eyes radiating helpless fury, stared out at me.

* * *

"We're not giving up," Skye vowed. "We'll find a way to take them down. However long it takes."

Her words sounded upbeat enough. But I could hear the doubt in her voice. This was chipping away at even her relentless optimism, even if she wasn't ready to admit it.

"We'll get her out, too," she said too forcefully, her confidence transparently false. "We have to, right? I mean, we can't just leave her there. I know you've started to care about her at least a little, even if you'd never admit it. And I think I have, too. Even though she's kind of terrifying."

This time, I was the one hunched over the laptop, wedged against the wall, using my knees as a makeshift table. I didn't respond.

"I mean, she's fae," Skye went on. "A being of pure magic. It's hard not to be in awe of someone like that, even if she can be kind of awful. Awe, awful. Ever notice how those sound alike? Sorry, I'm babbling. Anyway, we won't give up. Okay? Promise me you won't give up."

I finished what I was doing and stood. I set the laptop down on the bed.

Skye took my lack of reaction for a response. "Oh, right," she said, a tinge of bitterness infecting her forced optimism. "You don't care. Or at least you wish you didn't. Well, if you don't want to be involved, that's not my business. You

don't have to stick around. If you still feel like you need to protect me, use your money to do it from a distance. Then you can go do your own thing, whatever that is."

"That's exactly what I'm doing." I turned the laptop to face her.

Skye peered at the screen. "A ticket to Hawaii," she said flatly.

"I'm sure they already know how to find the house," I said, "so it's not a perfect solution. But it will do for now. It will take time for them to fly to Hawaii, after all, and hopefully it will take even longer for them to find the trail that leads to that ticket in the first place. Especially since I used a different alias with the airline."

"Just how many aliases do you have?"

"The house has a good security system," I continued. "Good enough to stop several well-armed humans. I'm less certain about the fae. If all else fails, lock yourself in the basement. The walls are lined with iron. Fae-proof."

Skye frowned at the screen. "Margo Collins," she read. "Somehow I don't think you're going to pass for a Margo." She looked up at me. "But this ticket isn't for you, is it?"

"Of course not," I said impatiently. "Haven't you been listening? I'll arrange for a car to be waiting for you at the airport. It will take you to the house. I'll give you the codes to the security system. There's enough food to last you at least a month—I set the house up to withstand a sustained attack." I realized I was pacing again. "I'll come for you if I can. After that, we'll make more permanent plans for your safety. If you don't hear anything from me after two weeks, call the number I just emailed you. My assistant will get a solid long-term identity set up for you, and for your cousins if it becomes necessary. I've already arranged for the cost of your education to be covered, so you don't need to worry about that."

"And while I'm starting my new life as a beach bum," said Skye, "what are you going to do?"

"Your flight leaves in four hours," I said, ignoring her tone. "You should leave as soon as possible, before Arkanica has a chance to track you down. Pack everything you need. I'll call you a cab."

"You didn't answer my question. What are you going to do?"

"I didn't answer your question," I said, "because I thought the answer was obvious."

Skye shook her head. "Nothing has changed. You still can't get inside. Your blood won't open the door. And without me, you can't even get your name and face into the employee files."

I had hoped to keep my plans to myself. She didn't need to be involved. But if

she wasn't going to start packing until I gave her an explanation, then I would give her one.

I tried not to think about what would happen if she still didn't do what I had asked. I had heard the doubt in her voice. I had seen the way she looked at Vicantha—and at me. Surely she had learned something by now. I only hoped she had learned enough to convince her to save herself.

"I've been thinking about the blood scanner," I said, gathering Skye's things as I spoke. "I'm not sure it's true that I can't get inside."

"The Lady of the Balance said you couldn't," Skye reminded me. "And the fae have to tell the truth."

"She told me what she *thought* was the truth. But I've been thinking about the rest of what she said. That lightbulb experiment Arkanica tried. She didn't say my blood wouldn't turn on the light at all. It did—right before it burned out the bulb." I stuffed the jars of nail polish into her backpack. "If that holds true in other situations, the magic in my blood isn't weak. It's just... glitchy." I paused to shoot Skye a smile—and found, to my surprise, that the smile was genuine. "And who doesn't expect a glitch in their system now and then?"

Skye pursed her lips. "That's risky."

I raised an eyebrow. "Riskier than you staying here with us when you should have let me send you to safety days ago?"

"Are you sure you even have magic in your blood right now?" asked Skye. "You still aren't anywhere close to fully recovered."

"I had enough magic left to bring me back to life, and that was days ago," I pointed out. "The magic is there. I just can't use it right now."

Skye shook her head. "Still too risky. Even if it doesn't register a straight negative, any weirdness will make them look more closely at you. And at the ID I assume you're going to have Jimmy make for you. And, if they even get that far before they decide to haul you away, at the employee file that I..." She frowned. "How were you planning to get your information into their system, anyway? You never asked me to do it."

I shrugged. "I figured I would chalk the missing file up to the same glitch." As I said it, though, I could hear how weak that part of the plan was. I had been so focused on protecting Skye that I hadn't wanted to admit I might need her.

Skye heaved a sigh. "I'm not going to be able to talk you out of this, am I?"

I didn't dignify that with a response.

"Then at least let me put you into their system. Give them one less excuse to stop you." Under her breath, she muttered, "Not that you're likely to get that far."

I shook my head. "Not only will that put you at more risk, I won't be around

to protect you.”

“Not a problem.” She gestured toward the laptop screen. “By then I’ll be on a plane, remember?”

I stopped short, halfway through cramming one of Skye’s shirts into her bag. “Then you’ll go to Hawaii?”

She gave me her biggest, sweetest smile. “If you let me do this for you.”

I studied her face, trying to figure out whether she was lying. She saw what I was doing, and held up her hands. “Honest, I will. Believe me, I do not want to end up in that building again.” She paused, and when she spoke again, her voice held a wheedling note. “But if there’s any way I can help from your house in Hawaii...”

By the time she got there, it would all be over, one way or the other. But that wasn’t the way to encourage her to leave, so I didn’t say it. “No,” I answered instead. “The employee file will be more than enough.”

“Well, since I’ve agreed to do what you want, the least you can do is tell me the rest of the plan.” She tucked her legs underneath her and looked up at me like a child getting ready for storytime. “Go on, spill. What are you going to do once you’re there?” Her gaze sharpened. “Because I’m assuming you wouldn’t risk your life like this if you didn’t at least have a plan. Right?”

“Getting past the front desk will be the hardest part,” I said. “After that, it won’t be complicated. Find Vicantha and the other prisoners. Get down to the bottom floor. Destroy whatever I find down there.”

“Destroy it?” Skye raised her eyebrows. “So your magic is back, then? That was fast.” She shook her head. “Nice try. If you want me to get on that plane, you’re going to have to find a better plan than that.”

I scowled. “I’ll buy a weapon from Jimmy when I get the ID. His business is protecting fae—I’m sure he has a few things lying around that don’t have enough iron to attract the attention of the Arkanica fae. That should be enough to take care of whoever is waiting for me down there. Once I’m alone, I shouldn’t need magic to do some damage, whatever is waiting for me. Ordinary humans accomplish impressive feats of destruction on a daily basis without any magic.”

“So, you with one plastic knife and a few sparks of magic against all of Arkanica,” said Skye. “Great plan. Or, just a thought, you could do the same thing you told Vicantha to do, and wait. Regroup.”

“Not an option anymore. If they’ve captured Vicantha, they’ll already be looking for me. And they’ve managed to killed me once. Next time, it will be permanent. If I don’t do this before they find me, they won’t give me the chance.”

“You want me to get out of town. Couldn’t you do the same thing? Just for a

few days. Long enough to get your strength back and make a better plan.”

But I was already shaking my head. “Vicantha is one of their test subjects now. Who’s to say they won’t start carving out body parts, or decide she’s too much of a risk and do to her what they did to me? Even if I could afford to wait, Vicantha can’t. She made the choice to go ahead, and now we’re stuck with it. Long shot or not, this is my only chance.”

I expected an argument from Skye. Instead, I got nothing but a long silence. She bit her lip as she searched for a rebuttal. But as the seconds stretched by, she didn’t offer one.

“It’s time for me to go,” I said as gently as I could, when it became clear she wasn’t going to find the argument she was looking for. “I need to get to the Drunken Scarecrow before it closes.”

Skye opened the laptop and stared at the flight confirmation. As I opened the door, she looked up at me. “Hey, you can’t break a promise, right?”

I stopped with my hand on the doorknob. “It’s a little more complicated than that, but yes. That’s close enough.”

“Promise me you’ll come back.”

I paused for a moment, trying to figure out how to answer. In the end, I slipped out the door without giving her any answer at all.

Chapter 28

I was afraid that waiting the few hours until Arkanica's doors opened for the day would make me too late. But since breaking and entering wasn't a skill I possessed, even when it came to buildings that weren't likely to be protected with layers upon layers of magical security, I didn't have a choice in the matter. I sat in the Dunkin' Donuts across from the Arkanica building, nursing a lukewarm coffee, with a brand-new Arkanica employee ID in my pocket and a fiberglass knife tucked against my thigh.

Skye was in the air, on the way to Hawaii. Her plane had taken off on time—I had checked. So if my plan didn't work, at least I would have the satisfaction of knowing I was the only one who would die for my failure.

Except that wasn't true. Vicantha would die along with me. I scowled into my coffee.

I forced my mind away from those thoughts, and checked my watch. It was time. Leaving my half-finished coffee on the table, I stood and walked across the street to the Arkanica building.

When I stepped inside, I swept my gaze across the room. I didn't see any familiar faces—nobody I had seen when Vicantha and I had met with Phoebe, and no one I recognized from my escape. But of course, that didn't necessarily mean anything. I wouldn't remember every face; that didn't mean they wouldn't remember me. And for all I knew, Arkanica had been passing pictures of me around, like a wanted poster. I kept my head ducked, just in case.

I had also changed my hair, trimming it slightly while making sure it was still long enough to fall over my ears. And instead of the clothes I preferred, I had scrounged up a pair of cheap khakis and a scratchy polo shirt. The changes were subtle, but sometimes the subtle things were what made the difference.

Nobody called out in alarm when they saw me, or gave me more than a cursory glance. I got in line behind a blond woman whose ears were poking out from under her hair, and tried to let go of some of the tension in my shoulders. I needed to look like I went through this routine every day.

The line moved up, and nobody stopped me. The woman in front of me placed her finger on the pad, and pulled her hand back a second later as a drop of blue blood welled up. The man behind the desk glanced at his screen, and at her ID, and waved her forward.

This time, now that I knew what to watch for, I saw him wipe down the pad and change out the needle. The entire process took less than ten seconds. It had

the look of a routine so well-practiced he could do it without thinking about it. Indeed, half his attention seemed to be on his phone, which was lying on the desk in front of him. He waved me forward without seeing me.

I placed my finger on the small black pad, trying not to look at it too closely, or to tense too much in anticipation of the pain. I tried to convince myself I did this every day. Still, I couldn't avoid a sharp hiss as the needle stabbed into the pad of my finger. As I studiously avoided looking down, a green light flashed at the bottom of my vision. I made sure not to let my relief show on my face as I pulled my hand back, and dabbed away the blood before the man at the desk could get a look at the color. I didn't know whether his machine would read me as human or fae, and if it was the latter, the red of my blood would be a dead giveaway that something wasn't right.

"New here?" the man asked, glancing up from his phone.

Apparently I hadn't hidden my reaction to the pain well enough. "You know how it is," I said, slow and easy. "You never quite get used to it." I kept my shoulders down, and my breathing steady.

I watched the man's hands, waiting for him to reach for the alarm. But his hands stayed where they were as he gave me a sympathetic smile. "I don't know how you people put up with it every day." He held out his hand for my ID. Then something on his screen caught his attention. He turned toward it and frowned. "I'm sorry, but we're going to have to do that again." He went through the clean-and-replace routine again with the pad, and held it out to me a second time.

I plastered an expression of benign exasperation onto my face, and placed my finger down again. This time, when the needle pierced my skin, I bit my lip before a noise of pain could escape.

The man frowned down at the screen again. "Can I take a look at your ID?"

I already had it ready in my other hand. I held it out to him. He had only given the ID of the woman in front of me a cursory glance, but he took mine out of my hand, and turned it over in his fingers. He squinted at the card, running his fingers slowly across the surface.

I held my breath and tried not to wonder just how good Jimmy was at his job.

He looked back and forth between the ID and his screen, comparing the information. Finally, he handed the card back to me. The frown didn't leave his face. "Everything checks out," he said. "But... I don't know. I've never seen this before." He held out a hand, blocking me from the inner door. "Hang on a sec. I'm going to have to call someone about this."

"Maybe it's been too long since my last injection," I offered, taking a gamble that the machine had read me as human.

The man tapped a couple of keys. "You may be right. This says it's been

twenty-one days.” But that only deepened his frown. “Which is even stranger. They have a strict schedule around here. Every two weeks exactly. They want to make sure there are no holdups like... well, like this. I’ve never seen them miss someone before.” This time, the look he gave me was sharper, and lasted a few seconds longer. “Stay right where you are. I’ll put in a call and someone will work this out.”

