

A woman with long, wavy brown hair and a pink t-shirt stands in a lush, misty forest. She is looking directly at the camera. In the background, a crow with white wings is flying. The forest is filled with tall trees and ferns, and there are glowing purple and blue particles floating around. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and magical.

P L MATTHEWS

# STORM SIGNAL

A DIGITAL DETECTIVE MYSTERY

P L Matthews

## Storm Signal

*A Digital Detective Mystery*

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# Dedication

I only have one sister, so I'm dedicating this to her before she writes *her* version.

## Author's Note

In this tale, you'll spot some unique spelling—welcome to Aussie English, where “colour” proudly wears its “u,” and “realise” prefers an “s” to a “z.” Plus, it's set in the beautiful city of Sydney, Australia. So don't be surprised if you catch the occasional “mate” slipping through the pages. Consider it a free lesson in Aussie slang. Enjoy the read. Cheers!

# CHAPTER 1

A rolled-up sock hit Skye in the face.

She turned slowly to glare at Bob, who perched on her headboard, looking for all the world like a judgemental gargoyle.

“You’re overthinking again,” he said. “Stop it. You’ll short-circuit the toaster.”

*The perks and perils of being a tech mage.*

“I’m *choosing*,” she muttered, holding the dress against herself. The mirror threw back a woman with frazzled curls, big brown eyes and a pulse visible in her throat.

Bob fluttered up, landing on her shoulder with a conspiratorial whisper. “Wear the jeans. If you’re planning on having *the talk*, you want to look like yourself, not a napkin at a fancy dinner.”

Skye snorted.

The talk, as Bob had so helpfully dubbed it, was between Skye and her vampire boyfriend, Seb. As mysterious as he was alluring, Seb carried way too many secrets, and it ate at Skye.

The plan was straightforward: ask about his past, then build a bridge to his present. Easy, right?

So why did it feel like her spine had turned into an anthill?

He pecked her ear affectionately. “Go comfy, go confident. Then talk to your vampire. And don’t even think about chickening out, or I’ll dig out your teenage poetry and perform it in an interpretive dance.”

The threat worked. She yanked on the jeans and pulled a long-sleeved turtleneck over her head.

Her phone buzzed on the bedside table. Movement detected—front gate. Her breath caught. She tapped the screen, and Seb’s figure appeared, striding

towards the house with that predatory gait of his.

Skye's stomach did a slow somersault. She took one last look in the mirror and rushed downstairs.

When she flung the door open, Seb caught her gaze, his finger hovering over the bell.

Blond hair tousled by the breeze, flawless porcelain skin, and eyes that looked straight through her—deep, dark, and intense. He stood nearly five inches taller than her, muscled and lean, his presence like gravity, inescapable, and pulling her in whether she meant to move or not.

It felt as if the ground had tilted beneath her—subtle, but enough to make her legs untrustworthy.

She managed a wobbly smile.

Seb stepped closer, his eyes never leaving hers. He dipped his head and brushed a kiss against her lips.

“Hello, Firefly,” he murmured.

Skye blinked, heart thudding. “Hey...”

A polite but deliberate throat-clearing came from inside the house.

Skye turned to see Bob perched on the bannister. “That was lovely. But I am, regrettably, starving.”

Seb chuckled and bent to lift a large paper bag he'd set beside the door. “Good thing I brought food, then,” he said, holding it up. “Human and magpie friendly. There might be something shiny in there too.”

Bob gave a pleased trill. “Now *that's* how you make a good impression. In you come. Romance is all well and good, but it's not terribly filling.”

Inside, Skye hovered near the kitchen island as Seb rolled up his sleeves and got to work. Her house filled with the scent of rosemary and garlic, warm and comforting. After he set the lamb in the oven, he boiled the potatoes until tender and tossed the steamed greens in a pan with lemon zest.

Skye found it hard to take her eyes off him as he worked.

The soft candlelight highlighted the sharp angles of his face, and the apron, emblazoned with *Ctrl+Alt+Eat*, somehow made him look both domestic and dangerous at the same time.

She set the table while they chatted about a book they'd both read, laughter and easy banter wrapping around them like a soft shawl.

Dinner was... perfect. A meal prepared for her with care, with tenderness.

Afterwards, Seb pulled a chilled bowl of sweet strawberries from the fridge, serving them with dollops of thick clotted cream and a lopsided smile that caused her heart to flutter harder.

They steered clear of anything serious. Skye didn't want to shatter the gentle rhythm of the evening—not when it felt so fragile and golden, like sunlight caught in glass. But the questions still pressed at the edges of her mind.

The candlelight burnt low, casting soft shadows. Bob had disappeared after the entrée, muttering that he simply couldn't miss *MasterChef*, because he liked to critique the plating. The volume from the living room was loud enough to give them a sense of privacy.

Seb kissed her knuckles, and just like that, her brain threatened to derail.

Skye jumped tracks before it could, blurting the first thing that came to mind. "What's with the 'Lord' title?"

It wasn't the most pressing question she had, but it was best to build up to it, right?

Seb chuckled, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "Starting me off easy, are you?" he asked. "I'm the son of a Marquess."

His light teasing emboldened her. She was on a roll now.

"Which year were you born?"

"1759," he said.

She swallowed. *Age is just a number*, she reminded herself.

"And what do you really do for Lord Bellmont?" Skye leaned forward.

Seb opened his mouth to answer when a loud squawk sounded from the living room. Skye ignored it. She was finally getting to the good bits of the conversation. But then Bob flew in, landing on the table with a dramatic flutter of wings.

"Babycakes, you need to see this."

"Not now, Bob," Skye said.

"Trust me, you really, really need to see this," Bob insisted before flying back into the living room.

Reluctantly, Skye followed, Seb close on her heels.

The news was on, showing a scene of utter havoc.

Overtured cars sprawled across the street like toys tossed by a storm, windows shattered, doors buckled. Debris choked the road, and a lamppost lay folded in half.

The camera panned to a group of people huddled behind a police barricade, their faces pale with fear. The image cut back to a serious news presenter.

“Police are on high alert, and the council is mounting a supernatural unit to assist. If you see the suspect, do not approach. I repeat, do not approach, and call 000 immediately.”

A blurry picture of a woman dressed in flowing robes appeared on the screen, her face slightly obscured, but not enough for someone who knew her well.

“Zephyra,” Skye whispered.

“You know her?” Seb asked, studying Skye intently.

Skye wanted to cry. Or scream. Or both.

And then realisation hit hard.

She spun towards Bob.

“Wait, how did you recognise my sister?”

Skye’s mobile erupted with a jarring chime, *Grandma* flashing across the screen. Her thumb swiped to answer as Bob, oddly twitchy even for him, darted behind a cushion, his feathers ruffling like a guilty umbrella.

“Hi, Grandma,” she said.

“Hello, Skye.”

The absence of her nickname jolted her. Skye knew that voice—the careful, tea-ceremony tone Grandma used when the world was about to tilt.

“Are you calling about Zephyra?” Skye pressed the phone tighter to her ear, watching Seb’s eyebrow arch.

Vampire hearing meant he was getting both sides of this disaster in Dolby surround sound.

A sigh travelled down the line, the kind that preceded either burnt scones or apocalypses.

“You know what’s going on, don’t you, Grandma? Where’s Zephyra?”

“Now, young lady—”

“You’ve seen her.”

Skye wound a curl around her finger, the strand coiling tighter with each absent-minded twist. Bob peeked from his cushion fort, beak clamped shut *miraculously*.

Another sigh. "Indeed."

Skye's teeth ground. Normally, Grandma would've launched into a soliloquy by now. "Why not tell me she was visiting?"

"Because she asked me not to tell you."

"Surprise!" Bob squawked, then immediately ducked as Skye shot him a glare that could have vaporised steel. He fluffed his feathers into a *who, me?* Ball of faux innocence.

"What. Is. Going. On?" Skye bit out.

A pause. The kind that made the kitchen lights flicker. "I'm not certain... but it's time for a family meeting."

*Ugh*. Family meetings meant one thing: someone was in trouble. A petty, warm spark lit in Skye's chest. For once, it wasn't her.

Zephyra, the sylph who'd never so much as ruffled a curtain with misplaced magic, the golden child, was the one leaving car-cratered streets in her wake.

The satisfaction curdled as Skye's gaze snagged on the muted TV.

A woman in a paisley scarf gesticulated wildly to reporters, her face alight with the ghoulish thrill of disaster. Behind her, the lamppost's twisted carcass glinted under emergency lights.

"It's fine," Grandma said, misreading her silence. "The human police can't touch this, and the supernatural community wouldn't know what to do with a fae on a rampage either. Though I expect Aricen will launch a PR campaign soon enough." She paused. "Tomorrow. Lunch at one o'clock. And bring Bob."

Aricen was the fae representative on Earth. Skye hadn't realised Grandma was on a first-name basis with the duke.

"Lunch, right," Skye managed. "See you then."

She hung up, the silence swelling like a bruise.

"Nothing like a Grandma's lunch, right?" Bob chirped, but quieted when Skye pinned him with a look.

Unsure how she'd got there, Skye reached the stairs when Seb's presence, warm and solid as a shadow at high noon, jerked her back to the present.

Her thoughts churned like a glitching hologram: *Zephyra. Here. After all this time.*

Skye turned to Seb, fingers knotting in her sleeves. “Sorry, I need to—” *Pull myself together.* “—run some CCTV searches. Track her path.”

The words tasted like battery acid. *Her path.* As if Zephyra hadn’t bulldozed through the city like a hurricane with a grudge.

“Can I help?” Seb asked.

“No.”

Too sharp. Too quick.

His slight wince made her gut twist. She softened her tone, though her chest still buzzed like a trapped fly. “Not yet. I need... some time.”

Seb nodded but followed her up to the attic anyway, standing silently at her back as she plunged into the blue glow of her monitors.

Hours bled into pixel trails and timestamped breadcrumbs. At some point, exhaustion must’ve won—because Skye woke with a stiff neck, her cheek smushed against the keyboard, the scent of lavender and musk lingering in the air.

Seb was gone.

And Bob’s perch sat empty, the only evidence of his presence a single black feather on the floor.

Skye’s fingers stabbed at the keyboard, jolting her sleeping monitor to life. The clock in the corner taunted her—seven minutes past eleven. Numbers blurred as she blinked gritty eyes. She had to be at Grandma’s at one o’clock. It would take at least an hour and a half to get to Leura.

Rain lashed the attic window in erratic bursts, the glass rattling like her pulse. She’d need to leave by eleven thirty at the latest, and she still had to...

*Ding-dong.*

Skye froze mid-yawn. The motion-activated feed flashed up automatically. Fred’s grinning face filled the screen, his groomed eyebrows wagging at the camera as he adjusted his cuffs. His umbrella dripped a steady rhythm onto her welcome mat.

“Oh, for the love of fairy cakes,” she groaned, forehead bumping against the desk.

Their shopping trip.

That stupid, impossible-to-resist invitation he'd somehow talked her into last week over peanut butter biscuits. The memory surfaced hazily—Fred's persuasive smirk, the way he'd swirled his coffee, that "trust me, darling" purr that always made her agree to things.

She took the stairs two at a time, nearly tripping over a discarded jumper. Yanking open the door, she was immediately assaulted by Fred's signature bergamot and sandalwood cologne.

"Darling, you look..." Fred's appraising gaze travelled from her bird's-nest hair to the crumpled turtleneck she'd slept in. His nose wrinkled ever so slightly. "...Like someone who desperately needs my help."

Skye blinked. "I don't have time for—"

"Ah-ah!" Fred produced a takeaway cup from behind his back with a magician's flourish. The rich aroma of a hot matcha latte hit her like a lifeline.

"First, tea. Then, we work miracles." His smile sharpened. "You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

The cup stalled halfway to her lips. "Ah, well, you see... something's come up."

Fred adjusted his already-immaculate pocket square. "*Something* or *someone*? What's got your knickers in a twist this time? Damage control or a full-blown intervention? Because I know exactly where to shop for both."

Skye stepped back, edging sideways with a sigh. "You'd better come in."

Fred glided past her, his oxfords clicking against the tiles. Bob warbled a greeting from his perch on the counter.

"Frederick," he drawled. "Here to critique our interior design or just the dark circles under Skye's eyes?"

"Neither," Fred said, following Skye into the kitchen. "I was actually wondering how you manage to pull off bedraggled chic so well." He gave Bob an appraising glance. "Very avant-garde."

Bob puffed up. "I prefer windswept rebel, thank you very much."

Ignoring them both, Skye slumped into a chair. "Have you seen the news?"

Fred sat opposite her. "And here I thought you had no interest in *mundane* matters. Which bit of news, precisely?"

Bob hopped onto the table. "Oh, just the footage of a *shady character* rampaging through town like a bull in a china shop."

Skye whipped around. “Zephyra is *not* a shady character!”

“Well,” Bob said, “she’s at least *volatile*.”

Skye wagged a finger at him. “And *you*—I haven’t forgotten that you somehow *know* her.”

“Know who?” Fred asked.

“My sister,” Skye replied.

“Your *sister*?” Fred’s gaze sharpened. “I don’t believe you’ve mentioned her before. Is she the black sheep of the family?”

Skye took a long sip of tea, the matcha bitter on her tongue. “No. That would be *me*.”

She didn’t elaborate—how could she? Zephyra. The older sister who’d mastered air magic before Skye could even spell *technology*. Her air magic ranked off the charts, while Skye fumbled with human gadgets, the unnatural daughter in a world that prized tradition.

They hadn’t spoken since the day Skye left Fairyland, all those years ago.

*“You’re quitting,” Zephyra had thrown the words like a challenge.*

*“So what if I am?” Skye had snapped back, arms crossed tight over her chest.*

Not a word. No fairy messages. No surprise portals. Not even a stray breeze carrying an insult.

And now? Now she had travelled *here*. Leaving wreckage in her wake like a signature.

Fred leaned forward, elbows on the table. “Well. This just got *fascinating*.”

Skye checked her watch again, the numbers burning into her retinas. “Grandma’s called a family meeting. Today. At one.” She massaged her temple where a headache was forming. “It’s time for explanations.”

Fred’s eyebrows shot up. “You mean your grandparents in the Blue Mountains?” He said it with the same tone one might use to say *the lost city of Atlantis*. Skye had mentioned them often enough—usually between mouthfuls of nostalgic praise for her grandmother’s cooking.

“Yes,” Skye said, mentally calculating travel times. The rain outside hadn’t let up, and the roads would be slick. “And I have to hurry if I’m going to make it.”

Who was she kidding? She was going to be *so* late.

Fred caught her wrist as she moved to stand. “Then I’ll take you.” His fingers were warm against her skin.

Skye shook her head, pulling away. “That’s too much hassle for you. It’s an hour and a half each way, probably more in this weather.”

Fred tutted, catching her hand properly this time and giving it a squeeze. “And miss the opportunity to meet the people who raised such a magnificent lady?” His grin was all white teeth and mischief. “I don’t think so. Besides,” he added, leaning in conspiratorially, “I’ve been dying to try those legendary dishes you’ve told me about. Your grandmother’s cannelloni? The lavender shortbread? I’d brave a cyclone for a taste.”