I had to applaud Skye for having the forethought to include an injection date so far back. It would have been a good way to explain the glitch. Of course, she’d had no way to know how strict Arkanica was about their schedule.

The man reached for the phone on his desk. Before he could pick it up, I placed my hand on his, soft but firm.

His hand tensed under mine. Slowly, his other hand started reaching for the alarm.

I leaned in and spoke in a hushed tone. “I’m not surprised the reading was abnormal. The truth is, my file contains some... strategic inaccuracies. I’m not human. I’m something you haven’t seen before. I was called in personally to handle the situation with Lady Iliana.” I swept my hair aside for a split second, just enough to show one of my ears.

His eyes widened—in surprise, but not shocked. That answer my question about whether he knew he was working with the fae. It had been a gamble, but one I had needed to take. I had thought it was a reasonable guess, considering the amount of blue blood he had to see on a daily basis. Even so, I let out my breath in relief.

“Okay,” he stammered. “Well. Let me just make that call, and we’ll get this straightened out.”

I didn’t move my hand. “I wouldn’t do that. I’m breaking the rules myself, by letting on that I don’t belong to this world. If you were to break the rules as well... let’s just say they have reason to be lenient with me. I doubt the same is true for you.”

A shiver ran through the man. He pulled his hand back from the phone. With a regal nod in his direction, I stepped forward.

“Wait,” he called.

My heart stuttered in its rhythm as I stopped.

“I don’t mean to keep you.” A drop of sweat ran down his neck and under his collar. “But can I just ask... why weren’t we told to expect you? For that matter, why didn’t anyone let us know about whatever is happening with Lady... whoever you said? I’m guessing that’s why everyone was running around like headless chickens yesterday, right?” He lowered his voice. “I understand the secrecy. But how are we supposed to do our jobs if we don’t know what’s

happening under our noses? Magic is real and the fae are helping us use it—how many more secrets can there be?”

Helping. The word hit a jangly note in my ears. It wasn't his fault his employers had told him a partial truth. Even so, when I turned back toward him with the cold smile I had seen on the face of many a would-be assassin, it wasn't hard to imbue it with an extra note of malice.

“There are no more secrets,” I said. “And if you want that nose you mentioned to stay attached to your face, you'll go on believing that.” I leaned in closer, baring my teeth. “Now, do you plan on letting me through, or will I have to file a complaint?”

His shiver was stronger this time. Another sweat drop joined the first. “Go right ahead. Like I said, I don't mean to keep you.”

I didn't wait around for him to ask any more questions. I pushed through the door.

I tried not to think about the last time I had walked down this hallway. Instead, I put my body on autopilot as I headed for the stairs. I pushed the stairwell door open and began my walk into the bowels of Arkanica for what I hoped would be the last time. Below me, the deep ache of iron beckoned.

I had expected it to take an eternity to reach the floor with the lab and the prison. Instead, it seemed to take no time at all. I paused for a moment inside the stairwell door as unwanted memories flooded through me. For a few frozen seconds, I was dying in that chair all over again.

But I didn't have time to waste on memory. I pushed the door open, felt for my weapon to reassure myself it was still there, and walked inside. It was time to get Vicantha out of here.

I couldn't suppress a brief shiver when I passed the room where I had died. I quickly moved on. As I drew closer to the prison, I couldn't help but feel surprised at how easy it had been for me to get this far. I had expected to run into more guards, and more locked doors. So far, the only doors I had encountered had opened easily. But I supposed the advantage to the blood test at the front door was that, while in theory it was possible for anyone without my particular genetic combination to get inside, in practice the building beyond the front desk was closed to everyone but the few fae who existed on this side of the portal, and humans who had access to an injectable form of their blood. It was an exclusive list, to say the least. It made sense that they wouldn't waste their time on the electronic locks and fingerprint scanners I had imagined, when the system they had put into place at the front desk took care of all that for them.

Even the door to the prison wasn't locked, and there were no guards stationed outside. At first, I assumed it was for the same reason. Until I stepped inside and

discovered that there would have been no point in locking the door or placing guards, because all the prisoners were already gone.

I scanned the doors for signs that the prisoners had broken out—or that Vicantha had broken them out. But I didn't see any damage to the bars or the locks. That didn't mean anything for certain, I told myself. Vicantha could have found a key, or forced a guard to unlock the cells for her. For all I knew, they could be free right now.

Then I remembered the image Skye had shown me, with Vicantha's furious eyes staring out at me from the file on Arkanica's newest test subject. That was enough to snuff out my brief spark of hope.

Another look around the room told me I wasn't going to find any clues here about where Vicantha and the prisoners had gone. So I didn't waste any more time there. I hurried to the one other place they were likely to be—the room where the man in the lab coat had strapped me to the table and drawn my blood.

This door was unguarded too. I tried the knob to confirm that it was unlocked. I paused to draw my knife, then flung the door open. I kept the fingers of my other hand around the clasp of my watch, in case I needed to slip it off. Not that it was likely for my magic to have returned so quickly, but that wouldn't stop me from trying.

But it wasn't necessary. The room was empty. Both tables were unoccupied, the restraints hanging loose. A small smear of blood on the closer table was the only sign that either of them had been used at all lately.

No enemies to fight. But also no Vicantha. And no sign of any of the other fae.

I didn't let myself pause to think about what that might mean. I turned around and headed back for the stairs. Rescuing them had only been the first part of my mission here. It was time to get on with the rest.

For all I knew, maybe I would find them on that lower level, along with whatever it was that made Arkanica tick. And if I didn't? Then at least I could make sure Arkanica didn't survive to hurt anyone else.

I expected to feel more iron pressing in on me as I traveled down. Instead, the pressure lessened with every step. I could still feel it, but almost all of it was above me on the floor I had left behind, not below.

The stairs ended in a single door. And it looked like I had spoken too soon about the locks. Because this door, unlike all the others I had passed, had a fingerprint scanner.

I examined it closely, to make sure this one was actually what it looked like, and not another blood scanner. A blood scanner, I might have been able to fool. No such luck. There were no needles, only a glossy black surface with an outline

of a fingertip. And while Skye had done the best she could with the employee records, she'd had no way to put my fingerprints into the system.

Which left me with only one option. I took a deep breath and slipped off my watch.

Nothing happened.

Sometimes the magic took a moment to surge. Occasionally, it didn't come at all. But I could tell right away that wasn't what was happening this time. When I reached for my magic, I felt the same faint spark I had sensed in the room earlier. But underneath, I could feel the iron, thick and heavy in my veins. My body was busily processing it, and I was closer to normal than I had been yesterday or the day before... but still not close enough. My magic was nothing but a whisper of what it had been.

I turned my focus inward, and tried to coax it up from my core. It didn't matter if it took everything in me. I could collapse later. But I needed the magic now.

But my magic had never answered to my whims. I had lost count of the times I had begged it to stop, with as much success as yelling into the heart of a hurricane. This time, I urged it to rise, and received nothing but silence in answer.

I pulled harder, straining mental muscles I hadn't known I possessed, begging my power to do what I needed it to do. It had brought me back to life; why couldn't it do this? A jolt ran through me, like a static shock. The door rattled on its hinges. Then nothing. The air stilled. The burst of power vanished as if it had never existed.

But the door clicked open.

I sent my magic a silent thank-you. It didn't matter that it had gone silent again; it had done what I had needed to do. It had given me a way through the door. I could get the rest of the way without it. I would tear the place apart with my bare hands if I had to.

I reached for the doorknob. The door swung open before I could touch it.

From the other side, Phoebe smiled at me. A dim blue glow filled the room behind her.

A wave of cold spread up my arms and across the back of my neck. The tiny hairs there stood on end.

"Well?" With a hint of impatience, Phoebe motioned me forward. "It would be a shame to come all this way and not come inside."

"You unlocked the door," I said slowly. "You knew I was coming."

"I admit, we didn't expect you to walk through the front door," said Phoebe. "It took us a while to put the pieces together and figure out that the anomaly at

the front desk was you. The person who scanned you in worked hard to erase the incident from the system—and almost succeeded, too. What did you say to him, anyway? He was shaking when we talked to him. We had to apply a considerable amount of pressure just to get him to identify a picture of you.”

Phoebe’s smile grew warmer as she pulled the door further open, like she was inviting a guest into her home. “But yes,” she said, “we knew you’d come. Why do you think we didn’t bother to track you down, after the... unfortunate incident yesterday with your friend? If we had come to you, you would have run, and would probably have slipped through our fingers. Or you would have killed more of our agents, and you’ve cost us enough good people already. If we sat back and waited, though... well, you have a friend to rescue, and a dragon that needs slaying.” She chuckled, like the two of us were sharing a private joke. “I did have a moment of doubt. I thought there was a chance you would recognize the good work we were doing, and put the good of all humanity ahead of the handful of people you would save by coming here. But apparently, you’re more shortsighted than that.”

She waited, but I didn’t step through the door. With a sigh, she walked out to join me. That was a mistake. Before I could consciously think of moving, my knife was out, the edge resting just under Phoebe’s chin.

Phoebe’s pulse beat wildly under the blade. But her voice was mild as she said, “I wouldn’t do that.”

A brief clack of footsteps behind me was my only warning before someone pressed a gun to the back of my head.

“Steel-jacketed bullets,” said Phoebe. “If a few of those go into your brain, it won’t be able to knit itself back together. At least that’s the theory—and if it doesn’t hold up, I can think of several people here who would love to take you apart to figure out exactly why.”

I considered my options. It didn’t take long. Slowly, I lowered my weapon. As soon as my hand dropped, the man with the gun reached forward to pluck the knife from my fingers.

“There we go, that’s better.” Phoebe rubbed her neck in furtive relief. “Now, how about you come inside?” Again, she motioned me in. The man behind me prodded me forward with the barrel of his gun.

This time, I did what she wanted. The light from the hallway cut off as the heavy door slammed shut behind me.

Chapter 29

The room was long and low. Stepping inside felt like entering a cave. I had to fight the urge to duck my head, even though I could stand up easily.

It took my eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light. When they did, the first thing I saw was the servers. Multiple rows, to either side of me, with lights blinking like stars. They filled the room with a soft mechanical whirring. The air was cool enough to make me glad I was still wearing my coat—I suspected the climate of the rest of the building had been tuned to meet the preferences of the Summer fae, but this room was at least ten degrees colder.

I stretched my inner senses out, but could only feel the faintest touches of iron in this room, except for the gun still pressed to the back of my head. The servers themselves could account for that, and judging by what I could feel, even they didn't have nearly as much iron in their inner workings as they should have. Yanina had been right—Arkanica was on the cutting edge of technology in more areas than one. But the only relevant part for me at that moment was that there were no iron cages on this level. True, I wasn't as sensitive to iron as Vicantha, but if this floor were another prison like the one above, I would know.

Phoebe followed my gaze to the rows of servers, and smiled. "We can't keep our most important information out on our main network where anyone can reach it," she said. "You never know when the wrong teenage girl might open the wrong door."

She probably meant for the reference to Skye to set me off-balance. I told myself it wouldn't work, even as my jaw clenched. "If you knew I was coming to destroy you," I said, "why bring me to where I could do the most damage?"

Phoebe's smile grew. "Look harder."

At first I didn't know what she meant. All I could see were the servers themselves. But there was another sound underneath their soft hum. That whirring I had noticed... it was too loud to be coming from the servers, and too mechanical. And it wasn't coming from the sides of the room. Instead, it came from the far end.

I took another glance at the far wall, and saw a set of wide double doors. Blue light spilled out from underneath.

"We had wondered how much the Lady told you," said Phoebe. "The answer is, apparently, not very much. Did she tell you we kept our greatest vulnerability hidden inside this room? She was right. But it isn't these." She waved a dismissive hand at the servers. "Information can be recovered. Experiments can

be redone. No, you came here for something else.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. Why bring me here?”

“That,” she said, “is something you should see for yourself.” Again, she motioned me forward.

This time I didn’t hesitate. This was why I had come here, after all, even if all my nerves were screaming that I was letting her lead me further into a trap. I would gain nothing by refusing. I followed Phoebe, and the man with the gun shadowed me, not letting the weapon lose contact with my skin.

“There’s only one thing that can’t be recovered once it’s lost,” said Phoebe as we walked. “Which is what makes it our most precious resource.”

She pushed open the doors.

Inside, the room was filled with rows upon rows of translucent cylinders, lying on their sides. Made of glass or plastic, they lay on platforms that stood about as high as my waist. They reflected the blue light above, but I caught glimpses of dark shapes inside.

I took a step closer to the nearest cylinder, trying to see through the blurry material. It took me a moment to recognize the humanoid shape of the figure inside. Once I did, though, the rest of what I was seeing fell into place. Arms, legs, a wisp of hair pressed up against the side. A hand with two fingers missing.

“Life,” said Phoebe. “Our greatest resource.”