Skye opened her mouth to protest, but Fred gestured towards the stairs. “Off you go, darling. Freshen up, put on something fabulous. Your chariot—by which I mean my exceedingly comfortable Mercedes—awaits.”

Skye rolled her eyes but couldn’t fight the smile tugging at her lips. She gave him a mock salute and headed upstairs to shower and change, his dramatic flair following her like perfume.

When she came back down, towel-drying her hair, she’d swapped her usual hoodie for a hand-crocheted jumper—dusty pink, hugging her frame with gentle warmth. The pattern was intricate but subtle; her grandmother had made it knowing Skye wouldn’t wear anything too fussy. Paired with her well-worn jeans and bare feet, it made her feel softer at the edges, wrapped in something that mattered.

Fred looked up, caught in the middle of some half-baked quip that never made it past his lips. His gaze lingered longer than polite, tracing the lines of the jumper. The glint in his eye dulled into something warmer, quieter.

“You look...” He trailed off, lips quirking into the barest smile. “Lovely.”

As if waking up from a trance, Fred stepped forward, back to his suave self. He plucked her coat from the chair with an easy flourish. He was halfway to draping it over her shoulders when a black blur dive-bombed between them. Bob landed on the railing with all the grace of a soggy paper aeroplane.

“Ah, you know, Babycakes,” he said, hopping in place. “I’ll just... hold down the fort here. Someone needs to monitor the CCTV feeds—”

“Grandma specifically asked for you,” Skye said.

The way Bob's feathers flattened against his body would have been comical if she wasn't running late.

Fred smirked. "What's wrong, feather duster? Scared of a little road trip?"

Bob's beak snapped open. "I'll have you know magpies are—"

"—territorial birds who hate leaving their nests," Skye finished, rummaging through the console for her spare beanie, pulling it free and giving it a shake like it might sprout wings of its own. The mountains could be cold this time of year, "which is why you've been to Bali twice."

"That was different! Bali had—"

"A five-star aviary suite at the Ayana," Fred supplied, examining his nails. "Complete with organic mealworms. I remember your Instagram posts."

Bob squawked. "You follow my—?"

"Banter later." Skye clapped her hands. Her phone read eleven-forty. "We have to go."

Bob's wings drooped. "Fine. Drag me from my comforts, why don't you? I hope you're all prepared for the emotional toll this will take on me."

He didn't fool Skye. His charm, his deflections—all smoke, covering whatever tied him to Zephyra. That was fine. Skye could wait. She had time, and he'd talk, eventually.

Fred held the door open. The rain had eased to a sulky drizzle, but the gutters still gurgled like a hungover kraken. Skye watched Bob hop miserably across the patio, his feathers fluffing against the damp.

Was he worried Grandma would ask about his connection to Zephyra? Or worse—did Grandma already know? The thought made Skye's chest tighten. Speculating wouldn't get her far, but one thing was certain—Grandma had a way of asking questions that felt like an interrogation wrapped in a cup of tea. Her air magic whispered wind through leaves, but its spine was unyielding oak.

Skye couldn't blame Bob for being nervous. Part of her even felt sorry for him, despite knowing he was hiding something.

"Cheer up," she said. "Grandma might've baked those almond biscuits you love."

Bob perked up. "Oh, yes. Those are to die for."

By some miracle, Fred had managed to park a few steps down from her townhouse. His Mercedes hummed to life, the heated seats radiating comfort as Skye slid into the front passenger seat, shutting the door against the drizzle. Bob flapped awkwardly into the back as he settled in with a sigh.

Fred glanced in the rear view and then at Skye. A knowing smile played at the corners of his mouth.

“Darling,” he said, “if there’s one thing I’ve learnt about family? The food is always worth the scolding.”

Except it would be Skye demanding answers, because Grandma had already admitted she knew more than she’d let on. More about why Zephyra had come to Earth. More about what had led to her little destructive *tantrum*.

Skye buckled her seatbelt with more force than necessary. Somewhere beyond those storm clouds, her perfect sister and a mountain of uncomfortable questions waited. At least she’d have Fred’s wit and Bob’s dramatics as a buffer.

For better or worse, the caravan was rolling.

## CHAPTER 2

The Mercedes' near-silent electric motor hummed as they left the city behind, the long tunnel lights washing over the car's sleek interior in rhythmic pulses.

Fred's voice broke the quiet. "Tell me about your sister, darling. Do you look alike?"

Skye blinked, pulled from her thoughts. "Zephyra is..." She tugged at a curl, the comparison inevitable. "Petite—probably shorter than me now, but somehow commands every room she enters. She has this curtain of straight, dark hair that never frizzes, not even in humidity, and enormous blue eyes that people call soulful."

Fred's fingers drummed lightly on the steering wheel. "Sounds like a magazine cover come to life."

Bob piped up from the backseat: "More like the 'before' picture in a 'how to be insufferable' tutorial."

Skye shot him a look but continued. "And her magic—" Her knuckles whitened around the seatbelt. "She was weaving breezes into lullabies by age five. Could calm a thunderstorm with a sigh."

Fred's gaze flicked to her. "Wait, you're telling me that *you*—Skye Sanders, tech mage extraordinaire, brain the size of a planet—feel second-best to someone?" He shook his head. "You zapped two murderers on a rooftop. Murderers who tried to frame *me*."

Skye winced. That had been a close call.

"Wish I'd been there to see it, but Bob's blow-by-blow made it sound like theatre."

"Yeah, well," Skye said with a smirk. "I also nearly got myself thrown off that roof."

Fred gave a dismissive flick of his wrist, a grin playing at the corners of his mouth. “Please. You even rescued Seb, your immortal vampire boyfriend, who should’ve been saving *you*.”

Her smile faltered for a second. Seb had come for her, even in daylight, weakened and exposed. He’d taken a bullet for his trouble.

Then the praise registered, and her cheeks warmed. Fred was being polite—the way people always were when comparing her achievements to Zephyra’s. Besides, he hadn’t met Zephyra yet.

Bob hopped on the compartment between the front seats, eyes bright. “Remember when she stirred up that little tornado in the story circle? Sent everyone’s quills and inkpots spinning, and painted half the elder tree blue?”

Skye twisted in her seat, the belt snapping taut. “You were *there*?”

Bob ducked his head, smoothing down a ruffled feather. “I might’ve heard... rumours. Hypothetically.”

Skye and Zephyra had been circling each other that day, their fight escalating until Skye shoved too hard. Her parents had blamed Skye for provoking the argument.

“That ended up being my fault, somehow,” Skye said.

Fred chuckled. “Ah, siblings. My sister and I once flattened Father’s prize roses in a brawl over the last Tim Tam. I maintain it was worth it.”

Skye slumped back. “We didn’t play pranks. More like we didn’t get along.”

*Okay, try magical meltdowns.*

“I couldn’t even call it a competition because she was perfect at everything she did.” She gestured vaguely. “Beautiful. Charismatic. Everyone loved her. And then there was me.”

“Gorgeous, brilliant, and infinitely more fascinating?” Fred offered.

“Oh, a genius for sure,” Bob said, “but watch Skye walk and scroll at the same time.”

Outside, the houses disappeared as they began the ascent up the mountain. Forests of eucalyptus trees whipped past, their branches shivering in the wind—a tremble that felt suspiciously like her sister’s touch.

As the road levelled out, the wild sprawl of bushland softened into the tidy charm of Leura. Autumn had painted the town in strokes of amber and rust, leaves drifting lazily from maples and liquidambars to gather in cheerful piles

along the footpaths. Quaint cottages huddled beneath the blaze of colour, their rooftops dusted with fallen leaves, and here and there, a thin thread of smoke curled from a chimney.

Fred eased off the accelerator, steering them onto the main street where cafés flaunted handwritten chalkboard menus and the scent of roasted coffee mingled with the faint tang of burning wood.

The earlier rain had softened to a drizzle, misting the windscreen, and a swirl of red-gold leaves cartwheeled past.

“Bet you feel right at home,” Fred said, eyeing the scenery like it might leap out and try to hug him.

She cracked a small smile, pointing out the old bookstore still standing stubborn against time, its display window crowded with dog-eared titles. “I used to love it there,” she murmured, warmth threading through her voice.

Fred hummed, turning down a narrower lane where the trees leaned in close, their branches arching overhead like conspirators. Her grandparents’ place came into view—a weatherboard cottage wrapped in ivy and the tangled blooms of late-season wisteria. White ribbons rose from the chimney, promising warmth within.

The tyres rolled over the pebbled drive, the sound sharp in Skye’s ears. She gripped the door handle but didn’t move to get out.

Fred leaned forward from the driver’s seat, peering up at the house. “This is your grandparents’ home?” he asked, probably wondering why she hesitated.

Skye nodded once and stepped out, her gaze settling on the pale grey cottage tucked beneath the trees. It looked almost exactly as it had the last time she’d been here, though the ivy had crept a little further along the fence, and were the window frames sporting a fresh coat of paint? Grandpa’s handiwork, no doubt.

Right on cue, the drizzle faded, and the clouds parted to let a few soft rays of sunlight spill through. The pitched metal roof caught the light, while the dormer windows blinked down at her like familiar old friends. The verandah stretched wide, arms open, ready to gather her in.

Fred cast a glance around the yard. “I feel like I’m walking into one of those nostalgic flashback sequences,” he said. “Where the heroine runs

barefoot through the grass and has a secret treehouse and an unnecessarily wise pet goat.”

Skye gave a half-laugh, but it caught in her throat. “Close. No goat. Just a very opinionated magpie and a shed full of jam jars and spell ingredients.”

Fluttering out after Fred, Bob sniffed the damp air. “As long as no one’s expecting *me* to be the wise goat in this scenario, we’re fine.”

Fred smirked. “What, not going to argue about the *opinionated* bit?”

Bob stretched his wings. “Mate, I’m opinionated, not delusional.”

Skye’s boots crunched over the gravel as she approached the porch. The aroma of lemon tree and lavender hung in the air like a welcome home sign.

Memories rose. She could almost hear her grandmother’s voice calling her in from play, the scent of something sweet cooling on the windowsill, the murmured hum of a charm woven into the verandah’s latticework.

Fred walked ahead a few paces, then stopped and turned. “You okay?”

Skye nodded. “Yeah. It’s just... everything here remembers me.”

Reaching out, she let her fingers brush the pergola post. The wood pulsed beneath her touch—an echo of magic, old and familiar. Still here, still alive.

The cottage door swung open before Skye’s boot touched the first step.

Petite as a sparrow, Grandma stood framed in the doorway, her white braid coiled like a crown. She looked delicate, yet her eyes could pin a thunderstorm in place. Time had left no marks, only enhancements: the silver in her brows sharper, the laugh lines deeper maps of joy.

“There you are,” she said, pulling Skye into a hug that smelled of rosemary and the ozone of old magic. Her lips brushed Skye’s cheek, warm as a sunbeam. Then she turned, gaze landing on Fred with the precision of a sniper scope. “Oh. And who do we have here?”

Skye bit her lip. She tended to sidestep conversations about her social life with Grandma, what little of it existed.

Seb had only ever been mentioned in passing, strictly under the client category. Even that had earned her a sharp inhale at the word *vampire*, which was warning enough to skip over the whole boyfriend detail. And now? Argh. Grandma was probably already cooking up ideas about Fred. Best to nip that in the bud before it sprouted into a full-blown matchmaking mission.

“This is Fred,” Skye said. “From my parkour group.”

Fred swept into a bow so fluid it should have been ridiculous but somehow landed on sophisticated. “An honour, madam. Skye’s told me stories about your cooking, though she criminally undersold your radiance.” His grin was all charm. “You look like a woman who’s stolen the moon’s glow for herself.”

Bob, perched on Skye’s shoulder, muttered, “Somebody stop him before I cough up something unspeakable.”

Grandma’s lips curved, sharp as the glint in her eye. “Hush, Bob. Just because you’ve got the subtlety of a brick doesn’t mean the rest of us can’t appreciate a little class.”

Her gaze lingered on Fred, clearly weighing him up. “Mind yourself, though, young man. Talk like that, and you’ll have me setting a place for you for Sunday lunch before you know it.”

Skye sighed. *That’s what I’m afraid of.*

Fred pressed a hand to his chest. “You’ve got me there. Sunday lunch and your good opinion? That’s dangerously tempting.”

Then, with a wink: “But I promise to earn my seat—sincere flattery’s only the opening act.”

Skye shot him a look. *Not helping.*

Grandma’s laugh was a wind chime melody. “Come in, come in.”

Inside, Grandpa stood by the dining table—a bear of a man with bark-rough hands and a grin that split his beard like sunlight. He crushed Skye in a hug that lifted her off her feet. “About time, little spark.”

“This is my *friend*, Fred,” Skye said, putting enough weight on the word to make her point, and stepping back from his solid, familiar hug.

Grandpa’s eyes crinkled at the corners as he wiped his hands on his worn work pants. “Any friend of Skye’s is welcome under this roof.”

“Good to meet you, sir,” Fred said, reaching out for a firm handshake.

Grandpa clasped it without hesitation. “Call me Tom. *Sir* makes me feel like I should be wearing a tie.”

Further in, the dining table boasted several dishes: golden potatoes, a salad glittering with pomegranate seeds, and—centre stage—a cannelloni bake still bubbling at the edges, its cheese crust bronzed to perfection.

Grandma herded them towards chairs with the efficiency of a sheepdog. “Sit. Eat. Before the magic fades and it turns back into leftovers.”

As Skye slid into her usual seat—the one that used to wobble until Grandpa had tightened every screw—the cottage seemed to exhale around her, settling into familiar comfort. The walls held onto her childhood laughter, and the floorboards creaked beneath her boots with their usual complaint.

Bob hopped onto the table, eyeing the food. “So, are we discussing Zephyra *before* or *after* someone throws a bread roll?”

Grandma’s smile didn’t waver as she served Fred an extra-large portion. “Manners, Bob! After lunch. No one ruins a delicious meal on my watch, not even a tempest in full rage.”

Once everyone had been served and the quiet clink of cutlery filled the room, it was Grandpa who broke the silence. “How’s business, little spark?”

“Doing well, Grandpa.”

Business had been good. Perversely, interest had spiked after the murder cases she’d worked on. She hadn’t advertised her involvement, and her name hadn’t turned up in the news (unlike *some* sylphs). But the supernatural community had gossip networks sharper than a hawk’s eyesight, and word had spread fast, especially across the socials.

She *strongly* suspected her apprentice, Josh, had been feeding the rumour mill as well, tidbits to stir the pot while keeping his hands looking clean.

Skye had barely finished her answer before Fred, fork poised mid-air, jumped in. “She’s being modest. Skye’s solved several high-profile murder cases.”

Bob squawked. “Yeah, she should get hazard pay. Maybe a statue.”

Skye’s foot connected with Fred’s shin under the table. His fork clattered onto his plate, and he turned towards her, eyes wide. “Wait, what did I do?”

Grandma, unfazed, passed Fred a plate of salad, the glossy pomegranate seeds glinting like rubies in the afternoon light. She had the faintest twitch at the corner of her mouth, as if none of this surprised her in the slightest.

Grandpa, on the other hand, had frozen mid-chew, his brow creasing deeper with every word.

“So,” Grandma said, sliding the salad into Fred’s hands before he could protest, “tell us about yourself.”

Fred glanced at Grandpa’s puzzled scowl, then back to Grandma’s expectant gaze, and must have decided his safest option was to start talking. “I

run a stockbroking business. Bit of this, bit of that, mostly stopping other people's money from setting itself on fire," Fred said, flashing that easy grin. "Had one client who was convinced he could predict the market by reading tea leaves. Swore it worked—right up until he poured everything into alpaca farms." He leaned in, lowering his voice like he was sharing a trade secret. "I managed to talk him into diversifying a little, but funnily enough, the alpacas actually paid off."

Grandpa let out a low chuckle, shaking his head.

Fred, encouraged, rolled into a few more stories—something about a failed stablecoin cryptocurrency, and another involving a panic sell sparked by Mercury in retrograde.

Halfway through, Grandma swept in behind him, setting down a tiramisu. The dusting of cocoa powder over creamy layers and the rich scent of coffee promised a feast for the senses.

The timing, of course, was perfect.

Skye, however, tapped a finger against her plate, not quite hard enough to be rude, but steady, rhythmic, a silent countdown. Her foot jiggled beneath the table like a restless cat's tail. Fred, oblivious or choosing to be, carried on.

Stabbing into the dessert, more out of frustration than desire, Skye took a bite. Silky, rich, the perfect balance of coffee and cream. For a moment, the irritation bubbling beneath her ribs eased, her foot even stilled.

When she glanced up, Grandma's gaze was on her, a flicker of satisfaction, and a small nod, like *see, I told you dessert fixes everything*.

Except, it didn't.

"Can we talk about Zephyra now?" The words burst out, sharp and sudden, like a gust slamming open a window.

Grandma tutted softly, but Grandpa reached over, his weathered hand patting hers with gentle understanding. Grandma's stern edges softened as she turned to him, offering a smile that held a lifetime in it.

"I'll put the kettle on," Grandpa said, pushing back his chair and heading for the kitchen.

"Come on, let's sit where it's more comfortable," Grandma said, ushering them towards the living room.

The air smelled of beeswax and lavender, and the space was a patchwork of comfort: a well-loved sofa with crocheted blankets slung over its back, shelves bowed under the weight of spell books and photo albums, and a fireplace where embers glowed.

Skye sat on the sofa's edge, fingers drumming against her knee. Fred settled beside her, stretching an arm along the backrest, while Bob claimed an armchair like a feathered monarch.

"Well?" Skye asked.

Grandma arched a brow. "Good things come to those who wait."

"Yeah, well, nothing good comes from Zephyra turning into a criminal."

"Zephyra is *not* a criminal," Grandma said, smoothing her skirt.

Skye folded her arms across her chest. "Did you watch the same news report I did?"

Grandma's lips pursed.

Fred leaned forward, his voice a velvet diversion. "Have I mentioned you have a lovely home, Mrs Sanders?"

Skye wavered between annoyance and reluctant admiration. How had Fred so quickly figured out that Grandma was houseproud? Clever. But darn it, Skye wanted answers.

"Please, call me Anila. Mrs Sanders makes me sound ancient." A smile tugged at Grandma's lips.

"Impossible," Fred said, flashing a grin that could have melted stone. "You'd have to be at least two centuries for that."

Bob gagged. "Someone pass me a bucket. Or a biscuit. Preferably both."

Skye's nails bit into her palms. "Can we please get back to the discussion?"

"You're being impolite," Grandma chided.

Approaching footsteps interrupted them. Grandpa entered, balancing a tray of delicate china—the good set with the forget-me-not pattern—alongside a steaming pot of tea and a plate piled high with homemade biscuits. He set it down on the coffee table with a soft clink, then placed a grounding hand on Grandma's shoulder.

"Skye has reason to be rattled," he said. "I am, too."

"Zephyra is *not* a criminal," Grandma repeated, tucking a stray silver curl behind her ear. "And yes, I saw the news. But I believe there's a reasonable

explanation.”

Skye’s eyebrows nearly met her hairline as she reached for a cup.

Silence pooled, steeping in the room.

Grandpa sighed. “Let’s start at the beginning. Zephyra came to us a week ago.”

*A week.* The words landed like a punch. Skye’s throat tightened. A week of her sister being on Earth, and no one had breathed a word. Her chest burned, but she clenched her jaw, swallowing the outburst.

*Wait. Listen.*

## CHAPTER 3

The teacup trembled in Skye's hand, the delicate floral pattern blurring before her eyes.

Without a word, Fred took it from her. Pouring a generous stream of tea, he added a good splash of milk and set a small strawberry jam biscuit on the saucer. The buttery scent rose with the steam, mingling with the brew's rose petal fragrance.

Despite herself, Skye felt her frayed nerves settle, the cup's warmth seeping into her fingers and, slowly, into her chest.

"Thanks." Skye smiled at Fred.

From the corner of her eye, Skye caught Grandma's small, knowing nod of approval. *Oh, no.* She'd have to stomp out *those* ideas before they took root.

But first, Zephyra.

Grandpa settled beside Grandma on the floral sofa, his broad hand covering hers. As usual, Skye found solace in his steady presence—the quiet counterbalance to Grandma's tempestuous nature.

Time had softened Grandma's sharp edges, but the fire still burned bright in her eyes, a spark Zephyra had inherited without question. Skye liked to think she took after Grandpa instead—calm, logical, measured.

At least, she *usually* was. When it came to her sister, all bets were off.

The Zephyra she'd known had been all reckless laughter and daring escapades. When they were younger, Zephyra had once convinced Skye to jump off a cliff *for fun*, then caught her with a gust of wind at the last second, because Skye's air magic wouldn't come to the rescue.

Sure, she'd mocked Skye's rule-following ways, but she'd never crossed into outright lawbreaking.

Then again, that was back in Fairyland. Here on Earth, maybe Zephyra believed the rules didn't matter. Skye had seen tourists pull idiotic stunts abroad they'd never dream of back home. Was her sister now another tourist fool pushing too far?

Except there was a big difference between dancing on statues or stealing street signs and tearing a town apart.

She shoved the thought aside. Facts first. Feelings could fester later.

"Why is she here?" Skye asked.

She hadn't seen Zephyra since leaving Fairyland. Their rare updates had come through Grandma's visits—trips Grandpa had stopped joining years ago.

*"Never felt welcome there,"* he'd once admitted, his smile tight.

He was the reason Grandma had chosen Earth as their home. In Fairyland, tech magic was met with suspicion at best, open hostility at worst.

Grandpa's fingers twitched against his teacup. "She's been here once before," he said, as if plucking the question from her mind.

The admission landed like a stone in her gut.

That meant Zephyra had come and deliberately avoided her. Skye focused on the dancing steam from her tea, willing her face blank as the hurt burrowed deeper.

"About a month ago," Grandpa added. "And as with this visit, she asked we didn't tell a soul."

*Meaning me.* Who else would they tell? The neighbours? Bob?

"Wait! This visit?" Skye's head snapped up, scanning the room as if Zephyra might materialise from the shadows. "Is she *here*?"

Grandma shook her head. "She was with us, but after the... incident, she called. Said she didn't want us implicated and would stay away until she sorted things out."

The unspoken truth hung between them, thick and heavy as wood smoke.

"So she's still on Earth," Skye said. She bit into the biscuit, barely tasting it.

The logical move would have been to flee back to Fairyland, but logic and Zephyra had never been on speaking terms.

Grandpa leaned forward; his calloused hands clasped between his knees. "Zephyra came because someone stole an artefact from the High Vault."

Skye stiffened. "What artefact?"

Grandma's lips pressed into a thin line. The firelight deepened the creases around her mouth. "The Pyrite Dagger."

Bob let out a low whistle. "Uh oh!"

Fred's gaze darted between them. "And that is...?"

"Bad news wrapped in cursed metal," Bob said. "Carved from a meteorite that fell through seven realms before landing in Fairyland. Cuts through dimensions like butter, or so the legends say."

And how did Bob even know that? Skye shook her head. This wasn't the time to start debugging the glitchy code that was his past.

Her mind ran internal searches, but when it came to the dagger, she drew a blank. She must have been too young for the "dangerous artefacts you must never, ever touch" lessons, and then she'd moved to Earth and missed them altogether.

Another, more pressing question forced its way to the top of her mental queue.

"Why is Zephyra involved?"

Zephyra hadn't been one for rules, responsibility, or anything as tedious as chasing down thieves, especially not across realms. Adventure, attention, and a good audience had always been more her style.

"Your sister's grown up a lot in the last twenty years," Grandma said, as if guessing her thoughts.

Skye snorted. *Grown up?*

The party-loving girl who thrived on showing off how much power she could command? To Zephyra, life had been one endless game, a way to win more admirers, more friends. Of which she had plenty.

Not that solitary Skye had ever been jealous.

*Not much, anyway.*

Grandma sighed meaningfully. "It's a sentient magic dagger."

*Of course it couldn't be a simple dagger.*

"One that can cut through anything or anyone," Grandpa added.

"Dumb question." Fred raised his hand. "Why is that important?"

Fred, being human, wouldn't be able to understand the implications.

"It means," Skye said, "it can slice holes between realms, letting all sorts of... undesirable things come through." She rubbed the back of her neck as she

processed the information and came to the unpleasant conclusion. “And if someone’s wielding it, stopping them wouldn’t be easy.”

There were terrifying monsters in Fairyland—Skye knew that firsthand, but the ones said to haunt the other realms were worse.

Or so the old legends Grandma had taught her claimed. Tales of horrors that crept through rifts and of the mythic air guardians who helped keep the balance. Stories Skye had long ago brushed off as *fairytale*s.

She almost smiled at the thought but forced her focus back to the real problem.

“That still doesn’t explain why Zephyra would come herself,” Skye said.

“Boreas took it,” Grandma replied.

*Ah, Boreas.*

Skye remembered him all too well. How could she not? Beautiful in that too-perfect way—light blue eyes, and shiny blond hair. An Elder’s son, and he flaunted the connection. He drifted through rooms like a sponsored breeze, all floating layers and serenity, with a smile that said *I’m better than you*.

A couple of other sylphs plus Zephyra had completed his little clique.

Skye hadn’t been out of their orbit; she’d been on a completely different planet.

The awkward younger sister, with frizzy curls, undercooked magic, and the social grace of a stunned possum. A tag-along shadow in a world spun from moonlight, silk, and smug smiles.

Boreas had once *accidentally* pushed Skye down a sinkhole twice her height.

Zephyra had reacted fast enough to save her from broken bones, but when Skye had tried to say he’d done it on purpose, Zephyra had defended her friend with fierce stubbornness, refusing to see what was right in front of her.

“Boreas wouldn’t have the guts to steal a biscuit from a tea tray,” Skye muttered.

Not unless he was absolutely sure no one was watching. Then he’d nick two.

“People change, Little Spark,” Grandpa said, echoing Grandma’s earlier words. “Especially when power starts whispering in their ear.”

“The dagger amplifies ambition. Twists it,” Grandma said.

“So now Zephyra’s playing hero?” Skye said, struggling to stitch the pieces together. “She’s never cared about Earth.”

Her sister had made her disdain for Skye’s choice of home painfully clear.

In the fireplace, a log collapsed with a crack, sending a spray of sparks swirling up the chimney.

“Do you think so little of your sister?” Grandma’s voice carried the sharpness of a blade being unsheathed.

The words struck like a blow to the sternum. Skye clenched her fists against the urge to rub her aching chest. Bitterness rose in her throat, thick and familiar.

She’d had to self-exile, her tech magic branded *unnatural* while Zephyra’s air magic earned applause. She’d suffocated in Fairyland, straining for abilities that came as easily as breathing to her sister. Two miserable visits home in twenty years, and both times Zephyra had been conspicuously absent with no explanations, whispers curling behind her back.

Did she think badly of Zephyra? Once, she’d trailed after her like a devoted shadow. Then came the fights when Zephyra’s laughter joined her friends’ taunts, when she dismissed Skye’s inventions as “tacky human tricks.”

Skye exhaled slowly, grasping for objectivity. “I can only judge by what I remember. You say time changes people, but a kelpie doesn’t shed its scales.”

Grandma’s loud inhale sliced through the room.

A low rumble of thunder growled across the sky. The sharp taps of rain sounded on the tin roof—soft at first, then building in frantic rhythm, as if the house itself drummed its fingers.

Bob fluttered down onto the tea tray, wings stirring the steam off the teacups. He snatched a biscuit with the urgency of someone preparing for battle. “Well, this is cosy. Anyone want to discuss the weather before the next round of emotional warfare?”

“Little Spark.” Grandpa’s voice was a steady anchor. “Can you accept you were both children then?”

Trust Grandpa to cut to the heart of it. His faith in Skye had been one of the few constants, and she wouldn’t fail him now.

“Tell me more,” Skye said.

“Boreas deceived everyone,” Grandma said, reaching for a ball of yarn and a crochet hook. Her fingers moved with the mechanical rhythm of someone trying to stitch their way back to calm. “He used his *friendship* to manipulate Zephyra to use her magic to breach the vault wards.”

“So it’s personal,” Fred said, taking a sip of his tea.

“Likely,” Skye agreed. A thought caught her mid-breath. “Why isn’t the Elder here? If his son stole—”

“He believes he’ll return the dagger willingly,” Grandma scoffed. “And refuses to accept he has fled to Earth.”

Bob pecked at his biscuit. “Ah, denial. The breakfast of champions.”

“Worse,” Grandpa added, “the Council suspects Zephyra. They’re talking about sending guards after her.”

The revelation struck like a power surge—everything flickered, then blinked into silence.

“To Earth?” Skye echoed, disbelief flaring. Surely there was some kind of treaty against this sort of thing. She rifled through her mental archives but came up empty—nothing about inter-realm enforcers. Probably not covered in the Academy syllabus.

Grandma nodded, expression grim. “Zephyra needs to clear her name.”

Fred swirled his tea. “Then it seems we’ve got a sylph to find before this turns into something messier.”

Skye’s fingers twisted a curl so tightly the root burned. “So, the Elder’s trying to pin this whole thing on Zephyra—”

“It was her magic that opened the vault,” Grandpa interjected gently.

Lightning split the sky outside, bleaching the room white for a heartbeat. The subsequent thunder rattled the teacups as rain hammered the roof like thrown gravel.

“Yeah, but she’s not the one waving around a dimension-cutting dagger!” Skye’s voice rose with the storm’s fury. Her boot tapped an erratic rhythm against the floorboards.

Grandma’s crochet hook worked faster, yarn looping through her fingers with growing tension. “The Elder implied Zephyra manipulated Boreas, that she wants the dagger.”

“That’s *ridiculous!*” Skye launched to her feet, sending the sofa cushions tumbling. Grandma’s faint smile only stoked the heat crawling up her neck. “What about the chaos downtown? Did Zephyra corner Boreas?”