I walked slowly between the rows of cylinders. I wanted to think of them as coffins, but considering Phoebe’s speech, I knew their inhabitants had to still be alive. The man with the gun followed me, although he let his weapon drop slightly.

I couldn’t see much through the thick material, but I could see enough. And the more I grew accustomed to the blue light, the more details I could catch. The people inside the cylinders were all nude, with ears that rose in sharp points through tangled hair. Tubes ran out of each cylinder into the whirring machinery that lined the walls. The pair of massive machines were the same shiny white as the restraints they had used on me, and I didn’t sense any metal in them. The tubes were full of thick blue blood.

“We usually keep a few subjects upstairs for our experiments,” said Phoebe. “But you didn’t think that was all we had, did you? We need a reliable fuel supply to keep our clients happy. We still don’t have anywhere near enough to go into full production, of course, but our current supply lets us provide enough demonstrations that our investors feel like they’re getting their money’s worth.”

When I turned to face her, she was still wearing that smile. The blue light gave her eyes a reptilian gleam.

“How did you abduct all these people without attracting Faerie’s attention?” I

asked Five missing fae had been enough to prompt Mab to send Vicantha after them. There were at least fifty in this room. How had their disappearances gone unnoticed?

“That part was easy,” said Phoebe. “Faerie had written them off a long time ago. These were the fae who stayed in this world when Faerie closed itself off. Either they were no longer welcome in their own world, or they crossed over at the wrong time and didn’t get the news quickly enough, or they simply preferred it here. Lady Iliana had a list of most of them, and together, we were able to find the rest. There are certain giveaways to watch for, when tracking down immortals. Similar names and faces over the years, similar occupations—especially for the fae, who aren’t known for their ability to change. But I’m sure you, of all people, know all this.”

She kept talking, but she wasn’t saying anything worth listening to anymore. I let her voice fade into the background as I walked down the rows, searching. The prisoners’ eyes were all open, and although I knew they couldn’t possibly be aware in there, some of their gazes seemed to follow me. Some were fair, some dark, but all had the slenderness and sharp features of the fae. A few were missing body parts. Almost all had iron scars. They all had tubes attached to their cylinders, draining their blood away into the walls.

None of them was the one I was looking for.

Then I stopped as one of the cylinders to my left caught my eye. There. A man with bristly fuzz covering his scalp, in place of the others’ long hair. If all the test subjects above had their heads shaved when Arkanica captured them, that meant Arkanica had brought this one down here more recently than the others. A closer look confirmed that he was the man I had briefly shared the prison with.

I moved in closer, trying not to alter the rhythm of my steps. I didn’t want Phoebe to see what I was up to. Next to him, I found the two women from the prison above. And the woman I had seen in the lab, the one with the missing eye. And there, beside the last of them... her. Vicantha. Even without her sleek black hair, I knew her the second I laid eyes on her.

It took me another couple of seconds to register that she was as naked as the others. I averted my eyes, but that only brought my gaze to the tubes snaking away from her cylinder, carrying her blood out of her veins. In my mind, I heard the cold fury in her voice when she had learned where Arkanica was getting their fuel. I bowed my head and closed my eyes in silent apology.

Then I opened them again, and raised my chin with cold resolve. Arkanica had brought me to where I needed to be, and I didn’t intend to waste that chance. Yes, they had a gun to my head. Yes, my magic was useless—I had left my

watch behind in the stairwell, and yet I didn't feel so much as a spark. No matter. I would put a stop to this.

I looked into Vicantha's eyes, wishing she could see me and read the message there.

Her gaze locked on to mine. Her eyes widened at the sight of me.

I jumped back. Behind me, the man with the gun stumbled to the side before I could crash into him.

"Sedation harms the quality of the blood," came a woman's voice from ahead of me. I couldn't see anyone there. But I could have sworn I had heard that voice before.

The speaker became visible between one footstep and the next as she walked up to me. The illusionist from the other night in the park. She must have been waiting here for us all along, invisible behind another of her illusions.

"We keep them paralyzed instead," she continued. "It's more work at the start, of course, but the improvement in yield is more than worth it. Besides, inhibiting their movements only requires a one-time procedure. Imagine the quantities of tranquilizer we would need at full capacity. The mind boggles, to use a human phrase."

"This doesn't bother you?" I asked, the memory of Vicantha's fury still echoing through my mind. "Seeing them use fae blood this way? I thought your magic was something sacred. The core of your being."

She answered with a sad sigh. "We do what is necessary for the survival of our species. No matter how painful that may be. Once, that meant ceding this world to the humans. Then it meant closing off all contact. Now..." She ran a finger along Vicantha's cylinder. Vicantha's eyes followed the movement. "Now, it means this."

"If you're so willing to make painful sacrifices," I said, "why not ask for volunteers? For that matter, why not volunteer yourself?"

The illusionist smiled coldly. It was a very fae smile, all sharp edges and veiled threats. "Why would we do that, when we can use this opportunity to thin the ranks of our enemies, and deal with the dangerous unknown quantity represented by the fae who chose to cut themselves off from Faerie rather than escape this toxic world? Don't the humans have another saying, somethings about birds and stones?"

I was done listening to this, and done looking at her smug smile. I turned back to Phoebe, making sure I could still see the illusionist from the corner of my eye. "You still haven't answered my question. Why did you bring me straight to the place you knew I would want to destroy the most?"

"Because you **can't** destroy it," said Phoebe. She was wearing the same

smug smile as the illusionist. “Don’t think I have noticed that something is missing from your ensemble.” She cast a pointed glance at my scarred wrist, where my watch should have been. “You don’t need the watch to hold back your magic, because your magic is gone. You have—or had—one little knife. Exactly what do you plan to do?”

Again, I reached for my magic. I ordered it to flood out of me and destroy the wrongness of this place. Then I coaxed, and then I begged. I had seen many atrocities in my long life, and never once had my magic held back from righting those wrongs. If I’d had the slightest spark left, surely it would have obeyed my call and brought an end to Arkanica.

But nothing came.

“So then I’m here so you can show off?” I said. “You want to take the opportunity to gloat, while I’m helpless to stop you?”

Phoebe gave a tinkling laugh. “Of course not. Do you really think your opinion means that much to us? No, you’re here because we think once you see what we have to offer, you’ll realize you’d rather stay here with us, and help us continue our work, than die in an attack that can’t possibly succeed.”

“The Lady of the Balance already made me this offer,” I said. “Would you like me to give you the same answer I gave her?”

“Oh, that deal is off the table,” Phoebe said with a wave of her hand. “What I’m offering you is a different sort of agreement.”

She nodded toward the far corner of the room. At the very end of the last row, one of the cylinders was hanging open. Empty. This one didn’t have any tubes running into the wall.

“Your... unique abilities... have caught the interest of our research team,” said Phoebe. “Namely, the fact that you were dead—unambiguously, verifiably dead—for a good several hours, and now here you are, the picture of health. We want to test the limits of this ability, and see if we can eventually harness it to give humanity the thing our species has been seeking since the beginning of time. Immortality.” She walked to the empty cylinder and rested a hand on the side. “Here’s what will happen, assuming you take us up on our offer. You will wait in here—sedated, unlike the others—until we feel confident that we’re equipped to handle you safely. Once we’ve put the necessary precautions into place, the work will begin, and you can have the satisfaction of knowing your contributions to our research will have a greater impact on the world than any crusade you could have taken up on your own.”

I clenched my hands into fists. Phoebe held up a hand. “Don’t say no just yet. We’re a business, after all. We’re willing to offer you a fair price. In exchange for your life, we’re prepared to offer you any one of our existing subjects.” She

swept her arm across the room, indicating the closed cylinders. “The subject of your choice will be free to go—after they make a binding promise not to harm us or reveal our existence, of course.”

My eyes followed Phoebe’s hand. I stared out at the sea of cylinders in front of me. There were so many. So many injustices, so much pain. I ached with the wrongness of it, like a fresh injection of iron into my veins. I had come here to stop it all. They wanted me to choose one.

Against my will, I looked down at Vicantha. She was still staring up at me. As I watched, her gaze flicked past me to Phoebe, like she was trying to figure out what was going on.

I looked up in time to see Phoebe nod. “I had a feeling you would choose that one.”

I opened my mouth to tell her what she could do with her offer. But then I glanced down at my bare wrist. My watch was lying in the hallway, and here I was, naked as the prisoners in the cylinders without my magic. If I said no, what would come next? What could I do besides die another needless death, and wake up in the same cage they were offering me now?

I had come here to save Vicantha. The others too, but at the core, it had been about her. And I had known what the cost would be. I must have known, even if I hadn’t acknowledged it to myself. Because the cost was always the same.

After a lifetime of throwing myself into doomed battle after doomed battle, maybe it had been foolish of me to think I could escape into luxurious seclusion. Maybe this was how it would always have ended, with someone who knew what to say to make me accept the cost willingly.

“How do I know you’ll actually let her go?” I forced the words from my throat, and tried not to think too hard about what it meant for me to be asking the question.

Phoebe nodded past me, toward the illusionist. “That’s why we sent one of the fae down here. To make sure you know we’re telling the truth.”

“If you agree to spend the remainder of your life as our willing research subject,” said the illusionist, on cue, “we will release the prisoner of your choice, provided she agrees to the binding promise we mentioned earlier. We will not harm her, now or in the future, except in self-defense.”

“And if she doesn’t agree to that promise?”

“Then, regrettably, we won’t be able to take the risk of letting her go.” Phoebe shrugged. “That’s a risk you’ll have to take. But we’re prepared to offer her a deal of her own, if need be. When presented with the choice of agreeing to our terms and gaining freedom for the people she was sent to rescue, or refusing and getting to watch our researchers use them for some of their more destructive

experiments... well, you know her better than I do. What would she choose?"

I didn't know. But I had to admit, there was a decent chance she would take the offer. I knew because I would have taken it. And even if she didn't want to admit it, she had a little of Oberon's sickness in her as well.

One more time, I met Vicantha's eyes. I doubted she could understand any of what was happening. The material looked too thick to allow any sound through. But if she had known what we were talking about, I imagined the cold fury in her eyes would have been identical to what I saw there now.

She wouldn't thank me for rescuing her, and putting her in the position to make that cruel choice. And in doing so, I would be unleashing a monster. If the agreement Arkanica planned on forcing her into would prevent her from harming them, then more than likely she would make good on her threat to take her anger out on all of humanity instead.

So then why take the deal? Why save her? If I cared about humanity as much as she thought I did, I should have already said no. If I cared about my own life, I should have said no.

With my head bowed over Vicantha's prison, I looked up at Phoebe and the illusionist through my lashes. They would be expecting me to try to save myself. I could wrench the gun away from the guard, if I was willing to risk getting shot before I managed it. Once I had the gun in hand, I could use it to fight my way out. I doubted it held more than a handful of bullets, and I was sure there were more guards outside the room by now, waiting to stop me if I tried to run. But any weapon would be better than nothing.

My heart, of course, rebelled at the thought of saving myself and leaving the prisoners behind. But my heart was my father's, and full of his sickness. I could fight it. Hold it back, like my watch held back my magic. I had fought my father's blood for seventy-five years; I could do it a little longer, long enough to escape this place with my life.

"Well?" asked Phoebe. "Have you made your decision?"

I barely heard her. My mind was on my last thought. Because it wasn't quite right. For the past seventy-five years, I had **tried** to protect myself against my stubbornly noble heart. I had told myself I had succeeded. I had ignored every small moment that didn't fit that narrative. Like how I had gone into a restless, destructive mood—pacing the carpets, throwing breakable things against walls, not sleeping for days at a time—at every mention of injustice or human suffering I couldn't block out of my mind quickly enough. Like the way I had stepped in to save Skye.

And then, once Vicantha had forced me to help her, I had let her maneuver me into staying longer than I had to, when I could easily have found a way to walk

away. If walking away had truly been what I wanted.

I had tried to hold it at bay. But in the end, the Lady of the Balance had been right. I was what I was. I couldn't fight my nature.

Maybe the Winter agents didn't deserve rescue. Maybe Vicantha didn't either. But it was like Skye had said—it had never been about them, not really. It was about me. Maybe the people I saved would go on to massacre a city. Maybe they would kill me. That didn't mean I would allow them to be hurt when they had done nothing to earn their pain. I might fear them, I might loathe the very thought of them, but I would not kill them for it. Because I was not them.

Vicantha had called it a sickness. But she had called fae blood, and the magic it held, sacred. And my sickness and my blood both came from the same source. My father.

My heart, the blood it pumped through my body... they were one and the same. And they weren't a weakness. They were power.

And I had kept my power locked up behind iron walls for far too long.

"This offer won't stay open forever." Phoebe tapped a long nail impatiently against the closest cylinder. "We do have other meetings today, you know."

I let her words wash over me without absorbing the meaning. Phoebe, the illusionist, the guard and his gun... none of them mattered anymore.

I was fae. I had sacred fire in my veins. It pulsed through me with every heartbeat, along with my father's sickness. My father's *goodness*.

And I was human. Which meant I would never be able to truly control fae magic, no matter how hard I tried.