“Probably.” Grandpa steadied the teapot as another thunderclap shook the house. “She didn’t explain during her call.”

Bob stretched his wings with a sigh. “So, to summarise: two fugitives, one deadly dagger, zero plans, and an emotionally unstable gust of Fairyland chaos. Excellent.”

The logic assembled itself in Skye’s mind, lines of code snapping into a flawless compile: Boreas, though powerful, couldn’t match Zephyra’s raw strength in a direct duel. Using humans as shields? Classic cowardice. And Zephyra—never one for subtlety—would’ve ploughed through like a hurricane. A traitorous flicker of pride warmed Skye’s chest before she stamped it out.

She paced before the fireplace, storm wind rattling the windows. Outside, the sky had darkened into a charcoal smudge, late afternoon swallowed by thunderclouds.

“I need to review CCTV footage and obtain proof Boreas was there. Though the Elder might claim he was fleeing Zephyra.” Her nails bit half-moons into her palms. Fred had been right. They needed to find Zephyra.

“Do you know where she is?” Skye whirled towards her grandparents. “Any way to contact her?”

Grandma’s crochet hook flew, the nascent beanie growing at supernatural speed. “She doesn’t carry a phone.”

Most fae treated electronics the same as they would toxic waste. Even Grandma only tolerated devices because Grandpa’s workshop spewed gadgets like a magpie hoarded shiny things.

Skye groaned. Finding Zephyra would be like tracking a particular raindrop in this deluge.

## CHAPTER 4

Skye's mind whirled, plotting potential ways to track Zephyra down. CCTV with facial recognition was the obvious route. She could scrape time-stamped footage from nearby cameras, cross-reference it with movement data, maybe set up a quick anomaly detection filter for someone matching Zephyra's build. The sticking point, of course, was the lack of a current image to anchor the algorithm. Unless maybe she could—

"I tracked the phone booth she called from," Grandpa said, cutting off her mental data stream mid-execution.

A laugh slipped out before Skye could stop it. Of course he did. She looked at him, affection softening the edges of her frustration. So clever and unflappable. Everything she aspired to be.

"Where?" Fred leaned forward, rain streaking the windows behind him like frantic claws.

*Please don't say Sydney!*

The city sprawled across more than twelve thousand square kilometres. It had enough concrete, bricks, and high-rise shadows to lose an army, let alone a single sylph. Add in the crush of commuters, the humming sprawl of suburbs, and scattered pockets of magic—some flaring bright, others barely a whisper—and it was like searching for a spark in a thunderstorm.

"Katoomba," Grandpa said.

Skye's shoulders dropped. Not as big as Sydney, but still a large mountain town.

"Scenic World, specifically," he added.

The tourist hub? Skye's mind assessed the possibilities as wind howled through the eaves.

Cable cars, a steep railway, cliff walks, rainforest trails—Scenic World was all sharp drops and suspended platforms, clinging to the edge of the escarpment like a dare. And around it? Kilometres of national park: towering gums, dense undergrowth, and sandstone cliffs veined with shadow. Easy to vanish into. Harder to search without alerting everything with ears.

Zephyra had always loved heights.

With a gesture, Grandpa summoned a map of the Blue Mountains and cast it onto the wall. Skye stepped closer, tracing a finger over the ridgelines and valleys. Lightning forked outside the window beside it, the storm turning the glass into a rippled mirror that threw their grim reflections back at them.

“The national park’s massive,” Skye said. “If she’s gone to ground there, we’ll never find her without a lead.”

Grandma tapped the map near Katoomba. “There are a couple of old surveyors’ huts along the cliff line. Isolated, but dry.”

“Or the mines,” Grandpa added.

Fred shuddered. “Dark, cramped, and decidedly *not* safe for tourists.” Fred eyed the map like it might bite him. “Which makes them perfect hiding spots.”

Skye chewed her lip. “But Scenic World’s crawling with tourists. Thousands of them.”

The attraction boasted it was open every single day of the year—rain, shine, or magical catastrophe.

“Exactly.” Fred’s grin was razor-sharp. “What better camouflage than a crowd? She could blend in with a school group, easy enough to play the visiting student.”

Zephyra’s diminutive height would help with that. People didn’t look twice at someone who barely reached their shoulders.

Skye snorted softly. She was one to talk. At five foot nothing, she might have been tall for a sylph, but most humans assumed she was fresh out of uni, not thirty. The curse of a compact build and a face that refused to age on schedule.

Skye frowned. “Except for the robes. She was wearing sylph clothing in the news footage.”

Grandma still held the crochet hook, twirling it like a wand. “That girl is smart and could charm the scales off a dragon. She’s likely found something

more... local by now." Her expression became thoughtful. "She could also have taken some of your old clothes when she stayed with us."

Yes, Skye admitted reluctantly to herself that Zephyra would probably figure out the smart way to blend in.

Honestly, the robes might have been a statement, and a disguise rolled into one, if she'd planned that far ahead. Zephyra hadn't been much of a planner back then, but she was clever, and when it came to her escapades, she'd always put more thought into them than she let on. She'd got away with a fair bit, hadn't she?

Bob cleared his throat with a sound like a creaky hinge. "I can have my associates be on the lookout. Magpies see everything in those trees, though the lyrebirds are worse for gossip, and the currawongs never miss a thing."

Skye shot him a look. They still hadn't had that chat about how he knew Zephyra. Had she asked him to keep tabs on her little sister? Skye dismissed the idea firmly. After all these years, with no contact? It didn't add up.

So what was their connection?

Questions buzzed at the edges of her thoughts, but they'd have to wait.

Scenic World was a labyrinth. And beyond it, cathedral gum trees, tangled undergrowth, and sandstone cliffs honeycombed with caves and old mine shafts.

A flock of bird spies would help.

Though now that she thought about it... how would that work? A magical magpie like Bob might be able to spot a rogue sylph, but could ordinary birds pick Zephyra out of a crowd? Could they even tell the difference between a breeze and a fugitive with wind at her heels?

So many questions and not enough time.

"Right," Skye said, squaring her shoulders. "Bob, mobilise your friends. Fred and I will check Scenic World and focus on the less crowded areas. Grandpa, can you dig up any mine maps?"

Grandpa was already tapping at his tablet. "Of course."

Lightning flashed, throwing their shadows against the wall—a fractured council of war.

Somewhere out there, Zephyra was either hunting or being hunted. And the storm, it seemed, was only getting started.

Skye's phone buzzed in her pocket. A message from Seb lit up the screen:  
*Where are you?*

Her thumbs hovered mid-air. He knew she'd come up to the mountains for lunch, but maybe he assumed she was heading back by now. It was close to five, after all, and the rain had that clingy, settling-in-for-the-evening sort of persistence.

*Still at my grandparents' in Leura.*

Three grey dots appeared. Paused. Flickered.

*Can I come?*

Her stomach did a slow somersault.

Yes, warred with, *absolutely not*—the thoughts colliding like rogue shopping trolleys.

Grandma's feelings about vampires were roughly equivalent to her feelings about mildew: bad for you, persistent, and best scrubbed away with salt and iron.

But having Seb here? Having him help untangle the Zephyra situation would be *nice*. Grounding. He was good in a crisis. Even better with shadows and secrets.

She bit her lip. Her pulse wasn't helping. Neither were the butterflies doing aerial stunts in her gut.

*Okay*, she sent, then pangs of anxiety knotted her stomach.

She was still mentally drafting excuses—trying to work out how to explain Seb's sudden arrival—when she caught Grandma giving her *that* look. The one that said *I know you're up to something, and I'm waiting for you to trip over your own story*.

"So," Skye began, forcing a smile. "Remember that client I mentioned?"

Fred tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

The doorbell chimed.

Of course it did.

Grandma set down her crochet. "Are we expecting someone?"

Skye was already sprinting down the hall.

*No. No way he got here that fast unless he—*

She yanked the door open.

Seb stood on the porch, rain glistening in his platinum hair like liquid silver. He wore dark jeans and a charcoal jumper that clung to him in all the right ways, raindrops beading along the fabric as if the weather didn't dare soak him. No umbrella. No coat.

"Hello, Firefly."

His lips brushed hers, brief, but enough to light a fuse in her cheekbones. Skye felt the warmth flood up her neck as she heard a familiar tread behind her.

She spun around.

"Hello," Grandma said, voice cool as creek stones. Her gaze swept over Seb: the unnatural pallor, the way the shadows clung to him like loyal hounds, the hum of power that surrounded him.

*How much did she see?*

Skye's words tumbled out: "This is Seb. The client I mentioned. He's helping with a case."

Seb's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly at *client*, but he merely inclined his head. "Ma'am."

Grandma's nostrils flared. "I see."

Her tone could have frozen boiling water.

Fred's cologne announced his approach—a swirl of bergamot and charm wafting in from the living room. He materialised a second later at Skye's side.

"Thornhill," he drawled.

Seb's smile hovered on the edge of cold. "Bancroft."

Bob fluttered onto the hatstand. "Hi, Seb!" he chirped, just a little too brightly.

Grandma's gaze snapped to him, but Bob ignored her. "Well, isn't this lovely?" he said. "Everyone accounted for, no blood spilled. Let's call that a win, shall we?"

Grandma's knuckles whitened around her hook. "Skye. A word?"

"We need to find Zephyra," Skye blurted, grabbing Seb's wrist. "*Now*. Bob's got leads, Fred's got ideas, and Seb's got resources." She edged towards the door. "We'll call you."

Grandma's mouth opened, protest ready.

But Fred stepped next to her. "Thank you for the tea, Anila," he said, retrieving both his raincoat and Skye's from the stand. "Truly. A lovely visit."

"Wait!" Grandma said imperiously, and everyone froze.

She scurried off and returned with a small bag. "Healing potions, in case." She handed them to Skye.

Bob flapped onto Fred's shoulder, tail feathers flicking. "Don't wait up," he cackled.

"Bye!" Skye hauled Seb onto the porch as rain sheeted down, sealing them in a private cocoon of mist.

Seb's voice was velvet over steel. "*Client?*"

Skye winced. "I panicked."

Behind them, the door clicked shut. Why did it sound like disapproval?

Under the porch, Skye scanned the street, expecting to see the sleek black limo Seb usually travelled in. As if reading her thoughts, Seb murmured, "The driver's nearby. Didn't want to spook your grandparents." A beat. "Though it seems your grandmother was... less than charmed."

*Yeah, no way I'm unpacking that one.* Not tonight. Not ever, if she could help it. A small voice in the back of her mind muttered that burying things was nothing but delayed debugging, and sooner or later, the system would crash.

Fred handed over her raincoat, and Seb stepped in to drape it over her shoulders, his hands lingering long enough to make her breath hitch. They walked outside the gate together, boots crunching on the wet gravel.

Right on cue, the limo glided into view, sleek and silent, its tinted windows gleaming like obsidian under the storm-heavy sky. It rolled to a stop behind Fred's Mercedes, close enough to make a point.

Fred didn't so much as glance at the limo. He turned on his heel and walked towards his car, every step radiating studied indifference.

Skye's brain snapped enough synapses back into place to realise a contest was brewing and did an internal eye roll.

Two men. Two luxury cars. Enough pride to fuel a mid-tier magic duel.

Fred held his umbrella high. "Shall we take my car?" He turned the full wattage of his grin on Skye. "Fully electric," he added silkily. "Zero emissions, efficient, and not the least bit allergic to sunlight."

Seb's brow arched. "Charming. Though I had the limo converted."

Skye blinked. *Really?* She'd given him the full rundown on the inefficiency of oversized petrol guzzlers, but she hadn't thought he'd taken it to heart.

"Custom electric drive," Seb went on, as if casually reciting specs. "Cloaking enchantments, reinforced windows. Quiet as a whisper, and significantly harder to hex."

"Wait, vampires can go green?" Bob asked as he fluttered over to Skye's shoulder.

Seb offered a half-smile. "We adapt."

A breath escaped, fogging in the cold as Skye blinked. "Brilliant. You're both environmentally conscious. Progress."

With a gentle push, the limo door swung open, releasing a wave of warmth that curled around her like an invitation. "This makes the most sense. We can all fit, stay dry, and plan our next move."

And with that, she climbed in, leaving the two of them measuring each other in the mist.

Bob swooped in after her, followed by Seb and, after a beat, Fred, who took the seat opposite.

As the car pulled away, Skye briefed Seb.

"Scenic World will be closed, won't it?" Fred asked.

Skye glanced up from her phone. "Actually, we're in luck, sort of. They're running the nocturnal light show tonight."

Her thumb hovered for a moment, then tapped, checked, and scrolled. The hope in her posture wilted.

She sat back. "Except it's sold out." A pause. Then, reluctantly, "We'll have to find another way in."

Casting a look out the window, she sighed. She hadn't been planning on hiking through the mountains in the dark. Or the rain.

"Give me a couple of minutes," Seb said, pulling out his phone.

Skye bit her lip, impatience itching along her nerves as he fired off a flurry of texts.

Anger at her sister's actions still simmered, but sympathy flickered too. Zephyra was out there, alone in a world she barely understood—chasing a criminal who'd fooled everyone. That took guts, Skye had to admit.

She turned to the window, watching rain spatter the glass as the limo turned onto a road swallowed by bushland, darkness pressing around them.

Finally, Seb looked up. "I got us tickets."

Relief bloomed in her chest. "Oh, thank you," she said, offering him a small smile.

Shortly after, the limo pulled up to the main entrance and eased to a stop. Outside, the night pulsed with activity. Families bustled past in rain jackets, kids waving glow sticks like wands, and couples leaned into each other beneath shared umbrellas.

The bold sign of Scenic World lit up the misty dusk in electric blue, casting reflections in puddles and turning the wet pavement into a stage of colour and shadow.

## CHAPTER 5

Skye stepped out, clutching her coat tighter as the drizzle found its way under the collar. The drone of voices and distant music blurred into the night air.

This wasn't going to be an easy search, but it might be their best shot.

Her eyes swept the crowd, and unease coiled tight in her chest. Too many people. Too much noise. The press of bodies sent her pulse into an uneven rhythm.

Seb's hand found hers. He raised it gently, brushing a kiss across her knuckles. A silent gesture that said *I see you* with more clarity than words ever could.

A heartbeat later, Bob swooped in and landed on her shoulder. "Right then, team," he declared. "Let's find a fugitive sylph before someone asks me to pose for a souvenir photo."

Fred appeared at Skye's other side, his umbrella tilted to shield her from the worst of the drizzle. "Well," he said, "if we don't find your sister, at least I can cross *unplanned family outing meets covert mission in the rain* off my bucket list."

He gave her a sidelong glance, the usual glint in his eyes tempered by something gentler.

Skye's lips twitched. The pressure in her chest eased, like turbulence settling into a steady current.

Seb flashed the tickets' code, and they were ushered to the railway platform.

As Skye took her seat, her breath quickened. The world's steepest passenger railway was *not* for the faint-hearted.

The carriage gave a low creak, then lurched forward, tipping into the cliffside as the descent began. The tracks groaned beneath them, the angle steep enough to make Skye's stomach shift. Coloured lights flickered across the ancient rock walls, casting rippling blues and purples that turned the narrow passage into a moving kaleidoscope.