So I wouldn't try.

Ever since I had stepped through that door, a part of me had been trying to coax the magic out, and ordering it to tear this place apart. Now I stopped, and let my mind go quiet.

Tristra had told me how the fae healed from iron poisoning, when they were lucky enough to survive. It healed gradually, like any other injury, and there was nothing that could be done to help it along. It took months, sometimes years, and occasionally the afflicted fae never returned to their former selves. I had assumed my own recovery would be much the same, only faster and on a smaller scale.

But all Tristra had ever known was elemental magic. Oberon's magic made its own rules.

The power in my blood couldn't be tamed, or turned into fuel. And it could never be fully suppressed. No human could bend it to their desires—not me, not Arkanica's researchers, not all my killers over the years who had tried to snuff it out of existence. When pure raw magic surged forth, there were only two

options: do its will, or be destroyed by it.

And what it wanted was this place in ruins.

The only thing stopping it from doing what I wanted... was me. Me, trying to force it to do my bidding, instead of the other way around.

I stopped coaxing. Stopped begging. Stopped trying to use the power on my terms. It was in control now. I stepped into the eye of the hurricane, and let the storm rage.

The magic surged up with a roar that filled my head, although I knew no one else could hear it. It burst through the remaining iron in my bloodstream, leaving nothing of the poison behind but tiny shards that sliced at me from the inside like slivers of broken glass. I thought I screamed, but I couldn't be sure. I couldn't hear anything but the howling of the storm inside and the pounding of my pulse in my ears.

The world broke apart in slow motion.

The gun went first, melting into thick drops of metal that dribbled to the floor. Arkanica must have built their guns for the fae to use; there was no iron in it. My magic couldn't touch the bullets, but with the rest of the weapon gone, they fell with a series of clangs. Next came the cylinders. The thick material split into triangular shards that hung in the air. Their inhabitants floated too, unable to move, eyes wide with confusion—and the beginning of hope. Beyond the doors, a series of snapping and sparking sounds let me know the servers were also coming apart. When I glanced out, I saw the glint of twisted metallic fragments, hovering.

The machinery along the wall groaned as fault lines spread across its strange white material. Another few seconds saw it break apart into precise crystalline shapes. I would have loved to examine them further, but I didn't get the chance, because as soon as the machines shattered, blood gushed out onto the floor.

I knew the smell of fae blood well, but I had never smelled it quite so strongly before. It was different from human blood—sweeter, but with a brackish note underneath, like a beach choked with seaweed. The thick liquid coated my feet and lapped at my ankles. Ordinarily, standing ankle-deep in an ocean of blood would have made my stomach turn. But I wasn't in control right now—not even of my own body's reactions. The magic was.

And the magic wasn't done.

Three other metallic lumps, which I took for the remains of weapons, sank beneath the blue with a splash. I hadn't even noticed the others draw them. The man who had been holding the gun was gone; in the distance, the far door slammed behind him. The illusionist had also vanished, although whether she had fled or was hiding behind one of her illusions, I didn't know. Phoebe was

still here, staring at the roomful of hovering triangles with her mouth gaping open. But as soon as I looked her way, she came back to herself enough to turn and run for the door.

She didn't even make it out of the inner room.

Her body unwove itself into a tangle of ropy veins and white bones and dusty atoms of skin. She hovered in the air for a few seconds, a jigsaw puzzle disassembled, before splashing to the floor and disappearing.

Next to where Phoebe had stood, a shimmer in the air broke apart into dust. By the time I could see the illusionist again, she had met the same fate as Phoebe. In a few seconds, she was gone.

But Arkanica wasn't the magic's only target. I knew, as the storm ripped through me, that I wouldn't make it out of this room either. Not as I had been. I could feel the person I had tried to be over the past seventy-five years breaking apart. I could see the shards. Until the magic swept them away.

I was burning. Drowning. Buried alive. The power seared through my veins with a heat that matched the cold of Phoebe's liquid iron. But I didn't fight it. I stood back and let the magic do its work.

I didn't know how much time went by before the magic started to settle. Around me, the blood rose into the air in tiny shimmering droplets of blue. The droplets grew smaller as they rose, until they disappeared entirely. I looked down to see that the floor was clean.

The prisoners drifted gently to the ground.

My legs gave out. I hit the floor hard, landing on my back. I wanted to close my eyes and rest, but I couldn't. Not yet.

It took every bit of strength I had left to crawl across the floor, passed the ruined servers, to the stairwell where my watch had fallen. Beside the watch was a wet pile of dust and bones and blood that I didn't let myself examine too closely. The guard hadn't made it out alive after all.

For the first time, I felt a sense of loss as the watch settled around my wrist and cut off my sense of my magic. But although the magic had saved me today, that didn't mean it would be on my side tomorrow. Or on the side of humanity. I needed to keep it suppressed if I wanted to keep myself and those around me safe.

But the rest of what I had inherited from my father... I wasn't keeping that in a cage anymore.

I let my head sag to the floor. The wood felt cool against my cheek. I could already feel the thick warmth of sleep beckoning.

Raising my arms against the floor, I heaved myself to a sitting position. Then, with one hand on the wall, I rose to my feet.

My job wasn't done. Not yet.

Arkanica wasn't draining the prisoners' blood anymore, but they still weren't free. Before I could rest, I needed to find a way to undo the paralysis. And then I needed to get them all out of here.

Chapter 30

As I hurried through the halls of the level that contained the labs and the empty prison, a shrill whining sound followed me from above, like an insistent mosquito. It was nothing so pleasant, I knew. Instead, it was the alarm belatedly letting the rest of Arkanica know something had gone terribly wrong. Frantic footsteps ran back and forth above my head, and the pounding and scraping from the direction of the stairwell told me they were trying to break through. But I had gotten a good look at the tangled mass of white material that used to be the stairs, enough to tell me it wasn't going to budge. While I had been focused on what my magic had been doing to the blood machinery, it had also snuck up the stairs to seal me off from the rest of the building. It had bought me enough time to do what I had to do. I hoped.

Not only that, it had understood to seal off not just the lowest level, but this one as well. Whatever part of me the power came from, it was better at planning ahead than my conscious mind had been. It had known I would need to do this one last thing before I could put Arkanica behind me forever.

I didn't waste the time it had given me. But the more doorways I burst through, only to find yet another empty room, the more I wondered if my task would even be possible.

I had hoped to find one of the scientists, and force them to undo whatever they had done to paralyze the fae downstairs. But the entire floor was deserted. The scientists were gone, every last one of them. Whether dead or escaped, I couldn't say. My magic hadn't left enough evidence behind to know for sure.

The iron had limited what it could do, of course. In rooms where the doors had been closed, like the prison and a couple of the labs, the magic hadn't been able to break free. Those rooms remained untouched. But a surprising number of people down here had worked with their office doors open. Arkanica must have believed in buzzwords like "collaborative work environment." And in every one of those rooms, my power had burst through and reduced them to their component parts along with all their furniture and paperwork, until nothing was left but a carpet of oddly-shaped confetti I didn't want to look too closely at.

Either that, or Phoebe had made a backup plan, and evacuated all the scientists ahead of time. For all I knew, they could have been huddled in a safe room right now, miles away from the Arkanica building.

In the first couple of rooms, I forced myself to kneel down and sift through what my magic had left behind, as much as my stomach complained at the

prospect. It wasn't as enlightening as I had hoped. I didn't find any clues as to whether the inhabitants had been in their offices or not. Without blood, it was surprisingly difficult to tell whether any given speck of debris had come from a piece of furniture, or a scrap of paper, or a living body. And I had seen how well my magic could make blood disappear.

What I found in the closed rooms wasn't any more useful. I found a couple of other labs, identical to the one where they had taken me. Another room was clearly designed for dissection, with the remnants of disassembled test subjects lining the walls, dried or preserved in jars. The next couple of rooms were easier, all computers and complex machinery, with no room for living subjects. Every room was empty.

Sometime soon, I would need to sit down and figure out what this meant for my future plans. Had I truly destroyed Arkanica, or had I left a seed behind that could take root elsewhere? If the latter, how would I go about bringing them down for good—while convincing Skye there was nothing left to be done? Whatever the answers, I already knew my plan wouldn't involve a flight home to Hawaii. The part of me that had wanted that life was lying in pieces downstairs.

For now, though, I couldn't think beyond the task at hand. I was going to need the other fae and their magic to undo what my own power had done to seal us in here. And once we broke free, we would need to fight our way out. But for any of that to happen, I needed to free them from the last prison Arkanica had placed them in.

And with no scientists left to help me, I only had one option.

I paused just long enough to think about what a bad idea this was. Then I retraced my steps and marched to one of the labs. I hunted through drawers until I found a scalpel that was made of that white material instead of steel. I borrowed a lab coat to go with it, this time less for camouflage—judging by the sounds I was hearing from above, nobody was going to make it down here anytime soon, and a disguise wouldn't help me if they did—and more to drive back the cold of the lowest level. Then I hurried back down the stairs.

I picked my way through the twisted remnants of Arkanica's servers, and pushed open the inner doors. At least fifty former prisoners lay on the floor, exactly where I had left them. But although they couldn't move anything else, they could still move their eyes—and every one of them was looking at me.

Through their stares, I could feel their confusion, their fear, their anger. The urge to destroy washed through me all over again—and this time, with my magic suppressed by my watch, I knew it was all me. I wanted to tear this place apart, piece by piece, until time itself turned back and undid what had been done here. Until that look in their eyes evaporated as completely as the blood on the floor.

My hands clenched.

I forced myself to breathe, long and slow. I had already destroyed what I could. Now it was time for the slower, more nuanced work.

Every one of them needed my help. But I went to Vicantha first. I couldn't read her fierce expression as I knelt down beside her. She might have been thanking me. She might have been begging me to save her. More likely, she was silently screaming for me to go away—she didn't want any more help from a human.

But if she didn't want my help, that was just too bad. She was going to get it anyway.

I closed my eyes and extended my inner senses toward her, searching for any fragment of iron. But I couldn't feel anything—not with the iron components of the servers in the next room, the only parts my magic hadn't been able to destroy, calling to me more loudly than whatever Arkanica had placed in her body. I opened my eyes, careful to keep my gaze focused entirely on her face. With a silent apology, I rested a hand on the side of her head and ran it slowly down her body, hoping I wouldn't have to invade her privacy too badly before I found what I was looking for.

The gods of modesty were smiling on me—I found it as soon as my hand brushed her neck. It was only the faintest of flickers, but it was there—a ball of iron lodged under her skin, where it didn't belong. I turned her onto her side, as gently as I could, and examined the back of her neck. Once I was looking for it, I could see it—a slight round bulge at the top of her spine, just under her skin. Good—it wasn't buried too deeply. That would make it easier.

I ran a finger along the bulge, contemplating the task ahead of me. This was not my area of expertise. Normally, I solved problems by taking off my watch and letting my magic do its work. But my magic couldn't help me here.

"This is going to hurt," I murmured in her ear. "I'm sorry."

Enough stalling. I raised the scalpel, took a deep breath, and parted her skin.

I knew her regeneration would take care of any risks, whether from the cut itself or any infections it let in. Especially once I got that thing out of her. But I still felt like I was trespassing, touching things I was never meant to touch and seeing things I was never meant to see, as I peeled the skin back around the small marble. Although **marble** was the wrong word for it—it wasn't even as big as that. It was closer to the size of a pea.

Even with the skin peeled away, I could barely feel the iron underneath. Whatever they had wrapped around it as a coating—some dull gray material glistening blue with her blood—was shielding the iron almost completely. That made sense—given how sensitive the fae were to iron, Arkanica had been

walking a thin line between poisoning their subjects and making their device too weak to be effective.

With the tip of the scalpel, I pried the ball free, then pulled it loose with my fingertips. Instantly, Vicantha jerked away. She sat up straight, and turned to face me in the same motion, face dark with fury.

I braced myself for her attack. This time, I didn't go for my watch. I had no intention of fighting her, not after I had gone through so much to save her. If she was going to fight me, I would just have to sit here and take it.

And if she was going to kill me? Well, then I would at least have the satisfaction of knowing I had gone in with eyes wide open this time. This story always ended the same way. I had known that, and I had come anyway.

I still wasn't sure how I felt about that.

She thrust her hand out. A blast of air scraped against my palms, raising a pink friction burn on my skin, but left the rest of me untouched. The ball flew out of my hands to slam against the ruined wall. The coating broke into shards and flew across the room in all directions. The tiny iron sphere inside dropped to the floor and lay still.

Vicantha rose to her feet. She walked across the room and stared down at the small fragment of iron. She drew back a foot as if to kick it, but instead stepped back with a shudder.

Belatedly, she looked at me. The fury was gone from her eyes. But I couldn't tell what I was seeing there in its place. She held my gaze for a silent moment, and took my measure.

"Thank you," she finally said.

I blinked.

I had spent six hundred of my seven hundred years saving lives, and all six hundred dying for it. In all that time, I didn't think anyone had ever said those words to me before.

My rational mind told me it made sense. Of course my magic hadn't scared her. She was fae—she used magic to turn on her lights every morning.