Skye grinned, the thrill overriding her anxiety. The wind whipped through her hair, and the scent of damp earth and eucalyptus filled her lungs.

To their left, the cliff face loomed so close she could have reached out and grazed her fingers against the sandstone.

*Zephyra's here somewhere. And we're coming.*

The train shuddered to a halt, its mechanical groan fading into the soft hush of rain on the canopy.

Doors slid open with a pneumatic hiss, and Skye stepped out onto the viewing platform, her boots meeting slick timber underfoot. The forest opened around them in a swirl of mist and movement, the elevated walkway winding ahead like a ribbon strung between treetops.

Down the path, the light show unfolded in quiet brilliance.

Bursts of colour shimmered through the eucalyptus leaves—cool blues and vibrant greens dappling the trunks, while threads of gold and violet danced like will-o'-the-wisps across the underbrush.

Illuminated sculptures of native animals emerged from the shadows, glowing with inner light: a possum mid-climb, a lyrebird with its tail feathers unfurled in a shimmering fan, a wedge-tailed eagle poised as if ready to soar. Some moved—subtle, graceful shifts that felt almost real. Maybe they *were*, Skye thought, eyes narrowing.

Gasps and laughter echoed from the families behind them. Children chased spots of colour that darted along the ground, and couples paused under the canopy of lights to take photos or just marvel.

Skye meant to stay focused. To scan the tree line, and think like an investigator, not a tourist. But a dome of soft light bloomed ahead, bathing the walkway in a slow pulse that synced with the wind, and something in her chest unknotted.

A breeze curled around her ankle like a cat, playful and warm despite the drizzle. Magic laced through the air, subtle and old, and the illuminated

walkways hummed with energy.

For a minute, Skye forgot why they were there.

“What does Zephyra look like?” Fred asked, pulling Skye from her reverie.

She blinked, the magic of the moment dissolving like mist.

Seb leaned in, his breath cool against her temple as he drew in a slow breath. “Does her scent match yours?”

The question caught her off guard. She knew vampires had sharp senses, but it hadn’t occurred to her that Seb could *track* by scent. He was full of surprises, a reservoir of capability wrapped in charm and shadow.

“Her magical signature is similar,” Bob said, talons shifting against the railing. “The same, but not the same. Well... almost entirely different, except in the ways it’s alike.”

Skye’s head whipped towards him. “So not only do you know what she looks like, but you also know her magical signature?” Her voice carried an edge sharper than the surrounding cliffs.

Bob hopped from foot to foot. “Right. I’d better go scout and conscript some local help, shall I?” Without waiting for an answer, he launched into the air, vanishing into the gum trees’ canopy.

Seb tracked Bob’s flight through the trees. “He’s keeping secrets.”

“Not the only one,” Skye muttered.

To her satisfaction, Seb flinched—a mere tightening around his eyes, but enough to send a petty thrill through her. Which she immediately chastised herself for.

*Ugh. Grow up, Skye.*

“Firefly.”

Seb’s fingers brushed a curl near her ear, his voice so low it vibrated through her. Up close, his eyes glinted with flecks of crimson, like embers stirred in a dark hearth.

“I know we haven’t finished our talk. But your happiness matters more than *my* secrets.”

The way he said *my* wasn’t lost on her. Not *all* secrets, only the ones he claimed as his own. And the rest? Still locked up, filed under *not his to share*.

But he was trying. That counted. Her chest warmed despite the cold rain.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Skye gave a small nod. She closed her eyes, reaching inward, calling up memories of Zephyra.

Her sister had always seemed so tall, twirling through sunlit glades with dark hair streaming behind her like a ribbon of ink. She could still picture that perfect button nose crinkling with laughter whenever her levitation attempts went sideways, and those heart-shaped lips pursed in disapproval the day Skye smuggled her first piece of human tech into Fairyland.

She let the image shift, ageing it slightly—sylphs didn't age like humans, but time softened edges, altered posture, rewrote expressions. Then she stepped back from Seb, fingers twitching in a precise sequence. Thin lines of blue light flickered between her palms, converging until the projection snapped into place with a faint hum.

The hologram shimmered to life: long, straight hair, black as a starless night, whipped around delicate shoulders by an unseen breeze. Her eyes were a startling, sky-blue, eerie, as if she were looking at Skye.

Around them, tourists oohed at the light show, oblivious.

The rain eased, then stopped altogether, leaving the trees dripping and the air thick with petrichor. Skye tilted her face upwards instinctively, surprised by the stillness.

Beside her, Seb inhaled deeply, his eyes half-closed. Something in his posture shifted—focused, predatory.

Without a word, he moved, slipping through a break in the crowd and veering off the main path towards a quieter, less-travelled section of the boardwalk. The lights were sparser here, the glow fainter, the tourists fewer.

Then, in a blur of motion, Seb vaulted the railing and dropped into the forest below, so fast he was little more than a shadow against wet leaves.

Skye didn't hesitate. She raised her hand and conjured a quick burst of bright, fluttering sparks that spun into the trees in the opposite direction, drawing eyes and gasps with them.

"Let's go," she whispered, and vaulted the fence after him.

Fred followed a breath behind her, his landing nearly silent despite the slick undergrowth. Their parkour training kicked in without thought—controlled steps, and low centre of gravity.

The forest welcomed them like a secret, dark and pulsing with magic beneath the surface.

Getting her bearings, Skye scanned for signs of Seb's direction. Around them, the nocturnal bush came alive. Possums scurried up scribbly gums, their eyes flashing, while a lyrebird's startled cry pierced the air as it fled through the undergrowth. Skye followed the ripple of retreating animals, their instincts sharper than any tracker.

She found Seb in a clearing, circling like a predator, his silhouette sharp against the pale moonlight. "She was here," he murmured. "Not long ago."

A concussive blast of air slammed into Seb, hurling him backwards. He hit a boulder with a sickening crack, and the stone splintered on impact.

Skye's breath caught, then rage flooded in, white-hot and blinding.

She didn't think. Didn't need to. Her magic surged—*both* kinds. Air curled around her like a living thing, whispering across her skin, tracing the residual energy back to its source. At the same time, her smartwatch pulsed to life, current building in her palm, a low hum of barely restrained power.

Air and tech, flowing in sync, no resistance, no glitch. The realisation flared in the back of her mind—startling, important. But it could wait.

Someone had attacked Seb.

And something in her tore loose.

She unleashed a crackling arc of lightning into the darkness.

A yelp. A thud.

Seb blinked, pushing himself upright.

*He's okay.*

The relief did little to quell the fire in her veins. Skye sprinted forward.

She skidded to a halt as Zephyra rose from the bracken like a storm made flesh, hands raised, gusts coiling around her fingers. Moonlight poured over them both, turning her sister's glare into something carved from silver and fury.

"What do you think you're doing?" Skye snarled, hurling a warning shock at Zephyra's boots. The ground blackened and hissed where it struck.

Zephyra didn't flinch. "You're consorting with *vampires*?" she spat, her voice thick with disdain.

A whip of air snapped towards her. Skye twisted on instinct, half-dodging, half-dispersing it with a gesture. The rest skimmed past her torso like a slap made of wind.

No more words. Skye lunged.

They collided like storms, grappling in the dirt. Zephyra's knee jammed into Skye's ribs; Skye retaliated with an elbow to her sister's jaw. Magic crackled between them, half-formed spells fizzling as they rolled, a tangle of rage and old wounds.

Skye and Zephyra tumbled through the soil and moss, their magic sputtering out as the fight turned raw and physical—gritted teeth, clawing hands, and the occasional well-aimed shove. Skye's curls came loose in damp, tangled waves, streaked with dirt and rain, while Zephyra's hoodie was ripped at the shoulder, jeans slick with mud.

As Skye reared back for another swing, strong arms wrapped around her waist and yanked her backwards. Seb.

Fred, calm as you please, strolled up to Zephyra with one hand raised and a charming grin in place.

Skye's heart lurched. *No!*

She bucked against Seb's grip, breath tearing from her lungs. "Let me go! She's going to kill him."

Unbothered, Fred stopped a mere step short of Zephyra, offering a half-bow and extending a hand like they were about to waltz.

"Well, this is a pleasant surprise," he said lightly. "I don't usually get to meet beautiful women mid-brawl, but I must admit—it does make a memorable first impression."

Skye tensed, waiting for Zephyra to blast him into next week, but her sister hesitated. Then, after a beat, she took Fred's hand, letting him pull her to her feet. The moment she was upright, she dropped his fingers like they'd burned her, blinking as if startled by her own compliance.

Zephyra took a step closer to Skye, her brow furrowed, mouth set in a hard line.

Before Zephyra could do anything, though, Fred rested a gentle hand on her arm, his tone softening. "Easy now. No one's throwing punches or spells for the next five minutes, all right?"

A shadow passed overhead, wings flapping noisily. Bob circled down, landing on a nearby branch with an exaggerated flutter. “Ooh, looks like I missed a good fight!”

Both sisters turned towards him in perfect unison.

“Shut up,” they said together.

Bob snapped his beak close with a loud click.

Seb’s lips brushed Skye’s ear. “You okay, Firefly?”

The fight drained from her, though her shoulders stayed tense. Seb relaxed his grip but didn’t release her entirely—whether because he didn’t trust her not to lunge again, or to steady her, she wasn’t sure. To be fair, Skye didn’t trust herself either.

Squaring up to her sister, she decided to take the high moral ground. After all, *she* was the mature one between them. Obviously.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Skye ground out.

Okay, maybe that wasn’t the moral high ground, but it was at least higher than the mud currently streaked all over her clothes and smeared across her cheek. She swiped at her face but suspected all she did was redistribute the grime.

Zephyra scoffed. “Oh, so you think you can lecture me? You’re still the same little sister who trailed after me like a lost pixie, impossible to shake.”

*Not for lack of trying.*

Skye’s fingers twitched, and she wanted to rub the old ache in her chest. Instead, she lifted her chin. “Some of us actually grew up. You should give it a go.”

Seb and Fred moved simultaneously. Fred stepped subtly into Zephyra’s space, a human shield, while Seb guided Skye backwards towards a fallen log. She barely registered sitting until she realised she was perched in his lap, his arms a loose cage around her.

But Zephyra planted her hands on her hips and opened her mouth, that familiar spark of defiance lighting her eyes. Skye tensed, bracing for impact—words poised like kindling, ready to ignite the moment her sister spoke.

“Enough, Babycakes and Sugarstorm!” Bob snapped.

For half a second, Bob’s usual mischief was gone, replaced by something sharper, older. Then he blinked, and the moment passed. “Shall you carry on

with your emotionally stunted reunion, or shall we solve the pesky problem of law enforcement in two realms hunting Zephyra?”

Fred took advantage of the distraction to ease Zephyra onto the log beside him, close enough to intervene if she tried anything. Not that he would be able to stop her. Skye tilted her head.

*Yet Fred got her to stop advancing and sit.*

Seb’s thumb traced idle circles on Skye’s hip. “Breathe,” he murmured, for her ears only.

She exhaled, watching her sister. Maybe Fred hadn’t done so badly after all.

## CHAPTER 6

The forest exhaled, and leaves rustled.

A lyrebird mimicked Scenic World's distant machinery, and moisture plopped from gum branches onto the sodden earth.

Skye studied her sister through the fog rising from rain-warmed ground.

Zephyra was beautiful, even with dirt streaked across her nose and chin like war paint. But the shadows under her eyes had nothing to do with mud or moonlight. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, fingers twitching at her sides—not with anger now, but exhaustion. She looked... haunted.

"What happened with the dagger?" Skye asked, surprised at how level her voice sounded.

"Hello to you too, sister dear," Zephyra said—her tone a little sharp. More habit than heat.

Skye bit back three different sarcastic replies. Seb's chin resting on her head, and his steady breath, settled her. "Hello, Zephyra," she said instead. "It's good to see you."

Zephyra's eyes narrowed as if waiting for the punchline. Funnily enough, part of Skye meant it. She'd never been a good liar, and twenty years couldn't erase that.

Fred brushed a leaf from his sleeve. "Ladies, while this reunion is undeniably *thrilling*, might I suggest we relocate somewhere with fewer mud-based hazards?" He gestured at their mud-caked clothes. Turning her way, he offered Zephyra a dazzling smile. "Though I must say, few could make windswept and wilderness look quite so regal. You're setting the bar dangerously high for post-battle fashion."

A soft chuckle escaped Zephyra, and the rigid line of her shoulders eased. Skye tilted her head. Fred, with nothing but charm and a well-timed

compliment, had done what magic and reason couldn't. Her admiration notched up a level. Miracle worker, indeed.

Skye tried again, ignoring Fred's suggestion for now. "The dagger, Zephyra?"

Zephyra let out a breath, her fingers worrying the torn edge of her hoodie. "Boreas said he needed it to stabilise the border rifts." Her voice caught briefly on his name, a falter that said more than she likely intended.

Fred's eyebrows lifted. "Boreas?"

Of course he noticed the hitch. Skye had clocked it too, but reading people never came naturally to her. It took effort, attention. Fred, on the other hand, made it look effortless.

"He's a... was a *friend*," Zephyra said.

*Ha. A friend, my left wing, and I don't even have any.*

Seb's arms tightened around Skye. "And you believed him?" Skye asked.

"Of course I did," Zephyra snapped, then deflated. "He had... access to certain archives. It seemed plausible."

"You trusted him," Seb corrected gently. "That's different to believing. Trust can make fools of all of us—when it's placed in the wrong person."

The words settled in Skye's chest. Not accusing, but guilt-inducing, nonetheless. And maybe personal. She wondered what betrayals Seb had endured in the long sweep of his life, what shadows he'd let in that had turned on him. The way he said it—*us*—sounded like experience, not theory.

Trust was important to her, essential even, if a little terrifying. Seb had only recently started lowering the walls he usually wore like a second skin.

She could be patient. Mostly. Ish. Maybe with snacks.

Shifting minutely against him, she let their shoulders align. A small gesture, and she wondered if he'd notice.

Seb stilled. Then, wordlessly, his arm slid from her waist to wrap around her ribs with careful pressure. His thumb brushed a lazy circle against her side.

Bob squawked. "Ah, love. The original weapon of mass delusion. Cheaper than hexes, and twice as messy."

Zephyra's glare could have frozen lava.

*Boreas*, seriously? Then again, it tracked. He'd been unfairly pretty as a teenager—probably looked like an elf from the Spring Court nowadays. "So,

where's the dagger?"

"With him," Zephyra said, the bitterness in her voice enough to sour the air. "And before you ask—no, I don't know where he's gone."

"Fine," Skye said, "but you must have been tracking him somehow. If I scour the CCTV footage from your little downtown disaster, I'm betting I'll spot him."

Zephyra blinked. "CC-what?"

Skye nearly facepalmed. Right. She was explaining surveillance tech to someone who probably would think *wireless* meant *wind messages*.

Bob fluttered down between them. "Imagine tiny mechanical fairies that watch everything you do and gossip about it to metal boxes," he said cheerfully. "Also, they judge your fashion choices."