But my heart felt like the world had been turned on its head.

After what my brain insisted had to have been at least several hours, she broke her gaze to look down at herself. I saw her tense as she remembered, too late, her lack of clothing. I studiously avoided following her gaze as I shrugged the borrowed lab coat off my shoulders and handed it to her. She pulled it around herself with an acknowledging nod.

Together, we looked out at the others. Some kind of wordless communication passed between us, even though we didn't touch and our eyes didn't meet. There were so many of them. So many wrongs to be undone.

Vicantha jerked her chin toward my scalpel. “Find me another of those,” she ordered. “And then get to work on the others. We don’t know how much time we have.” Her voice was full of ice and vengeance.

I did what she asked, and together, we worked. Most of the fae didn’t move, even after I freed them. They were clearly conscious—I could tell by the way their eyes followed me around the room—but their minds were somewhere else. I didn’t know whether this was something else Arkanica had done to them, or if being trapped alive and conscious in a coffin for so long had simply taken a harsh toll. Either way, they would need time to come around. I only hoped we could rouse them enough to lead them out of the building, when the time came.

Vicantha handled the prisoners she had been sent to rescue. They took a private moment together while I continued working on the others. They kept their voices too low for me to hear what they were saying, but I caught enough of Vicantha’s tone to be surprised at the tenderness there. Although I supposed I shouldn’t have been. I had known from the start how much her people meant to her.

While they talked, I focused my efforts on the other side of the room, letting her have her privacy. I took the opportunity to slip one of the shielded iron balls into my pocket while Vicantha wasn’t looking. I wasn’t sure yet how I would use it, if at all. But in my position, I couldn’t afford to cast aside a potential weapon against the fae.

When they were done with their reunion, the Winter Court agents took a trip upstairs with Vicantha, and came back with enough scalpels for all of them, as well as several more lab coats. With their help, we finished the work quickly. Once the last iron sphere was lying on the floor, Vicantha clapped sharply to get everyone’s attention. Some of the prisoners I hadn’t been able to rouse flinched at the sound, which I took as a good sign. The Winter Court agents and I turned to Vicantha and waited.

“Arkanica will make it down here eventually,” Vicantha said, once she had our attention. “Maybe in minutes. Maybe not for hours. But it will happen. Unless we do it first.” A sharp smile spread across her face. “I think we should be the ones to set the terms of the fight we all know is coming. Those terms are this: we get every fae in this building out alive, and we stop these people from ever doing anything like this again. That means we find anyone left in this cursed place, and we spill their blood the way they spilled ours.”

I wanted to agree with her. I might have, except for one thing. “Their low-level security doesn’t know what Arkanica really is,” I said. “The ones at the front desk. Maybe others.”

Vicantha turned to me with a snarl. “They’re human.”

“You’re fae,” I pointed out. “I saved you.”

Our eyes locked for a moment, her ice against my fire. Vicantha thought she would win, I could tell. But I had gone through too much today to back down now. I had come here to save innocent lives, and that was what I was going to do.

Vicantha looked away first. “Fine,” she spat. “We’ll give them the chance to run. If they fight to save this place, they die with the rest.”

It wasn’t the solution I would have preferred, but it was as fair an agreement as we were going to reach. I nodded.

“Does anyone else have any objections?” She narrowed her eyes, daring someone to say yes. She reached for her waist, and scowled when she found the deep pockets of her borrowed lab coat instead of her daggers.

As expected, no one said anything.

Vicantha gave a satisfied nod. “Do you have enough magic to fight?” she asked the Winter Court agents.

A chorus of hungry yeses answered her.

“Then work with me to rouse as many of the others as possible. We’ll take half an hour. We can’t afford longer than that. Then we’ll arm the ones who are capable, and we’ll fight. Kieran, you’ll guard the remaining prisoners. It will be an easy job—we don’t intend on letting any of the humans live long enough to find their way down here.” She smiled again, this one colder and crueler than the first.

The Winter Agents murmured their agreement. But before she could declare the conversation done, I cleared my throat.

If her magic had run to fire instead of air, her scowl could have melted me to ash. “What is it now?” she growled. “Do you plan on arguing for the rest of these humans’ right to live?”

“Not at all,” I assured her. “But I should be the one to do this. You need to get your people out of here, the way you came here to do.”

“And how do you plan on fighting them?” Vicantha asked. “I was here, remember. I saw what you did. After that display of power, I’d be surprised if you had anything left.”

I didn’t know whether she was right or not. But after the way my magic had broken through the last of the iron poisoning, I had a feeling it would come to me if I gave it a good enough reason. “Oberon’s magic plays by different rules.”

“Then you want us to wait here, helpless, while you do our work for us?”

That was exactly what she had asked me to do. But I didn’t say that. “No. I want you to do what I said—get the others out. Fight your way free alongside me, but when you see the exit, start running and don’t look back. I’ll take care of

anyone still alive.”

Vicantha’s jaw clenched. “This is our fight,” she said in a low voice. “Their lives are ours to claim. You kept me from taking revenge on the city, and I’m grateful for that. If you hadn’t, I wouldn’t be here now to do what I have to do. But *I* have to do it. **We** have to do it. Don’t deny me my revenge a second time.”

I tried to think of an argument she would listen to. I couldn’t. In her place, I wouldn’t have listened either.

And she was right. When it came down to it, this was her fight. Hers, and that of every prisoner still lying on the floor.

I nodded wordlessly, and turned away.

“Then it’s settled,” said Vicantha. “Winter Court, come with me. We’ll find weapons upstairs, something better than these scalpels. Our magic should be enough, but having another option is never a mistake. Then we’ll come back and see what we can do for the prisoners in the time we have remaining.” She strode to the doors, motioning behind her.

The four Winter Court agents looked at each other. None of them moved. “Not yet,” said one of the women—the same one who had finally talked to me in the prison. “There’s something we need to take care of here first.”

The other three shifted to stand behind her in wordless agreement.

“This room is in ruins,” Vicantha said impatiently. “Oberon’s son has destroyed everything there is to destroy. The only thing left to do down here is see how many of these people are capable of fighting alongside us, and that can and should wait until we have better weapons in our hands.”

Another look passed between the four Winter agents. “No,” said the woman in front. “Not everything.”

In unison, all four of them turned to look at me.

Chapter 31

I was too tired for anger. All I felt, as those vengeance-hungry eyes tore into my skin, was resignation. I had known it was coming, and here it was. It felt almost comforting, after that strange moment with Vicantha. All was right with the world again.

Vicantha followed their eyes to me. She whirled on them sharply, anger sweeping over her features. “He saved our lives.”

“Don’t,” I said to her, wearily. “There’s no point. This is what happens. This is what always happens.”

“What Vicantha says is true,” said the woman in front. “You did save our lives. And for that, you have our gratitude. I truly wish we didn’t have to do this. But unfortunately, the power you used here today also served as a demonstration of why magic like yours cannot be allowed to exist in the world. Your power is too strong to be trusted to the hands of a human, and too uncontrolled to be safe.”

“Enough.” Vicantha slammed her hand against the door. The hollow sound echoed through the room. “I refuse to waste any more time on this. We need to use every minute we have in preparation to fight our real enemies.”

“Feel free to leave the room, if you’ve grown too fond of him to understand what needs to be done.” The woman sneered. “Yes, I was listening yesterday, when you explained the situation from your cell. I understand how deeply your judgment has been compromised, even if you don’t. Fortunately, none of the rest of us have that problem.” She turned to me. Unexpectedly, her face softened. “I’m sorry this is necessary. Please believe that we are truly grateful.”

With that, she advanced on me, step by slow step. The other three followed.

By the time they started moving, the air had already begun to swirl around me. When I tried to lift my arm, the wind exerted a subtle, warning pressure. This was what the Summer fae had done to Vicantha in the Black River Park parking lot. A second later, the air shimmered, and the figures in front of me blurred. I squinted, but I was looking at a watercolor painting. I couldn’t tell where one attacker ended and the next began.

Then something tugged at me from the inside, like my body was trying to move in two different directions at once. I recognized the touch of water magic. Some fae whose magic resonated with water, the ones born with exceptional natural magical strength, had power over even the water inside the cells of living creatures. I doubted this particular fae, whichever one of them it was, could rip

me apart from the inside like some of them could. If they could have, they would have done it already. But they could keep my own body fighting itself, which would make it more difficult to defend against the other attacks.

I knew I should be angry. I knew I should be afraid. But all I could feel was a slow, foggy apathy that kept me standing still, arms hanging at my sides, without even needing the encouragement of the swirling air. That was water magic too—the emotional counterpart to air’s mental manipulation.

I understood why Arkanica had been so vigilant about keeping iron on—and inside—their prisoners at all times. If they had relaxed their guard with a single prisoner, for a fraction of a second, they would never have gotten as far as they did. Underestimating magic was a dangerous mistake—one I had made myself once or twice, and then never again. The humans imprisoning these fae had been playing with fire—or, in their case, air and water.

Before long, they would receive a harsh reminder of how necessary their vigilance had been. But for now, they weren’t the ones in danger. I was.

I had fought more than my share of the fae. But almost all those fights had been one-on-one. On a couple of occasions, I had gone up against two at a time, but even that had been rare. Fae assassins didn’t tend to work together. Four against one... this was something new.

I tried to think through the apathetic haze. The ones I had fought in the past had all been stronger and more experienced than these fae. I could see it in the way these four moved, even with the watercolor blur obscuring the specifics. The assassins the Courts had sent after me had all been trained specifically to hunt people like me. These fae, on the other hand, had been trained for... whatever their original mission had been. Not only that, but they were weakened from months of imprisonment and experimentation.

But all my analysis was moot, because I didn’t stand a chance against them without my magic, and I wouldn’t have a say in how my magic chose to fight them.

I unclasped my watch and let it slide from my wrist.

Nothing happened.

I resisted the urge to coax my magic up. Instead, I took a mental step back, and let it do what it wanted.

But this time, what it wanted was to let me die. At least, as best I could determine. I could feel it, coiled quiescent in my gut. But despite the danger of the fae creeping slowly closer, it stayed there, lazy and content, like a cat sleeping in a beam of sunlight.

I ground my teeth in frustration. That feeling was strong enough to break through the apathy, even if I couldn’t muster up the desire to fight. I had found

the key to my magic. I had given it the freedom it demanded. And this was how it repaid me? By leaving me to the wolves?

Maybe Vicantha had been right. Maybe I had simply expended too much power already. Oberon's power did have limits, even if I was beginning to suspect those limits were far smaller than I had thought.

The tugging sensation grew stronger—my arms, my legs, my belly, every part of my body was divided against itself. Tiny starbursts of pain bloomed in a dozen different places as small tears opened up deep in my muscles.

The wind ripped through my hair. It caught a few of the translucent triangles scattered across the floor, and as they circled me, they opened deep cuts across my biceps and chest.

I fought the wind enough to crouch down. The apathy made me move in slow motion, even though I knew exactly what the feeling was and what was causing it. I forced my fingers to close around two large and sharp shards the wind hadn't swept up yet, even though my mind was whispering to me to let my fingers go slack and fall asleep right there.

As I stood, the wind pulled my lips back in an artificial smile. It became real as I clutched the shards so tightly they drew blood. I didn't know what kind of chance I had against four magic-wielding fae, with only makeshift weapons and no power of my own, but that didn't mean I wouldn't try.

The wind slowed as the fae on the other side evaluated the threat. The sharp triangles drifted lazily through the air. Then the wind swept all the shards back at once. They gathered in front of me, their sharp points aimed at my heart.

The shimmer in the air disappeared. So did the watercolor blur. Just in time for me to see the one-eyed woman lower her hand like she was banging a gavel.

Like a dozen pieces of a single weapon, the shards flew toward my heart.

I didn't have time to fight. I couldn't even dodge, not with the apathy slowing me down and my body at war with itself. All I could do was brace for the pain. It would be a familiar pain, at least. I knew how it felt to be stabbed in the heart. What I didn't know was the part that came next—the part where they would rip my magic from my body, like Vicantha had done that night by the river. Unlike Arkanica, they knew better than to risk letting me come back.

But the pain never came.

A gust of wind swept my hair back as it tore the shards off-course. They shattered against the wall, and rained down to the floor with a tinkling like soft bells.

All I could do was blink. When I opened my eyes, Vicantha was standing between me and the four attackers.

"When Mab's right hand speaks," she said, "I suggest you listen. I believe I

said we were done with this foolishness.”

The woman who had spoken before stepped forward with a glare almost cold enough to match hers. Almost. “You would protect him over us?”

“He’s the reason you’re alive,” she said, low and furious. “The reason all these prisoners are free. The reason Arkanica can no longer do its work. He has more than proven his worth. He is *useful*, and in the Winter Court, wasting a potentially valuable resource is a crime.”

“You aren’t yourself,” the man spoke up. “If you were, you would know this has to be done. Whatever your personal feelings toward this... creature.”

“This has nothing to do with emotion. This is about proper use of resources. And have you forgotten that while we stand here arguing, our time is running out?”

“You’re right,” said the woman in front. “We’re done arguing. The Courts have spent hundreds of years hunting Oberon’s son. We’ll never have another opportunity like this, where he delivers himself into our hands, his magic used up. In the Winter Court, we don’t waste valuable resources... or valuable opportunities. I intend to make use of this one.” Her eyes narrowed as she took a step forward. “This is your only warning. We will go around you, or we will go through you.”

“Don’t do this,” Vicantha warned.

In answer, the woman raised a hand. The wind stirred to life again. A sharp triangle rose up from the floor, and swept in toward my neck.

I raised an instinctive hand to block it. At first, I thought it had worked—more than worked. Not only had the shard never reached my neck, it had never so much as pierced my hand. Even the wind itself had stopped.

But my magic still lay sleeping, a cat basking in a nonexistent sunbeam.

Before I could begin to wonder what had happened, the fae woman fell, her neck bent at an unnatural angle.

Vicantha stepped back. I hadn’t even seen her move. Her hands glowed with the light of the fae magic she had drawn from the woman on the floor. She bent her head as she let the sparks fall to the ground.

“What did you do?” the fae man whispered.

“I came here to save your lives.” At the sound of Vicantha’s voice, I blinked again. I hadn’t thought she could come that close to tears. “I risked my own life to save you. Now two of you have died at my hands. Please, don’t make me do this again.” She paused, and swallowed. “Please,” she whispered.

The remaining three Winter agents looked at each other, and at the body on the floor. Then they looked at Vicantha.

The fae man cleared his throat. “The remaining humans in the building are a

greater threat. We don't know if we'll have time to handle both, so we should prioritize the one that poses the greatest risk."

"And there's no art to killing someone when he's defenseless, after he's used all his power saving us," said the one-eyed woman in a rough whisper. "What kind of story would that make?"

As one, the three of them turned away, toward the doors.

I watched them go, so I wouldn't have to look at Vicantha. So I wouldn't have to figure out what I was feeling. Once again, Ernest's face swam up in my memory. I had hoped he would step in to save me, that day. Even with hundreds of years of experience to the contrary. Instead, he had been the one to strike the first blow.

I forced my eyes to Vicantha's. "Thank you."

She didn't say anything. But she held my gaze for a long moment. Then she turned to follow the others, and didn't look back.

When they were gone, I let myself lean against the wall and slide slowly to the floor. I had done my work. I had freed the prisoners, and put an end to Arkanica's work. The rest of this fight belonged to the fae. They would gather their army, and take their vengeance. I had destroyed this place; now the fae would cleanse it.

I reached for my watch and slipped it over my hand. A second before the clasp tightened around my wrist, I felt my magic stir to life.

I knew it wasn't sentient in its own right, however much it might seem at times to have a mind of its own. The power was a part of me—just a part I didn't fully understand, and likely never would. Even so, in that fraction of a second before it disappeared from my senses again, I thought it felt... satisfied.

Why? It hadn't been in any hurry to save my life. Maybe my own power had turned on me, and decided I was too dangerous to live; maybe some part of me, exhausted and beaten after hundreds of years of this, had simply wanted it to be over. Whatever the reason, if it had wanted me to live, it would have surged to life to save me. So why should it be happy that I had survived by chance, only due to the intervention of someone who should never have taken my side?

Unless that was what it had wanted all along.

Unless some deep part of me, the same part that held the core of my power, had known what was going to happen.

I scowled at the thought. I would never have expected one of the fae to do what Vicantha had done—and even if something deep in my unconscious mind had seen it as a possibility, why take the risk of being wrong?

As if in answer, Ernest's face appeared in my mind again, as clearly as if he were standing in front of me. But this time, the old memory didn't ache quite as

much.

I pushed the image away, and my thoughts along with it. I watched the door, grabbed my scalpel in case I needed to fight, and waited for the fae to finish their work.

Chapter 32

Twenty-four hours later, after the battle was won and the wounds healed, at least the visible ones... after the last of the former prisoners had stumbled or been carried through the portal... after the story of the simultaneous disappearance of everyone who worked for Arkanica had already quietly vanished from the news, relegated to a single post in one of the private Hawthorne social media groups, just like every other strange occurrence in Hawthorne... after Vicantha, Skye, and I had finally gotten a good night's sleep... after it was all over, at least in theory, the three of us sat down at a table together at Lydia's Pizza for a late breakfast. We stared at each other silently over slices of broccoli buttercream pizza, none of us sure where to begin.

I poked at my pizza with a cautious fingertip, but couldn't bring myself to take a bite, despite my pleasant memories of Lydia's previous concoction. Skye had already wolfed down her slice, and was eyeing mine. Vicantha hadn't so much as looked at hers. She was busy watching the door, one hand on her hidden weapon. I was fairly certain she hadn't blinked since we had sat down.

A middle-aged woman pushed the door open, took one look at Vicantha, and backed right out onto the sidewalk again. That was the third customer she had scared away in ten minutes. It hadn't escaped Lydia's notice, either. As the door jingled closed, Lydia shot a glare toward our table from behind the counter.

She didn't know, of course, that Vicantha was the same woman who had assaulted her the other day. Vicantha had placed us all under a heavy illusion; I suspected Lydia would never have let us in the door otherwise. The illusion was the reason Lydia was staring daggers at Vicantha, instead of cowering out of sight.

Vicantha either didn't notice the glare or didn't care. She kept on watching the door, as if one second's lapse in her vigilance would be enough to let an entire army sneak in behind us.

To be honest, I didn't blame her.

Skye looked from Lydia to Vicantha. "She's trying to tell you you're scaring off all her customers," she stage-whispered.

"We can't afford to become complacent," said Vicantha, without looking away from the door. "It's likely at least a few of Arkanica's people escaped, and while this illusion will be more than enough against humans, I don't have enough of my strength back yet to make it effective against the fae."

At the mention of Arkanica, I shot a glare of my own at Vicantha—which

she, of course, didn't see. I had thought the two of us had made an unspoken agreement not to mention that possibility in front of Skye. Maybe I should have said it aloud after all. Or better yet, made her give me a binding promise to help me convince Skye the threat was gone for good, whatever it took.

But even as I had the thought, I knew I could never have followed through. The two of us were done forcing promises from each other. We owed each other too much for that.

"We're not relaxing anything," said Skye. "We're celebrating a job well done."

"You shouldn't even be here," I reminded her, turning my glare in her direction. "If you had kept your word, you would be in Hawaii right now, eating eggs Benedict prepared by my personal chef."

Skye met my accusation with a shrug. "Not fae, remember? I can lie all I want."

"And despite Vicantha's pessimistic outlook," I continued, "Arkanica is gone. I can assure you of that—I destroyed their labs myself. Even if, by some highly unlikely chance, one or two people escaped, they won't be able to do anything without the resources they had here."

"In other words," said Skye, with a gaze that had far too much intelligence behind it, "you think some of them are still out there, but you're hoping *I* won't think that."

After everything we had gone through, and everything she had seen, somehow she could still say that with a light tone and a hint of a smile. As if this were all some kind of game. As if this fight hadn't nearly cost her her life. I wanted to answer with an unequivocal denial, but since I knew it wouldn't change anything, I conceded, "It is... a reasonable possibility."

She shrugged again. That smile of hers grew, making my jaw clench. "All the more reason to take a minute and eat some pizza while we can." With that, she snatched Vicantha's slice off her plate. Vicantha didn't react. Skye bent over the pizza and crammed it into her mouth, evading the silent question in my eyes: *Are you going to leave when I ask you to?*

At least that meant there was no reason to refrain from speaking my mind anymore, if she already had it figured out. "It's hard to feel like celebrating when we can't be sure," I said. "They've lost most of their research, if not all of it—and, most importantly, their entire blood supply. That will go a long way toward impeding their future efforts, even if some of them are still out there. But we don't know who, if anyone, made it out, or what kind of connections they have that would help them get back on their feet."

Skye swallowed the hunk of pizza in her mouth and made an exasperated

noise. “Do you not understand the meaning of ‘celebrate’?”

“I also still don’t know what the Winter Court was doing here,” Vicantha added, with her eyes still on the door. “If Mab didn’t see fit to tell me, that means sneaking around behind the backs of my queen and my entire Court to find out. And I **do** intend to find out. I have a lot of work ahead of me, and the prospect doesn’t put me in the mood for a celebration.”

I was glad Vicantha wasn’t looking at us, so she couldn’t see my blink of surprise. Had she just revealed her feelings, uncoerced, and not in the context of an imminent battle between the two of us? I supposed stranger things had happened. Especially in Hawthorne.

“There’s always more work to be done,” Skye agreed. “Which is why we should trudge joylessly off into the snow, refusing to acknowledge any small victories, and keep our eyes grimly focused on a faraway target we might never reach.”

“Thank you,” said Vicantha. “I’m glad you’ve come to your senses. Does that mean we can dispense with this ritual and get to work?” She rose to her feet.

“Do they not have sarcasm in Faerie?” Skye reached out to tug Vicantha back down, but pulled her hand back before it could brush Vicantha’s skin. A flash of fear crossed her face as she tucked her hands into her lap.

So she had learned something after all. I was surprised by the way that made me ache inside. I wished she could have held onto her innocent dreams. But that was the price of survival.

“As much as I hate to admit it, she does have a point,” I said, before the atmosphere could grow too awkward. “I don’t intend to let Arkanica rebuild, but whatever comes next, I plan to enjoy a gourmet meal and a long soak in a hot tub before I get to work again.”

Skye’s head jerked toward me. “Hang on. Did you just say you aren’t going to let them rebuild?” A slow grin spread across her face. “You’re going to do it, aren’t you? You’re going to start saving lives again.”

Vicantha’s eyes flicked upward. “Did you actually think he was capable of doing anything else?”

I pretended Vicantha hadn’t said anything. “If any of them made it out,” I hastily clarified to Skye. “Which is still a distant—”

“Okay,” Skye interrupted, “and what if they didn’t? Does that mean you’ll be headed back to Hawaii to lie around in the sun all day?”

I wanted to argue. To tell them both that they were wrong about me. Instead I sighed, squared my shoulders, and let go of the last shard of the illusion I had left behind in the Arkanica building. “There’s never been a shortage of lost causes out there,” I said. “I’m sure I can find one or two to keep me busy.”

Skye's grin spread so wide my lips ached in sympathy. "Hey, this one wasn't such a lost cause," she pointed out, smacking the table for emphasis. "We won!"

Despite myself, I couldn't resist an answering smile. "Yes, we did."

She pushed her plate aside. "So, what now? Have you two got any ideas on how to track down anyone who might have escaped, or do you need my help on that? Are we going on the road, or staying here in Hawthorne?"

Here it was—the conversation I had been dreading. "Neither," I said shortly. "Wherever I go next, you won't be coming along."

The grin melted from Skye's face. "I—"

I didn't let her get any further than that. "Your help has been invaluable," I assured her. "And I appreciate your courage, and your willingness to stay in the fight. But Vicantha was right about one thing." I met Skye's gaze, and didn't let her look away. "You're a liability. Not because of who you are, but because of who I am. You will always be the easiest way to get to me."

Skye raised her chin in defiance. "I told you I was in this to the end. If I didn't walk away when my life was in danger, why would I walk away now, when they've lost everything and we're holding all the cards?"

"Because this isn't your fight," I said. "It's ours. Vicantha, because of what they did to the people she's sworn to protect. And me..." I paused, thinking about how to word what I had figured out late last night while I had listened to Skye and Vicantha snoring in tandem. "Me, because Arkanica's work involves both humanity and the fae, each as much as the other. But the humans and the fae have been separate for too long—neither of them understands the other well enough to fight a threat that belongs to both worlds. But like Arkanica, I'm both and neither. Which makes them mine to fight."

"It's my fight too," said Skye. "They made it mine when they decided to target me."

I shook my head. "You're only involved because of who your grandfather was to me, and because someone decided to use that to threaten me. That's not a good enough reason."

"You don't get to decide what I fight for, or why."

"No, *you* should be the one to decide that," I said. "And you haven't gotten that chance."

"Don't talk down to me. I told you, I'm not naive. I may be young, but I've had my share of tragedy in my life. I figured out a long time ago that the only way to deal with it is to decide for yourself how you want to respond. And right now, I'm choosing to fight."

I didn't say anything. I simply held her gaze in silence, reminding her, without a word, how much more experience I had than her in this arena.

She swallowed, and dropped her gaze. “You can’t expect me to go back to normal after this. What do you think I’m going to do, go right back to doing algebra in the back of the RV while Sheila and Randall sing traveling songs?”

I shook my head. “I don’t expect that. I plan to set up a generous scholarship for you—”

“Sitting in some classroom wouldn’t be any better,” Skye interrupted.

“Let me finish. The scholarship will be for a school specializing in computer science. Very prestigious. Very remote. Very fake. You’ll be living with people loyal to me, and studying on your own—you seem to have the intellectual curiosity and personal initiative necessary to make an arrangement like that work. Any resources you need will, of course, be provided to you. In five years, come back to me and tell me what you want to do with your life, and what cause you want to fight for. Whatever you choose, I’ll help you do it.” A small smile came to my face. “Of course, by then, you may not need my help.”