Skye's exasperation must have shown, because Zephyra crossed her arms with a sniff. "I *do* know what one of those metal message devices is."

"You mean a mobile?" Skye said, unable to resist.

Fred reached out and patted Zephyra's hand. Skye winced, half expecting her sister to blast him into a tree.

But instead, Zephyra tilted her head, studying Fred with something like curiosity. Maybe even the faintest trace of amusement.

"Darling," he said with a wink, "if mobiles were just devices, we wouldn't need half the therapists in Sydney."

Zephyra gave a tiny snort. Not a smile. Not quite. But close enough that Skye blinked.

Fred, of course, looked unbearably pleased with himself. "I still think we should relocate somewhere more comfortable," Fred eyed the dark tree line. "Some of us feel the cold."

His pointed look at Seb was met with vampire indifference, but Skye couldn't suppress a shiver as the evening chill seeped into her damp clothes.

Seb must have noticed. Without so much as glancing at Fred, though the absence of his usual disdainful silence spoke volumes, he nodded. "Good idea."

"We could stay with Grandma and Grandpa," Skye offered, then immediately regretted it. Between Grandma's vampire prejudice and her own reluctance to share about her relationship with Seb, that was a disaster waiting to happen.

Zephyra beat her to the objection. “Bad idea. They’ll insist on helping, and I’d rather they didn’t.”

Skye bristled on instinct. “They’re plenty powerful.”

Grandma’s air magic could still silence a room, or a cyclone, with a whisper. She’d once grounded a thunderbird mid-flight using nothing but a disapproving look and a gust severe enough to snap branches.

And Grandpa? His tech-magic workshop practically hummed with sentience, his inventions as unpredictable as they were effective. He’d rigged their toaster to detect magical interference and once hacked a scrying mirror into a three-realm communicator. Between them, they could probably outwit half the Fae Elder Council and short-circuit the other half.

“I don’t want them in danger!” Zephyra’s teeth clenched before she added softly, “This is my mess. I need to clean it up.”

“And by ‘I,’” Bob clarified, “you obviously mean *we*, because even a sylph who can lasso a cyclone with her pinkie can’t untangle this mess alone. Trust me, solo heroics make great headlines and terrible endings.”

Seb pulled out his phone, and the absence of his arm around her side was immediate. Skye missed the quiet weight of it more than she wanted to admit. At least his other arm stayed snug on her waist, anchoring her.

Zephyra’s eyes narrowed with interest. She leaned towards Fred. “A vampire has a *mobile*?” she said, tasting the word like it was something slightly ridiculous.

Fred’s grin turned wicked. “Oh, darling, they have come a long way from carrier flying bats. I look forward to introducing you to Earth’s many... indulgences.” The flirting was thick enough to cut with the Pyrite Dagger itself.

Did he mean it, or was he keeping Zephyra in check with charm and theatrics? Hard to say. This was Fred, after all. He flirted like other people breathed.

Zephyra gave a faint smile, but the fatigue was etched deep. Her usual sylph-like grace had thinned, her movements a little looser, less precise. She swayed on her seat, the weight of being both hunter and hunted probably tugging at her with every breath, leaving a frayed edge to her posture.

Seb dialled. Whatever safe house he was arranging, she hoped it had a big shower. And a hot drink. Definitely, a hot drink.

“Good evening. This is Sebastian Thornhill of House Bellmont.” His voice smoothed into that polished British accent he reserved for formal occasions, all crisp consonants and velvet vowels. “I require accommodation for myself and three companions.” A pause. “Yes, that will suffice.” Another beat. “We shall arrive within the hour. Might you also arrange dry clothing?”

His gaze skimmed over their rain-soaked, mud-smeared group as he rattled off clothing sizes with unnerving precision. Skye wasn’t shocked he knew hers. Seb had bought her dresses before, somehow always nailing the fit. But the way he pegged Fred and Zephyra’s measurements without so much as a tape measure raised a few eyebrows.

Maybe he really had been a valet once upon a time? The thought made Skye chuckle under her breath—until Seb shot her a look, one eyebrow arched in question. She half-sat across his lap, cradled like something fragile and potentially feral.

Yeah, right—*and she was the life of the party.*

“Casual attire is acceptable,” he concluded. “Your discretion is appreciated.” And he hung up.

The trek back to the platform was mercifully short, though every step squelched with wet leaves and stubborn mud.

They climbed out of the Jamison Valley’s embrace in a ragged procession. Fred led with his usual flair, somehow managing not to look entirely dishevelled; Bob flitted ahead like an anxious tour guide; Zephyra remained silent, her damp hoodie clinging to her head; and Seb, beside Skye, glided rather than walked.

He moved with the calm inevitability of a tide returning to shore—composed, dignified, and untouched by rain or argument.

Thick bushland slowly gave way to the curated trails of Scenic World as the wild gave up its hold to man-made paths and soft guide lights.

The elevated walkway greeted them with a reassuring solidity, its planks vibrating under their boots. Sounds of civilisation filtered back in: the distant buzz of visitors, the faint hum of overhead wires, and somewhere nearby, a child laughing at a glowing possum installation. The forest, with its shadows and secrets, began to feel like another world.

To Skye's immense relief, the railway was still running. The alternative would have been a vertical hike that, while theoretically within her capabilities (she *had* scaled a cliff once, though it was after being pushed off one), held little appeal in wet socks and emotional fatigue.

Not that she'd have minded how Seb could perhaps assist her with that particular ascent. The thought sent a thrill down her spine, which she promptly chastised.

*I'm capable. Independent. Not some swooning—*

The cable car's arrival interrupted her internal lecture, gliding into the station with a whisper and a hiss, softly lit like something conjured out of mist.

They squeezed in among the crowd of tourists, their mud-caked clothes earning sideways glances and a little extra room. Conversation proved impossible over the shrieks of delighted children and the mechanical clacking of the carriage, leaving Skye to study their reflections in the glass—four battered figures suspended between earth and sky, the valley's lights twinkling below like scattered stardust.

Zephyra stood rigid beside Fred, her fingers still plucking at the frayed edges of her hoodie sleeve. Skye recognised that look—the assessing gaze of a creature deciding whether to fight or flee.

Seb, unbothered by either the vertiginous drop or the curious glances their mud-splattered group attracted, kept his hand at the small of Skye's back.

That casual stance of his was deceptive; he would have already catalogued every passenger, coiled to react faster than any human could blink. She may not be a fan of the underlying and ready violence but couldn't fault his protective streak or his alertness.

It struck her then—she hadn't done her usual threat assessment of Zephyra. Sister or not, she eyed the way moonlight glinted off Zephyra's blue eyes. Could Skye trust her?

*She's powerful, unpredictable, and we haven't seen or talked to each other for years.*

Threat level: High.

The cable car gave its final lurch as it docked at the top station, the operator's cheerful "We hope to see you again!" registering over the racket of tourists disembarking.

Seb held her back until the crowd thinned before guiding her out, Fred and Zephyra trailing behind.

Outside, the chauffeur waited with a stack of fluffy white towels, which they accepted in silence, scrubbing at dried mud and leaf litter.

Bob, perched on the limo's roof and steadfastly refusing to be "deconstructed by terrycloth," broke the tension with a stage whisper: "Do we tip the vampire for valet service, or is that included in the whole 'ancient nobility' package?"

Seb's lips quirked, and even Fred chuckled as they piled into the car, having surrendered their soiled towels.

The limo glided away from Scenic World, leaving the night show behind as it wound through the darkened mountains. The road hugged cliffs, offering glimpses of the Jamison Valley below—a vast, inky expanse punctuated by occasional pinpricks of light from distant homesteads.

Skye pressed her forehead to the cool glass, watching the silhouettes of scribbly gums blur past.

Soon they pulled up to the hotel—a grand sandstone edifice perched dramatically on the clifftop, its façade softened by ivy and age. Arched windows glowed like lanterns in the mist, casting warm pools of light onto the flagstone drive.

Inside, the air carried a hint of polished wood and lavender oil. The reception was all old-world charm with a modern gloss—brass light fixtures, thick carpets, and an Art Deco fireplace crackling in welcome. Behind the counter, the receptionist handed over two keycards with a polite smile, as if guests arrived in various states of disarray all the time.

Maybe they did, though the understated opulence of the place suggested otherwise. Then again, wealth didn't necessarily make people less bizarre—just better at hiding it under cashmere throws and concierge service.

What was the word? Ah, yes, *eccentric*.

"Two rooms?" Fred raised an eyebrow.

Zephyra, who'd been unusually quiet, straightened. "Skye and I can share."

Despite not consulting anyone, her tone brooked no argument.

Fred and Seb exchanged a glance—a silent, weighted thing that had Skye's stomach knotting. Uh oh! Those two together? It could go so badly.

But Fred merely smiled. “Of course. I’m sure you two sisters could use the time to reconnect.”

*Ah, no?* Skye screamed internally. Outwardly, she managed a tight nod, praying Fred and Seb wouldn’t murder each other in the night.

“We should debrief first,” Seb said, his voice calm but firm.

As a vampire, he was at his peak now—night was his domain. And truthfully, Skye was too wired to sleep anyway. Besides, it wasn’t even ten yet, practically afternoon by her nocturnal standards.

Zephyra squared her shoulders, her chin lifting in a move so reminiscent of Grandma, Skye nearly laughed.

“Indeed,” Zephyra said. “Proper introductions are overdue.”

At least she wasn’t eyeing Seb like he might bare his fangs and drain them all on the spot.

Fairyland had its own monsters—maybe vampires seemed quaint in comparison.

A polished man in a navy suit approached, his salt-and-pepper hair impeccably styled and his demeanour radiating efficiency.

“Mr Thornhill?” He gestured to the trolley beside him, laden with shopping bags. “We’ve prepared a selection of attire for you and your companions as requested. Shall I escort you to your rooms?”

Not even a flicker of surprise crossed his face when Bob swooped down and chirped, “Evening, mate!”

He merely inclined his head and replied, “Good evening, sir.” As if addressing magpies was an everyday occurrence.

Seb nodded, and the manager led them to the lifts, gold-trimmed doors that slid open without a whisper. Skye cringed when she caught her reflection in the mirrored panels, as it smoothly rose to the top floor.

Plush carpet muted their footsteps as they stepped out into a hushed corridor lined with tasteful artwork and subtle downlights.

The rooms were adjacent, doors framed by elegant wood panelling and brass numbers that gleamed under soft lighting. Skye stopped at the first one. The manager offered a courteous smile as he handed over several matte-black bags, the sleek look and discreet logos whispering wealth. Skye murmured a

thank you, fingers tightening slightly on the handles as she tried not to think about the price tags.

Turning to Seb as Zephyra vanished inside, she added, “Let’s regroup here in half an hour?”

She shot him a look she hoped conveyed, *Please don’t murder Fred.*

Lifting her hand, Seb brushed his lips against her knuckles. “As you wish.”

His smirk suggested he was amused by her concern.

Skye closed the door behind her and exhaled, taking in the room. The suite was a study in understated luxury—high ceilings with intricate cornices, a chandelier dripping crystal teardrops, and floor-to-ceiling windows framing the moonlit sprawl of the Megalong Valley. Plush sofas in deep sapphire velvet formed a seating area around a marble coffee table, where a silver tray held an assortment of gourmet chocolates and a handwritten note: Welcome, Mrs Thornhill.

Skye nearly choked, hastily crumpling the note and shoving it into her pocket before Zephyra could catch a glimpse.

Bob, of course, had seen everything and cackled. She wagged her finger in warning, the universal language for *Not. A. Word.*

To the left, twin beds dominated the space, their linens crisp and inviting, piled with pillows to drown in.

A door ajar revealed a bathroom worthy of a five-star spa. It had a freestanding tub and a rainforest shower big enough for three.

Zephyra rifled through the shopping bags, pulling out a black jumpsuit and holding it up with a critical eye. “Your vampire has decent taste,” she conceded.

Skye snorted, grabbing a bag labelled with her name. “He does, but this would have been selected by the hotel staff.”

For all she knew, Seb stayed here so often, his tastes were known. Too late she realised she hadn’t denied he was *hers*, but luckily Zephyra didn’t press her on it.

Inside, she found dark jeans, a cashmere sweater, and a pair of boots with heels that felt dangerous for unprepared ankles.

“Right,” she said, heading for the bathroom. “I call first shower.”

Zephyra’s smirk was pure mischief. “You’d better make it count. Not every day you’re getting dressed up for Lord Pale, Mysterious, and Intensely

Watchful.”

Skye waved her off, but the heat rising in her cheeks betrayed her.

And she’d got the Lord part right too.

Skye was in and out of the bathroom in ten minutes, record speed, considering the plush towels and alluring scent of something floral and wildly expensive. But she couldn’t relax. The clock was ticking, and more importantly, she was deeply uncomfortable leaving Fred and Seb unsupervised for too long.

Zephyra breezed past her without comment, but before closing the bathroom door, she paused and turned, one brow lifted. “Who’s the good-looking human?”

Skye blinked. “Fred? He’s a friend.” A grin tugged at her lips. “Annoyingly charming, but very clever and harmless. Mostly.”

Hmm. Fred’s charm *was* a weapon, precision-tuned and as effective as a heat-seeking missile.

Zephyra’s lips curved. “Good to know.” And then she shut the door.

## CHAPTER 7

A knock sounded at the door.

Still recovering from the whiplash of the interaction with her sister, Skye opened it on autopilot.

Seb strolled in first, all easy elegance in black jeans and a slate-grey jumper that hugged his torso. His damp platinum hair caught the light like moonlit glass.

Fred followed, casual only by his standards—light-coloured suit jacket over an open-collared shirt, paired with tailored trousers and spotless loafers. He looked like he'd wandered off the set of a designer whisky ad, and he knew it.

Bob squawked. "Fred's still alive," he announced. "No teeth marks, no hexes. Remarkable."

At that exact moment, the bathroom door opened again with suspiciously perfect timing. Zephyra stepped out, dressed in a pantsuit tailored to her petite frame. Despite her size, she radiated presence—her walk a fluid current of purpose.

Damp hair spilled over one shoulder, and her eyes, clearer now, held a familiar steel. The transformation was subtle but striking. She'd weathered a storm and come out ready to command a room—fierce, in a razor-edged way that would make people think twice before underestimating her. "Hello there," she said, gaze zeroing in on Fred.

Not even a glance in Seb's direction. While part of Skye was relieved Zephyra wasn't launching verbal barbs at Seb, the pointed avoidance stung.

Apparently, prejudice ran in the family.

Fred's grin widened into something that should have come with a warning label. "My, you're even more beautiful than I initially appreciated."

Zephyra tilted her head, lips parting into a smile that was... coy?

Skye's eyes darted from one to the other. *What's going on?*

Another knock interrupted. Seb opened the door and stepped aside as two waiters wheeled in a trolley laden with food, arranging it artfully on the coffee table.

"I ordered sustenance," he said. "You should eat."