Skye looked torn. “That sounds... amazing, to be honest. But it would also mean sitting out *this* fight. That’s what this is about, isn’t it? A bribe to get me out of the way?”

“A way to keep you safe,” I said. “And this way, you’ll still have a chance to fight. Only it will be for something you choose, not something that was chosen for you.”

“And if an angry Arkanica survivor finds out where I’m hiding, and comes looking for revenge?”

“The threat does exist,” I said reluctantly. “I won’t pretend otherwise. You’ll have to stay isolated at first, to make sure they aren’t going to track you down. That will limit your social options considerably, for which I apologize. But you can start to relax your precautions once I’m reasonably sure they’ve lost track of you. And after I ensure Arkanica is no longer a threat, you’ll be able to visit your cousins as much as you want, and even attend regular college if the idea appeals to you. And you’ll always have a direct line to me in case of emergency.”

At the mention of her cousins, a flash of longing crossed Skye’s face. “Would I get to say goodbye to Sheila and Randall first?”

“Briefly. I’ve already worked it out. As far as they’re concerned, you won the scholarship competition, and the school I’ve created was so impressed by your performance they want you to enroll right away. Luckily, the fact that your cousins have been homeschooling you means I don’t need to make additional arrangements with your high school.” Setting up any meeting—however brief—with Skye’s cousins was a risk, I knew, both for me and for them. It would give them more of a chance to see through my ruse, and at this point, any contact with Skye put them in danger. But I also knew it was necessary, if Skye was going to

agree to any of this. “I’m sorry I can’t give you more than that. But keeping them safe is also a priority.”

Skye’s pain showed on her face, but she nodded. “I understand.”

“Even I won’t know where you are,” I said. “And no one will be able to trace any of this back to me. I created an identity for this that isn’t connected to any of my existing names or accounts, so even if Arkanica does whatever they did before, it won’t let them find you. But of course I’ll be able to contact you, and vice versa, if the need arises.” I paused. “That is, if you agree.”

A kaleidoscope of emotions shifted across Skye’s face. I had chosen the right bait for my hook—I could see how badly Skye wanted what I was offering her. But it remained to be seen whether it would be enough to tempt her away from the more immediate fight.

“On one condition,” she finally said. “I want two promises from you.” She paused, biting her lip thoughtfully. “Maybe that’s two conditions.”

“What are they?” I asked warily.

“First,” she said, drawing an invisible tally mark in the air in front of her, “promise me that if you need my help, you’ll contact me.”

I hesitated. I hadn’t planned on going to her for help again. Not when there were so many other humans who shared Skye’s area of expertise. Humans with more experience, and less history with Arkanica, and no personal connection to me.

And from the look in Skye’s eyes, she had already figured all that out.

“And the other?” I asked, stalling for time.

“This one is easy,” she said. She drew another tally mark in the air. “Promise you’ll keep in touch.”

I shook my head. “Not while Arkanica could still be out there. Later, maybe, but for now it’s too dangerous.”

I expected her to argue. She wanted to—I could tell. Instead, she pressed her lips together and thought. “I’ll agree to that,” she finally said. “Once it’s safe for me to see my cousins again, get in touch. Let me know how you’re doing. I’m not talking two-minute phone calls, either. Let’s say four letters a year, minimum.”

I nodded. “That sounds fair.”

Skye glared. “You think I wasn’t listening when you told me how your honesty thing works? Make it a promise.”

I could make myself sit down and write a letter a few times a year, if it was the price of keeping Skye safe. Besides, I couldn’t say I would be unhappy to hear from her again. Those glimpses of Ernest I saw in her sometimes... they could be painful, when they caught me off guard, but they also made me

remember the best of him. And that wasn't entirely a bad thing.

"When you can have regular contact with your cousins again without the risk of Arkanica finding you," I said, "I will write you no less than four letters a year. I promise."

"And?" Skye prompted.

I let my breath out through my teeth. If I committed to asking for her help when I needed it, I would have no choice but to do it. No matter the situation. No matter how much danger I would be putting her in.

But she would be in a lot more danger if she refused my offer.

I dragged the words from my mouth. "I promise to ask for your help in the fight against Arkanica if I encounter a problem that would be better solved by your skills than by any other option." That gave me some wiggle room, at least. And limited it to Arkanica—that part was important. Otherwise I would be stuck calling her in her nursing home eighty years from now, asking for help she regretted having offered me so long ago. At least I hoped she would regret it by then. I didn't want this to be her life forever. I wanted her to be selfish and safe.

From Skye's frown, I was guessing she hadn't missed the limitations I had placed in there. But she must have known it was the best she was going to get, because a second later, she shrugged and flashed me a smile. "Good enough. I'll start packing." She turned to Vicantha, who had angled herself toward us just enough to listen in without making it overly obvious. "So how about you? Is he letting you stick around, or are you getting sent off into exile too?"

That finally got Vicantha to turn around. "This human does not dictate my movements," she informed Skye coldly.

Skye flinched back before she caught herself. She shifted in her seat, in a vain attempt to cover for her earlier reaction.

"I'm not human," I reminded Vicantha.

Vicantha ignored me, just like I had ignored her a moment ago. "To answer your real question, I'm not staying," she said to Skye. "I have business at home. I need to return to Faerie and discover why the Winter Court has taken a sudden interest in this world."

"So this is goodbye for all of us, I guess." Skye stared glumly across the table at her empty plate.

"The two of you spent a good part of your time here as hostages," Vicantha reminded Skye. "I imagine you will both be grateful to be gone."

Skye tilted her head. Just like that, the gloom melted from her face. "Does that mean you won't be grateful?" Her grin returned. "I knew it. You'll miss us, won't you?"

"I go where I'm needed," said Vicantha. "Emotion is irrelevant."

“You’ll miss us,” said Skye, with a satisfied nod.

I didn’t hear Vicantha’s response. I was thinking about what Skye had said a moment ago. I was thinking about saying goodbye, about being on my own again. For most of my time here, I had wanted nothing more than to be free of Vicantha, and to send Skye away where she could be truly safe. I had spent more hours than I could count dreaming of that beach in Hawaii. Now, though... part of me still breathed a sigh of relief at the idea of leaving, but this time it was because I would be going back to what I knew. Taking up another noble cause, standing alone against another evil. And yes, probably dying in the attempt—but I had come back before. I would do it again.

But even if Vicantha wasn’t willing to admit it, I was—I would miss them. They had both held a mirror up to me, and showed me who I truly was. Not only that, but Skye had done what I had stopped believing was possible—she had seen my power, in all its destructive glory, and she hadn’t run. And Vicantha... she had seen my humanity, and had still stood up for me against her own people.

“We’re not done with each other for good,” I said, to myself as much as to Skye. “Vicantha has promised to work together on the Arkanica problem if they come back. And she may need my help with the Winter Court, if she has to return to this world.”

Skye stared at Vicantha, then at me. “Wait. When you say promised, do you mean *promised*?”

“It isn’t binding,” Vicantha snapped. “I told him if he determined that he was in need of help, I would consider the possibility of offering my assistance.”

Skye answered with a silent smile.

Vicantha’s face darkened. “Whatever you’re thinking, human, erase it from your mind.”

Skye held her hands up in front of her chest, palms out. “All I’m thinking about is this delicious pizza,” she said, with her best innocent eyes. “Kieran, can you go get more?”

I walked up to the counter. Just like last time we had been here, Lydia was taking orders as well as cooking. I ordered another slice of pizza for Skye, then made it five, in an attempt to make up for some of the business we had cost her. She held her hand out for my card, with no recognition in her eyes.

She swiped the card. Her smile turned into a frown. “I’m sorry,” she said. “It looks like your card was declined.”

I bent over to examine the card. It was the same one I had paid for our first order with. “It worked a few minutes ago.”

“I can try again,” she said doubtfully. She ran it through the machine a second time, then shook her head.

At that moment, my phone rang. It wasn't my usual ringtone—which invariably led to a robot trying to sell me an extended warranty for a car I didn't own—but the one that meant my assistant. I took the card from Lydia and stepped away from the counter as I answered.

“One of my cards was just declined,” I said, by way of greeting. “I don't suppose you're calling to explain why.”

My assistant paused before answering—only for a few seconds, but that was long enough to send a chill up my spine. “I'm sorry,” he finally said. His voice was stilted. Distant. “I can't be a part of what you're doing. Consider this my two weeks' notice.”

“What I'm...” He couldn't mean Arkanica. He couldn't know what I had done here, or what I really was. I glanced over my shoulder at the door. No one was there. But like Vicantha, I didn't stop watching.

“It's out in the open now. All of it.” There was something underneath the distance now—a hint of anger, or more than a hint. “What kind of deals you've made, and with who, to gather all those artifacts you've had us sell for you. We know about the terrorist cell in Libya, the deaths in Colombia, the civil war in —”

Relief hit first. Confusion followed a second later. “I don't know what you're talking about,” I said, before he could continue. The historical artifacts I hired people to retrieve for me, and then sold to collectors to maintain my wealth, were all relics from my own long life. I had never engaged in anything more underhanded to get my hands on one of them than trespassing.

“You can drop the act. I've seen the pictures. I hired an expert to go over them—it's you in every one.” He paused, but spoke again before I could begin to formulate a response. “I've talked to everyone else in this little network you've accumulated for yourself, and we all agree. As a last favor to you, we'll do our best to keep this out of the press. None of us wants to see you as the villain in the next summer blockbuster, if only because the publicity could bring our own involvement into the light. But we're finished. I'll fulfill my obligations for my last two weeks when it comes to maintaining your investments, but if you need to contact me, send me an email. I don't want to hear your voice again.”

Before I could answer, he hung up.

I started to call a different number, this one belonging to the man who had helped me establish most of my aliases. Maybe someone else would be willing to talk to me, even if my assistant—my former assistant—wasn't. Maybe somebody had enough information to help me piece this nonsense together into a narrative that made sense.

But halfway through dialing the number, I stopped. I didn't need to talk to

him or anyone else. I might not understand the details—the photographs that weren't of me, no matter what any expert said, or this babble about a terrorist cell and a civil war. But I didn't need to understand all that to know who had done this, and why.

Instead of completing the call, I logged into my main bank account—or tried. I got the result I expected: the account was frozen.

I tried a different account. Then a different alias. And another. Always with the same result.

Skye and Vicantha were craning their necks, trying to catch my eye. I walked back to the table, my gaze still fixed on my phone.

"You forgot the pizza," Skye said as I sat down.

I held up a hand to shush her, and kept going through my accounts. Meanwhile, my phone dinged over and over as emails started pouring in. A couple of brief glances told me I didn't need to read any of them. It was all more of the same, from various people I had worked with over the years. One piece after another of my carefully constructed life rained down around me like the fragments of Arkanica's blood machinery.

Finally, when Skye's throat-clearing had grown so unsubtle that I was afraid it would catch Lydia's attention, I looked up. "There's one alias they didn't find," I said. "An old one, from sixty years ago. I had almost forgotten it existed."

"Um..." said Skye. "Maybe you had better start from the beginning."

"Someone froze my accounts. *All* of them, some of them under aliases I haven't used in fifty years. All while manufacturing scandals to ruin my reputation, complete with photographic evidence good enough to fool an expert." I met their eyes grimly. "Three guesses as to who's responsible."

Vicantha bared her teeth. "Arkanica is still out there."

"And with enough resources at their disposal to do something like this," I said. "More than that, they want us to know it. They could have gone into hiding. They chose to flaunt it in our faces instead."

"So you've got nothing left?" asked Skye.

"Luckily, the fact that I forgot about that account for so long means it's been accumulating interest for a very long time," I said. "There's plenty there to do everything I need to do for you. After that, I'll have enough left over to let me get by for a while. Assuming I forgo my usual luxuries." So much for that gourmet meal and hot-tub soak.

"If they're able to do this now," said Skye, "they could have done it all along. So why now, when it's too late?"

"It's a message," I answered. "They're telling me they're not gone. Not only that, they're saying they were holding back before, and they've learned from

their mistakes. They want me to know that if I come after them again, the gloves are off.”

“I assume you don’t plan to heed this warning,” said Vicantha.

“The problem with their logic,” I said, “is that by doing this, they’ve taken away every bit of the life I created for myself when I decided to stop involving myself in humans’ problems. That means all I’ve got left is my old life, and my old self. And there’s only one thing my old self would do.” My smile showed a few more teeth than necessary. “Hunt them to the ends of the earth.”

Skye shook her head at me. I was confused until she said, “Really? You’re going to use that as an excuse? You know perfectly well you would have done the exact same thing if they had given you a dozen roses and a puppy.”

“You are who you are,” Vicantha agreed.

All I could do was nod. “I am now.”