Sustenance. The word sat oddly on Skye's tongue. She cast Seb a sideways glance. As far as she knew, his idea of nourishment involved blood, though he could eat regular food, and occasionally did so with disarming gusto. She'd only ever seen him drink blood once... and thankfully, not from a person.

Her curiosity stirred. Did he need it daily? Was he hungry now?

Once the waiters had unloaded the trolley, they slipped out, the door closing behind them with a soft click.

Platters of food were uncovered like treasure: steaming bowls of saffron rice with roasted vegetables, grilled lamb cutlets with rosemary jus, a vibrant salad of heirloom tomatoes and burrata, and a rich mushroom risotto sprinkled with truffle shavings.

The scent of freshly baked bread curled into Skye's nostrils, warm and inviting. A small cheese board sat beside the golden rolls. Brie, aged cheddar, and smoky blue had been arranged with the care of a fussy chef.

For dessert, delicate slices of lemon tart and chocolate ganache cake rested on porcelain plates, each garnished with tiny edible flowers like a kiss in petal form. Beside them, a crystal dish held a selection of handcrafted chocolates.

Fred's eyes lit up. "Finally, a proper post-battle spread."

"Funny," Bob said, fluttering down towards a cherry tomato, "I didn't see *you* fight."

Fred plucked a chocolate and offered it to Zephyra. "Try this. The chocolate's divine."

She accepted it with a tilt of her head. "I've never had this food before," she said, inspecting the delicate swirl of glossy dark chocolate.

Fred's grin widened. "Then tonight, darling, prepare to have your taste buds transformed."

Bob chirped. "You're laying it on thicker than a glamour spell at a fae fashion show."

“Oh, I haven’t even turned on the vintage charm yet,” Fred replied, eyes twinkling.

They gathered around the coffee table, steam curling from the platters. Seb plated a lamb cutlet, a scoop of risotto, and slices of tomato, placing it in front of Skye.

Zephyra leaned in, eyeing the offerings like they might hiss or sprout legs. Her fingers hovered near a roll, then withdrew.

“Overwhelmed by choice?” Fred asked lightly. “I’d be delighted to curate an experience.”

At her hesitant nod, he dished up a small portion of the mushroom risotto, adding extra truffle shavings, and smeared a creamy blue cheese onto a warm bread roll.

Zephyra took a cautious bite, then froze.

For a moment, she looked like she might reject it. Her expression shifted. Surprise flickered. Her lips pressed together as she chewed slowly. “It’s... unexpectedly good,” she said at last.

Fred gave a slow nod, satisfaction radiating off him like a cat finally coaxing a wary bird to eat from its paw.

Bob snorted. “Fae cuisine could learn a thing or twelve about flavour. I swear, some fairies think ‘adventurous’ means adding an extra petal to a salad.”

Seb, who’d been quietly assembling a roll with aged cheddar, cut to the chase. “Tell us about Boreas.”

Zephyra’s fork paused mid-air, then clinked softly against her plate as she lowered it. Her unfocused gaze drifted somewhere far beyond the room. “He’s accomplished. Not as strong as me, but an effective wielder. And lately, he’s taken to studying old texts and artefact lore. He’s become a bit of a scholar.”

Skye scoffed. “He’s also a bully and arrogant as heck.”

“We were children,” Zephyra countered weakly.

“Yeah, and selkies don’t change their skins,” Skye said.

Fred reached for the wine bottle, blocking Zephyra’s line of sight. “Sounds like someone needs a drink.” He poured a glass for Zephyra, then glanced towards Skye with a raised brow.

Chuckling without humour, Skye shook her head. “You should know better than to offer me wine,” she said.

Last time had ended with her facing off against a vindictive vampire in six-inch heels. Skye had won—barely.

Fred's eyes twinkled. Clearly, he'd offered on purpose. Maybe he thought a splash of wine might take the edge off. But no. This wasn't a moment for dulled reflexes or fuzzy thinking. Not with Zephyra in the room and trouble circling.

To her mild surprise, Fred turned to Seb next. "And you?"

Seb's gaze lingered on the glass a beat too long before he gave a single nod. "Yes, thank you."

Skye's chest eased. Wine accepted, insults withheld. They were being civil. If it lasted longer than ten minutes, she'd take it and frame it.

Fred obliged, pouring Seb a careful measure, then topped up his own before sliding the bottle back into its cradle.

He turned to Zephyra, who had already drunk a third of hers.

"What matters is his plan now. Do you know much about that?"

Her fingers tightened around the stem, and then she took a longer swig. "I can't deny he played me like a harp." A wry smile tugged at her lips. "But I don't think he acted alone—and no, I'm not referring to my dazzling contribution." She exhaled slowly. "I intercepted messages."

The hitch in her tone made Skye ask, "Before or after the theft?"

"Before," Zephyra said. "He'd been acting off. I thought maybe he was cheating on me. The message had a specific tone."

Fred arched a brow. "Intimate?" he guessed.

"Yes. No. I don't—" She blew out a breath and raked a hand through her hair. "I don't know. But I have the name of a female. And maybe... a location."

Bob cooed. "Ooh, how intimate? As in candlelight and poetry, or more along the lines of steamy scrolls and secret rendezvous?"

Seb lifted a chocolate, holding it near his mouth. "Enough to make her break up with him."

"He denied everything," Zephyra muttered.

"Well, *duh*," Bob said, fluffing his wings. "When in the grand tragicomedy of romance have cheaters ever led with honesty? A liar's a liar—whether it's your heart or a vault they're stealing from."

Fred smirked. "Since when are magpies relationship experts?"

“We live longer than most of you and have front-row seats to all your romantic catastrophes,” Bob shot back. “Think of me as nature’s gossip columnist with wings.”

Magpies lived for about forty years. Not that long, but still longer than most pets and some relationships. That line, *most of you*, tugged at Skye’s thoughts like a gust slipping under an unlocked window. And who did he mean by *we*? “About that lifespan—”

“I didn’t believe his denials,” Zephyra cut in, derailing Skye’s interrogation about Bob’s mysterious past. “But when he spoke about healing the rifts, he seemed sincere.”

Skye snorted. “So, you believe he cheated on you, but not that he lied about needing the dagger to repair a rift between the realms? You think he’d risk destabilising two worlds to protect them, but wouldn’t manipulate *you* to get what he wanted? That’s a logic error large enough to fly a zeppelin through.”

Bob’s earlier words about liars echoed in Skye’s mind. Secrets might not be outright lies, but omissions walked a fine line. Seb dealt in carefully edited truths, each one chosen like code in a sensitive program. She glanced at him, and he dipped his chin in her direction, the subtle motion betraying he’d noticed her shift in mood. Of course he had.

Zephyra’s fingers tightened around her wine glass. “Are you trying to school me about relationships while being *courted* by a vampire?” she snapped.

Skye bristled. “Seb has more honour in his pinkie than Boreas has in his whole body, wings, wind tricks and all.”

Seb beamed at her.

“Girls,” Bob interjected, pecking the table like a judge’s gavel. “We’ve been over this. Your bickering is embarrassing your plus-ones.”

Zephyra crossed her arms. “I don’t *have* a plus-one.”

Bob’s eyes gleamed. “Plenty of pixies in the mushroom ring, Sugarstorm.” He shot a pointed glance at Fred, who choked on his risotto.

“Wait! Sugarstorm?” Skye asked.

He’d called Zephyra that back at Scenic World too, and it had the distinct flavour of an old nickname, well-worn and rather familiar.

Zephyra rolled her eyes. “As if Babycakes is any better.”

Skye huffed. "At least mine doesn't sound like a unicorn-themed weather pattern."

"Oh, please, yours sounds like a failed bakery mascot."

"It does not."

"It *does* too."

They stared at each other, expressions teetering between defiance and amusement—then both cracked. Laughter burst out of them, sudden and unrestrained, the tension dissolving like honey in tea.

With a thoughtful tilt of his head, Fred glanced at Zephyra. "I rather like Sugarstorm. Sweet with a bite."

"Hands off my nicknames!" Bob squawked. "Besides, Her Frostiness would never let you—"

"Actually," Zephyra mused, looking at Fred, "it sounds less ridiculous when *you* say it."

Fred's grin turned wolfish. "Does it now?"

"Not that I'm granting usage rights," Zephyra added hastily, her cheeks pink.

Skye leaned in. "But Bob gets a free pass?"

"That's different."

"How?"

"Because—"

"We're getting off track," Bob interrupted, looking to Seb for backup. "Am I right, oh shadowy sovereign of sensibility?"

Seb steepled his fingers. "You know Skye won't drop a mystery once she's sunk her teeth in. But Bob's correct. We need to stop Boreas before he triggers an inter-realm incident."

"Pretty sure Zephyra's already handled the incident part," Skye said, the spark of sibling rivalry flickering beneath her words. When Zephyra glared and everyone else sighed, Skye threw up her hands. "Fine! But we're clearing her name *and* saving the realms."

"In that order?" Fred asked.

"Argh! Not you too," Skye said.

"Let's focus," Seb said firmly. "Boreas and his accomplice."

"Or lover," Bob threw in.

“Or both,” Fred chimed in, swirling his wine glass.

Zephyra let out a soft huff of laughter. “I take my snarky comments back. You’ve got enough chaotic energy around you without me adding to it.”

Bob opened his beak, but Skye fixed him with a warning glare. “Don’t!”

“Merely observing,” Bob said, all innocence. “What’s one more act in this charming little circus?”

He cackled as Skye groaned, burying her face in her hands.

“Bob.” Seb’s voice was mild, but something in it made the air still.

The magpie froze, then sheepishly mimed zipping his beak shut with a wing. “Fine. Silenced. Gagged. Artistically oppressed. Just know history will judge you.”

“Right,” Zephyra said, her smile vanishing. “The woman’s name is Tess, and the location is Leura.” She pronounced it ‘Leh-uh-rah’, drawing out the syllables.

“Leura,” Skye corrected automatically. “You didn’t realise that’s where Grandma and Grandpa live?”

“This is only my second time visiting them!” Zephyra said. “I’ve been a bit preoccupied tracking a magical traitor, in case you forgot.”

Seb’s hand settled on Skye’s arm, but she had already shifted into investigator mode. “How did you track him?” Skye asked.

Too many magical signatures muddled things. Their signals would be layered, causing interference, and making it near impossible, even for someone as powerful as Zephyra, to isolate one presence. A scrambled signal in a storm.

Maybe in a smallish space, she could have narrowed it down. Sylph magic was distinct, after all, and rare enough on Earth to stand out.

“Oh!” Skye straightened. “That’s why he went to Sydney! Smart.”

Point to Boreas.

“Yes, except the fool wore the courting ring I gave him,” Zephyra said, her mouth twisting in a grimace. Her jaw tightened. “He used humans as shields. I was trying to avoid collateral damage when he slipped away.”

*Ah, yes. Brilliant strategy. Really nailed that one.* But Skye kept the sarcasm to herself, just.

“By the time I reached his last location,” Zephyra continued, “all I found was this, discarded in a bin.”

With a flick of her wrist, a gold band studded with rainbow-hued gemstones materialised in her palm.

Fred leaned in to examine it. "Rather pretty for a traitor's trinket," he murmured, then brightened. "At least we've got a name and location! Though surely, he'd avoid your grandparents' town now?"

"Boreas probably knows even less about Earth geography than Zephyra," Skye mused. She tapped her chin. "Unless his accomplice guided him to Sydney for another reason."

A first name like Tess in a town of four thousand wasn't exactly a neon sign pointing to his hideout.

Perhaps there would be clues in the message Zephyra had intercepted?

"Can you remember the exact wording of those messages?" Skye asked, pulling out her phone.

Zephyra stiffened. "Does it matter?" Her eyes flicked to Fred, then away.

Skye tilted her head, watching her sister closely. Was that reluctance or embarrassment? Is that why Zephyra was hesitating? Darn it. A pang of guilt pricked at Skye's chest, but she forced herself to stay the course. They couldn't afford to get sidetracked by tangled feelings or bruised pride.

"Yes. It does." Skye's words clipped the air, her tone edged with the effort it took not to throw her hands up.

Red bloomed across Zephyra's cheeks.

Fred rose from his seat and crossed to the writing desk. "Why don't you write it down for Skye?" he said lightly, setting a pen and notepad in front of her.

Zephyra gave him a grateful glance, one that made Skye's shoulders ease a fraction. Thank the stars for Fred and his knack for clearing the static from the air.

With careful strokes, Zephyra wrote it down and then passed the folded note across the table. Skye scanned the looping handwriting:

*My dearest Boreas, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you put a spell on me. I miss you more than I care to admit, and I can't wait to see you again.*

It had been signed with a T and a heart emoji.

Skye winced. *Yikes*. No wonder Zephyra had been cagey. This reeked of late-night poetry and bad decisions. She reread it, then tapped the first line.

“She’s a witch.”

Okay, so she wasn’t entirely sure, but it was the *if I didn’t know any better* that got her. Humans still clung to the idea of love spells and enchanted charms, which, of course, were utter nonsense. The closest real thing was a siren’s song or a vampire’s lure—both more about coercion than Cupid. Any halfway-trained witch knew love spells didn’t exist. Not real ones.

Seb leaned over her shoulder. “Useful?”

“Maybe.” Skye’s thumbs flew across her phone, searching *witches + Leura*.

Unsurprisingly, several entries popped up. The Blue Mountains had long been a haven for the supernatural. Its mist-shrouded peaks and ancient valleys quietly welcomed those who didn’t quite belong elsewhere.

Many claimed the land itself thrummed with spiritual energy, old magic embedded in the rock and wind, waiting to be harnessed. Whether that power healed or harmed, of course, depended entirely on the hands that wielded it.

Skye wished, not for the first time, that there was a switch. A fail-safe to strip magic from those unfit to carry it.

Skye scrolled down.

Madame Esme’s Crystal Cave (*Accurate tarot or your money back!*)

The Druid’s Hollow (*Organic ingredients since 1987*)

Mystic Tess. (*Crystals, Spells & Potions at Reasonable Prices.*)

Skye snorted. Genuine witches didn’t sell spells like discount bin scrapbooking supplies. It could get her in trouble with her local coven, or even worse, if the High Witch heard about it. However, her first name’s initial matched.

Some members of the supernatural community weren’t above hustling gullible tourists. Tess might be a fraud, or worse, a practitioner desperate for money. The latter would explain her teaming up with Boreas. Who knew what he would have promised her? This Tess might be the one they were looking for.

A few more taps revealed Tess’s boutique on Leura’s main street, opening at midday tomorrow. No surname, but the shop’s logo—a crescent moon tangled in what looked like thorn vines.

*How cliché!*

“Got her,” Skye said, projecting the image as a 3D hologram above the coffee table. “If it’s her, she might have gone to ground after the debacle with Boreas in the city.”

“Don’t think so,” Seb said. “The city is so far away she likely feels safe here.”

“Reasonable prices?” Fred said, reading the shop’s tagline. “Darling, anyone who puts that in is either desperate or dangerous.”

He had echoed Skye’s very thoughts.

“Or both,” Seb murmured, his fingers grazing Skye’s. The contact sent a subtle current along her arm—whether sparked by the brush of his touch or the storm of nerves building inside her, she wasn’t sure.