Epilogue

A week later, I crept along the thickly carpeted hallway of a high-end Los Angeles apartment building, silent as a ghost. Vicantha wasn't beside me, not this time. She had slipped back through the portal days ago. Skye was gone too, off to her new "school." Tomorrow, I would be returning to the cold of Hawthorne. For now, given the proximity to both Arkanica's former headquarters and the Faerie portal, it was the best place to start tracking down the remnants of Arkanica. Even so, I wasn't looking forward to making a home for myself in that weather, no matter how temporary. I had a long time to wait until summer. And after today, frivolous plane trips would be a thing of the past.

But I had paid for these tickets, and endured the hours-long trip encased in a metal tube, without a second thought. There was something I needed to know, and the answer was inside this apartment.

I stopped in front of the door at the end of the hall. I pulled the lockpick out of my pocket, and winced at the bite of the steel as I slipped it into the lock. I was out of practice at this sort of thing, and it had never been one of my strong suits at the best of times. When I had the ability to blast a door off its hinges, using more subtle methods seemed redundant. But what little knowledge I had once possessed came back to me as I worked, and the lock clicked open easily.

When I turned the doorknob, the door swung inward on well-oiled hinges. Apparently, living in a place like this meant the inhabitant didn't feel the need for a deadbolt. I was grateful for that—it meant I could slip inside without needing to figure out a non-magical way past any additional security. Blasting doors off hinges wouldn't get me what I was after. Not tonight.

The living room was bigger than my entire first apartment in Hawthorne had been. If that hadn't been enough to scream money, the art on the walls would have done it. It was the kind of art people bought because it was an investment, not because they derived any enjoyment from looking at it. The angular couch at the center of the room also exuded luxury of the worst sort. Why was it that so many people with money tormented themselves with ugly art and uncomfortable furniture? I had never made that mistake. A small sigh escaped me at the thought of my home in Hawaii, which was probably on its way to auction by now.

A thief would have pulled the paintings off the wall first, then gone for the sound system. I walked past all of it and eased open the door to the bedroom.

The room held a faint floral smell, deep and musky—jasmine, maybe. I couldn't see much in the dark, with the shades drawn. Just rumpled covers, and

dark hair on a pillow. I stopped to listen, and caught the sound of quiet, rhythmic breathing.

I walked closer, to get a look at the woman's face. With her eyes closed, and her body relaxed in sleep, her expression was open, vulnerable—a very different face from the one she had shown me. Even so, I easily recognized her as Yanina Albrecht.

She didn't stir as I pulled up a chair from her old-fashioned vanity table, or as I straddled the chair to face her. She stayed asleep until I softly cleared my throat.

Then she jerked awake. Her eyes landed on me as soon as they snapped open. She scrabbled back, but her legs got tangled in the covers before she could get too far. She opened her mouth—probably to yell for help. I shook my head, placing a finger to my lips.

She lunged for her phone on the night table next to her. I snatched it away before she could touch it.

Her wild gaze darted from me to the door. I could guess easily enough what she was thinking—she was deciding whether to run, trying to figure out whether she could make it. I shook my head again. "I'm only here to talk," I said, trying to make my voice as nonthreatening as possible, although I knew that at this point it was a lost cause. People didn't generally break into someone's apartment in the middle of the night if they only wanted to talk.

She eased herself to a sitting position, watching me warily, like she wasn't sure whether I would stop her. I stayed where I was, arms resting on the back of the chair, as she wrapped her thick comforter around herself.

She flicked on the reading light by the bed. I didn't stop her from doing that, either. Her brows drew together as she studied my face. "I met with you in Hawthorne," she said, like she wasn't sure of her own words. "You were thinking about signing a contract with Arkanica." She rubbed her eyes, as if she thought I might be some kind of hallucination. Or, more likely, another nightmare.

I answered only with a nod.

"What are you doing here?" Fear and confusion mingled in her voice. "How did you get in?"

"The second part is easy," I said. "I picked the lock. As for the first, I'm here because I need the answers to two questions."

"Whatever you want." She drew her arms in closer to her body, pulling the comforter tight. In the battle between confusion and fear, fear was winning. "Just... don't hurt me. Please. If you're here because you've learned the truth about Arkanica, your problem is with them, not me."

“I can’t promise anything,” I said. “You see, I don’t make promises unless it’s absolutely necessary.” I leaned my head over the chair toward her, and brushed my hair back, just for a second, to reveal the tip of one pointed ear.

Her eyes grew round. She stared at me like she was seeing me for the first time. Panic flared on her face, and for a second, I thought she would try to make a run for it after all.

Instead, she sagged. Fear dissolved into quiet resignation. She bowed her head, and kept her eyes fixed on the bed in front of her.

It took me a moment to realize she was expecting me to kill her, here and now.

When the fatal blow didn’t come, she cast a cautious glance up at me. “You... you said you had questions.”

“I want to know,” I said, “what about your life is worth burning other lives to preserve. I want to know if there’s enough good in you to balance out this evil you’ve chosen.”

Yanina shook her head. “You’re looking at it all wrong. It’s not about me. I told you, it’s about the whole human race.” Under the meek, scared woman in front of me, I finally caught a glimpse of the ruthless idealist I had met with over dinner.

“You could have worked toward any number of other potential solutions to this world’s problems,” I said. “You chose this one. So my question remains: what makes your life worth theirs? What good is there in you?”

She opened her mouth to speak. I shook my head before she could say anything. “Don’t lie to me,” I warned. “People like me, we can tell.”

As with Phoebe, I was relying on the assumption that she didn’t know as much about the fae as she thought she did. And as with Phoebe, my assumption was correct. She closed her mouth, thought for a moment, and started again.

“If you want me to say I’m special somehow, you’ll be disappointed,” she said. “There’s nothing exceptional about me. I give to charity twice a year. I do my best to give the interns a leg up. But I’m no great do-gooder. I go to work every day, come home, watch TV, have a couple of drinks. My partnership with Arkanica—that was the best thing about me. Through them, I had a chance to leave the world better than I found it.”

“At considerable advantage to yourself,” I pointed out. “Arkanica gave you an opportunity to get everything you’ve ever wanted—a way to save the world and get rich doing it. If you were concerned about the effect of your job on the environment, you don’t have to be anymore. Instead, you get to be at the forefront of a new era—and be one of the first people to rake in the profits from it. And all you have to do is not think too hard about the cost.” I shook my head.

“I told someone recently that a good person is just one who hasn’t been tested yet. You aren’t a good person. You were tested, and you failed.”

She opened her mouth to protest. But she must have remembered what I had said about lies, because she closed it again before she could say whatever she had planned. “I guess I did,” she said instead, more humbly than I would have expected from her.

“If I were to make a binding promise not to harm you, or even so much as contact you again, and all you had to do in return was end your association with Arkanica,” I asked, “would you do it?”

“It doesn’t matter. Arkanica is gone, and everything we hoped for is gone along with them.” For the first time, sharp suspicion entered her eyes. “Did you have something to do with that?”

I waved away her question. “Imagine they weren’t gone. Would you do it?”

From the way she paused, I had a feeling she was thinking about lying. But as before, she decided against it. “No,” she said. “The world needs this too badly. And besides...” She hesitated, then gave a small shrug. “Well, I guess if you’re here to kill me, you’re going to do it no matter what I say. So I might as well say it. The stories about your kind—they’re not exactly sweetness and light. The fae toyed with humanity for centuries, using us for their own purposes. Why shouldn’t it be our turn? You did it for fun. We’re doing it to save lives.”

“So if Arkanica comes back, and you get your chance to create your utopian dream, powered by thousands of imprisoned fae silently screaming deep underground... if that happens, you’ll be able to live with yourself?”

Yanina flinched at my words before she could stop herself. “I won’t pretend it’s not hard sometimes. But you get used to it. A person can get used to anything, with enough incentive. And you can’t pretend we don’t have incentive.”

I didn’t answer. I regarded her for a long moment, not speaking. Only thinking.

“That was more than two questions,” Yanina said after a while.

I shook my head. “That was all part of my first question. I wanted to know if I was wrong about humanity. If being human means more than being selfish and corrupt inside.”

“I took a tour of Arkanica’s lab once,” said Yanina. “Those silent screams... I’ve seen them. I hear them in my head every night. And I’m willing to hear them until the day I die if it means creating a world the people who come after me can live in. Does that answer your question?”

Instead of answering, I studied her more closely. Just in case there was anything hiding under her surface that I had missed. But she was what she said

she was—a perfectly ordinary human. Exactly what I had expected to find. She was working toward the day when she could burn lives to fuel her ordinary moments, and patiently awaiting a time when that thought didn't bother her anymore.

But a voice in the back of my mind whispered that she had another layer to her. She might have been going about it the wrong way, but she was fighting for the future of humanity. Maybe, just maybe, that counted for something.

I shut that thought down hard. Yes, she was fighting for her world's future—by sitting back and waiting for the money to roll in while Arkanica tortured captive fae for her. That was all I needed to know, and I had known it before I had gotten on that plane. I might as well have stayed in Hawthorne and saved my money.

At last, I answered her. “It does. There's no light in you.”

She pulled the comforter tighter. Her voice wobbled as she asked, “And what's your second question?”

I kept my voice level. “Whether I'll kill you for your part in this.”

She went still. Only her hand moved, creeping toward the drawer of her bedside table. I opened the drawer, and saw a familiar object that made my eyes water with memory. Quickly, I pocketed the pepper spray. I had no desire to repeat that experience anytime soon.

“Killing me won't help anything.” The wobble in her voice grew. “Arkanica is already gone.”

“A friend of mine believes in the power of vengeance,” I said. “If nothing else, by removing you from the world, I would be doing her a favor. But I'm not here because of her. You're full of human rottenness and human corruption, and if some opposite force exists—some innate human goodness—it doesn't count for much.” I tried not to think about Skye. Whatever Skye had, Ernest had had it too, and that hadn't meant anything in the end. “And you've earned death with your actions, as much as anyone on Arkanica's payroll.”

Yanina's eyes darted toward the door again. I rose from the chair and stood between her and the exit. She didn't try to move.

“So why haven't you done it already?” she asked.

That was a good question. Why hadn't I? Why go through the charade of asking her all those questions, when I had already known what the answers would be? **Because you thought you might find something, and you did,** that same voice whispered. **She does have a spark of goodness in her, however warped and twisted it's become. She wants to save the world.**

Again, I shoved that voice back into the darkest corner of my mind. This time, I also locked it in an iron box and threw away the key.

But I could still hear it.

Why had I saved those Winter Court agents, when I had known what they would try to do to me afterward?

Why had I killed those Nazi soldiers, why had I joined the war at all, when after hundreds of years I should have known better?

Why had I let Yanina live long enough to finish this conversation?

In answer, my mind showed me Ernest's smile.

Maybe there had never been any light in him. Maybe it had only ever been an illusion. Maybe every small moment of connection between me and Vicantha had been an illusion too, nothing more than my own desire for companionship reflected in the ice of her eyes. And maybe—probably—Yanina had no spark of light in her.

But I wanted to believe she could.

I had discovered, that day in the Arkanica building, that I didn't fight to protect people because of who they were. I did it because of who I was. Maybe, despite how difficult the questions seemed in my mind, the answer to both was as simple as that.

I reached a hand into my pocket. Yanina tensed, her eyes following my movement. But all I pulled out was a small folded piece of stationery from the hotel where I was staying. It had my phone number written on it. I had written it out before I had come here, before I had made my decision. I must have known what I would do, even then, but I hadn't let myself see it. But I understood now.

I held the paper out to her. "If you hear anything about Arkanica," I said, "call me."

She took the paper, but didn't unfold it. She kept watching me, like she was waiting for the trick, bracing herself for the moment when I would strike.

There was nothing left to say. I turned and walked out of the bedroom.

I hurried out of the apartment before Yanina could come out of fight-or-flight mode enough to consider calling the police. Not that she could, since her phone was still in my pocket. I made a mental note to mail it back to her at the earliest opportunity. First, though, I would go back to the hotel, maybe take a quick swim. The hotel pool, green under the fluorescent lights and thick with the smell of chlorine, was a poor substitute for the hot tub I had dreamed of back in Hawthorne, but it would do. Then I would grab a couple of hours of sleep before my early flight tomorrow. In less than a day, I would be back in Hawthorne, walking beneath the shadow of the former Arkanica headquarters, bundled up against the cold.

And then? Then my work would begin.

Author's Note

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Up Next

Kieran isn't alone. Someone else wants Arkanica destroyed as badly as he does—but their cure might be worse than the disease. Oh, and Mab wants this newcomer dead... and she's sent Vicantha to handle it. [Read *No Illusions* now!](#)

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About the Author

Cruelty, selfishness, greed... this world is full of darkness. But light still exists, caged but undimmed, an unquenchable spark at the core of the human heart. And that spark is worth fighting for.

Some people are still willing to fight. Bloodied and broken, they rise undaunted from every defeat to fight for justice and compassion in a world that has none. But before they can drive back the world's darkness, they'll need to confront the darkness in their own souls.

These are the heroes at the heart of Z.J. Cannon's work, which blends page-turning suspense with high-stakes drama to create stories about flawed and often deeply damaged people fighting against overwhelming odds to do what's right.