Seb turned to Zephyra and arched an eyebrow. “Unless you told Boreas you intercepted the message when you confronted him?”

“I’m not stupid.” Zephyra tossed her hair. “I only said I was suspicious and waited to see if he’d trip over his own lies.”

“Let me guess,” Fred said, his usual easy charm edged with something darker. “He swore you were the love of his life. That there could never be anyone else.”

Skye’s gaze flicked to him. Had he lived that script before?

Zephyra nodded. “I told him I didn’t believe him and stormed off.”

Bob fluttered onto the table. “So, do we storm the witch’s lair at dawn or —”

“Midday,” Skye said firmly. No way of being sure it was the right witch, and she’d rather not break the law if she didn’t have to. She winced. There’d been a time when that wasn’t even a question. “That’s the shop’s opening time.”

Zephyra’s grin was all teeth. “Perfect.”

## CHAPTER 8

Skye crossed her arms.

“You’re not coming,” Skye said.

“Like the Crone’s crown I’m not!” Zephyra’s glass hit the table with a loud clink. “We’ve already established you don’t tell me what to do.”

Fred offered Zephyra another chocolate, which she didn’t even glance at.

“We have established nothing,” Skye said, glaring back, only just managing to ignore the way Seb, seated beside her, caressed her arm.

“I quite like this authoritative side of you, Firefly.”

Heat suffused her cheeks.

Zephyra opened her mouth, but Skye cut her off with a raised hand. “Even if the CCTV footage is grainy, witness descriptions will have circulated by now. The police would have had a sketch artist do a composite—might not be perfect, but close enough for someone to recognise you.” Her gaze shifted to Fred, an idea sparking. Josh wasn’t here to rig up a disguise, but Fred? He’d do in a pinch.

Catching her look, Fred’s lips curled slowly. He’d have already figured out where her thoughts had wandered.

Skye turned back to Zephyra, who was halfway out of her seat. “You can’t go out in public.” She waved a hand at Zephyra’s general etherealness. “If Tess is a witch worth her salt—”

“Very funny, Babycakes,” Bob interjected. “Witches and salt. Like it.”

Skye gave him a pointed look, then forged on. “She’ll have wards able to pick up on fae magic. You walk past her shop and they’ll light up like a dashboard on fire.”

That took the wind out of Zephyra’s sails, and she sank back into her chair, shoulders tight but with no comeback.

Skye pivoted to Seb. “You can’t come either.”

One dark eyebrow arched. “Daylight isn’t the handicap you seem to think —”

“Why risk it?” The memory of Seb’s near-fatal daylight exposure not that long ago tightened her throat. “Fred, Bob and I can handle a meeting.”

Zephyra gasped. “You’d send a *helpless human* into danger?”

Fred’s laugh was all sharp edges. “Darling, if you think stockbrokers are helpless, you’ve clearly never seen a bidding war over mineral rights.” He adjusted his cuffs. “I eat corporate sharks for breakfast. A rogue witch is practically a palate cleanser.”

Bob fluttered onto the chandelier. “Also, hello? Magpie here. My ancestors stole shiny things from dragons. We’ve got this.”

\* \* \*

“Rise and shine, Babycakes,” Bob crooned directly into Skye’s ear. She cracked one eye open to find him perched precariously on her duvet, feathers brushing her nose.

Zephyra was still asleep in the next bed, face smoothed of its usual sharpness, dark lashes fanning against her cheeks.

In the soft morning light, she looked like the big sister Skye remembered: the one who’d let her sneak into her bed after nightmares, whispering stories about cloud palaces until she’d sink into sweet dreams.

Time had honed their edges in different ways, but that old tug of kinship remained, stubborn as gum resin.

Skye eased out from under the covers, her bare feet sinking into the plush carpet as she tiptoed to the sitting room.

“What time—” Her whisper died as she took in the scene: Fred lounging on the sofa like a contented cat, a breakfast spread worthy of a café covering the coffee table.

Golden toast stacked beside jars of homemade-looking jams, fluffy pancakes drizzled with syrup, a proper teapot steaming next to an assortment of tea bags—and, blessedly, a matcha latte with her name on it.

“Good morning, darling,” Fred said, a roguish grin playing on his lips. “I approve of the pyjamas. You look absolutely adorable!”

The silk pyjamas in question were a hotel courtesy: deep emerald green with a subtle sheen, soft enough to melt against the skin.

Skye scowled, scrubbing a hand through her bedhead. “You’re way too cheerful.”

“It’s practically midday,” Fred said, pouring tea. “And I slept like a log. Your broody vampire opted to ‘work’ in the sitting room all night.” He mimed air quotes. “So I had the bedroom to myself.”

Skye loaded her plate with pancakes. “Is he still up?”

“Dead to the world now.” Fred waggled his eyebrows. “Literally and figuratively.”

Bob cackled. “Nothing like a round of supernatural musical beds to start the day!”

“Please,” Fred scoffed, “if I’d wanted to share with Lord Broods-a-Lot, I’d have carried him bridal-style.”

Skye nearly spilled her latte. The comforting warmth had just begun sweeping the sleep from her brain, but Fred’s comment jolted her fully into alert mode. His words about the time caught up a second later, and she swivelled to glance at the clock above the mantel, eyes narrowing as the numbers registered.

“Darn it! I wanted to catch Tess as soon as she opened.”

Fred waved a syrup-drizzled fork in a theatrical flourish. “First, you’re a walking hazard before noon. Second, this is the Blue Mountains. We’re in the land of flexible schedules and herbal tea delays. Storming in while she’s still yawning over her crystals is simply bad form, darling.”

Over breakfast, they tossed around ideas for how to approach Tess.

“You could pose as a couple seeking a love enhancement,” Bob suggested, head tilted with exaggerated innocence.

Fred choked on his tea. “Absolutely not,” he gasped, reaching for a napkin with wounded dignity. “I have standards.”

Bob fluttered onto the jam jar, eyeing him like a disapproving aunt. “Please. You’d flirt with a fire hydrant if it winked at you.”

“Only if it had good bone structure,” Fred shot back, smoothing his collar.

They settled on Fred playing the wide-eyed, spiritually curious type. He'd wax lyrical about energy blockages and aura misalignment while Skye would act as the sceptical friend, reluctantly along for the ride.

Her role? To ask the practical questions and steer the conversation towards dangerous artefacts, without blowing their cover.

It was the only plan that had a chance because it played to who she was. Skye knew herself well enough to admit she couldn't fake New Age wonder without giving off strong *undercover cop at a drum circle* energy.

Bob's final verdict:

"Excellent. One airy dreamer, one suspicious spreadsheet. She'll either try to convert you or confess everything just to make it stop."

They finished breakfast quickly, and Skye changed back into last night's dark jeans and cashmere top—no point dressing up for a potential confrontation.

Zephyra remained curled under the duvet like she hadn't slept properly in weeks. Skye left her a note in case she woke before they returned.

The air was crisp, the kind of cold that seeped into her bones. Skye tugged her jumper tighter as they stepped outside, where Fred's Mercedes sat at the kerb, keys in the hands of a valet.

*Seb must have arranged for the car to be brought over.* The realisation warmed her almost as much as the jumper. If the vampire and the stockbroker had survived a night sharing quarters *and* coordinated logistics without bloodshed, maybe there was hope for peaceful coexistence.

The drive from the hotel to Leura's main street was wrapped in the soft lull of early afternoon. Mist clung to the ridgelines, the tree-lined roads weaving through pockets of fog and damp eucalyptus air. Grand old houses gave way to the town's quaint business strip—weatherboard shopfronts painted in heritage hues, window boxes spilling with overzealous geraniums, and cafes buzzing with lunchgoers.

The sky hung low and expectant, clouds swollen with the promise of rain. Fred steered them into a parking spot a few doors down from Mystic Tess's shop. Its front was dark, the display window cluttered with crystals, herb bundles, and a dreamcatcher tangled with fairy lights. The sign on the door had been flipped to *closed*.

Skye peered inside the glass. The whole setup looked like the lovechild of a boho market stall and an eccentric apothecary.

Fred sighed. "Either she's running late or not opening today."

Skye pulled up the area's layout on her phone. "There's a back entrance," she said.

"Breaking and entering? *Again?*" Bob flapped his wings in protest. "I swear, one of these days I'm going to start billing you for my services as a criminal accomplice."

Fred gestured for her to take the lead, and they strolled down the street, rounding the corner as fat raindrops began to fall, dotting the pavement like inkblots.

The narrow alley behind the shop was empty of passersby, just the rhythmic patter of rain and the muted hiss of tyres slicing through wet asphalt in the distance. Bin lids glistened under the drizzle, and a scattering of fallen leaves clung stubbornly to the cobblestones. It was exactly the kind of overlooked space where secrets felt at home.

Skye's eyes swept the alley with a mixture of calculation and professional disappointment. No cameras. No motion wards. Not even a basic sensor rune etched into the back gate. Honestly, it was laughable. For someone supposedly steeped in magical insight, Mystic Tess didn't grasp the basics of practical security.

Skye resisted the urge to roll her eyes. This was why people hired consultants like her—well, people with half a clue and something worth protecting. If this was how Tess ran things, no wonder she'd ended up tangled in someone else's mess.

Bob grumbled but took up his post on a nearby awning. "If we get arrested, I'm pleading avian ignorance."

The backyard gate had a simple latch. Skye shook her head. "Laughable." She flicked it open with ease.

They stepped into a hidden oasis—a garden plucked from a fairy tale.

Lush ferns crowded stone pathways, their fronds slick with rain. Climbing roses twisted around wrought-iron arches, their petals a deep, velvety crimson. At the centre stood a gnarled apple tree, its branches heavy with fruit.

The air smelled of damp earth and something sweeter, like crushed herbs and honey.

Skye's smartwatch vibrated against her wrist. *Magic*. Tess was the real deal.

Fred let out a low whistle. "Well. This is either incredibly charming or incredibly ominous."

Skye's fingers brushed the petals of a nearby flower. "Let's find out which."

They crept along the stone path, the garden's enchantment thickening the air like syrup. The back porch held a wrought-iron dining set, its curling edges beading with rain that dripped onto the timber decking.

Two mismatched plates sat abandoned, each with half-eaten portions of pasta tangled with mushrooms, the sauce now dull. Beside them, a pair of teacups remained filled, the tea gone cold. Skye leaned in, nose wrinkling slightly as the lingering bergamot hit her senses—definitely Earl Grey.

Whatever had interrupted the meal, it hadn't given them time to clear the table. A single fork lay dropped on the pavers.

Skye's skin prickled. She crouched, pressing her palm to the door's lock. Having watched her apprentice pick locks with ease, she decided to try her own version. A whisper of air magic threaded through her fingers, coaxing the mechanism's inner workings. With a soft click, it yielded.

Fred called out, "Hello? Anyone home?"

Skye shot him a look.

"What?" he murmured. "If someone is here, we can claim the door was ajar and we announced ourselves. Perfectly innocent mistake."

The lie tasted flimsy, but she didn't argue. The silence from inside felt off.

They stepped into a narrow hallway that opened into a hastily repurposed potion room. Dried herbs dangled from the ceiling in brittle clusters, their shadows weaving like spider webs across the peeling plaster walls. A long workbench groaned under the weight of mismatched glassware—vials, mortars, tincture bottles. A sour, acrid tang made Skye wrinkle her nose.

Something had gone wrong here.

The scent hit her fully as they stepped in—the unmistakable stench of vomit.

Then she saw the woman.

Tess?

Sprawled face-down on the floorboards, she lay like a dropped marionette. Her blonde hair fanned out like spilled wine, one arm reaching futilely towards an overturned vial, its contents emptied onto the timber grain.

Fred crouched, his fingers seeking a pulse. “Alive,” he said grimly after a moment. “But barely.”

Skye had already dialled triple zero. She relayed the essentials—unconscious woman, possible food poisoning. The dispatcher took her details with brisk efficiency and promised help was en route.

“Can you move her onto her side?” the dispatcher instructed.

Fred and Skye worked together, rolling Tess carefully onto her side, positioning her arm and head to keep her airway clear. Tess didn’t stir.

While they waited, Skye took a quick glance around. A clean plate sat in the drying rack. Tess must have made it as far as the sink. The stovetop was bare, no saucepans out, no sign of dinner half-prepared.

But Skye’s eyes kept pulling back to Tess. Her chest rose and fell, too slow. Skye’s fingers twitched at her sides, jaw tight, every shallow breath Tess took stretching the silence thin.

The wail of sirens grew louder over the steady drizzle until an ambulance screeched to a halt out front. Blue and red lights pulsed through the windows, washing the walls in alternating bursts of urgency.

Skye hurried to the door, ushering in the paramedics—a broad-shouldered bloke with a salt-and-pepper beard and a wiry woman whose no-nonsense ponytail swung as she moved. A soft halo of magic curled around the woman’s hands as she adjusted her gloves.

Was there a rule about pairing at least one supernatural with a human in emergency crews? Possibly. Paramedics never knew what they’d be walking into—glamours, wards, magical backlash. And when the patient might be a shifter mid-transition, or a fae with iron sensitivity, treatment was more complex than monitoring vitals or applying compression.

Sure, supernaturals usually tried to handle their own crises, but emergencies didn’t always play by the rules, and sometimes there wasn’t time to wait for the right kind of help.

“Back here,” Skye said, leading them to Tess.

Fred pulled Skye aside as the paramedics knelt beside the unconscious witch. “She’s in good hands,” he murmured, squeezing her shoulder.

Skye clenched her fists, guilt gnawing at her. *If only we’d come last night.*

Then logic kicked in. The half-eaten meal, the untouched tea gone cold—was it a spoiled meal, or deliberate poisoning? And what had Tess been reaching for, a remedy or an antidote? She should’ve taken a sample of the food, maybe even the dregs in the cup.

Too late now.

What mattered more was the glaring absence of the second diner. Someone had been eating with Tess. Someone who’d left in a hurry. The question was, had they fled before or after the symptoms began? And if they’d vanished that fast, were they the cause?

Skye’s gut clenched. Was it Boreas?

The male paramedic checked Tess’s pulse while his partner shone a penlight into her dilated pupils. “GCS 8,” the woman muttered, snapping open a kit.

“What happened here?” the female paramedic asked, not looking up as she adjusted the oxygen mask over Tess’s face.

Fred spread his hands. “We just arrived and found her like this.”

The paramedics exchanged a glance before the woman fired off a rapid text. Within moments, they had Tess strapped to a gurney, the wheels rattling as they hurried her towards the ambulance.

Another siren wailed outside. Two police officers entered, both women, one tall with a stern jawline, the other shorter with auburn curls escaping her cap. The stern one zeroed in on them. “You two know the victim?”

“Not at all,” Fred said, opening up his arms. “We came for a spiritual consultation.” He leaned in, his smile all white teeth and dimples. “We were hoping for... *otherworldly* guidance.”

The curly-haired officer’s lips twitched despite her professional demeanour. Her tag read: Marsden.

“Did you have an appointment?” The question was directed at Skye.

Relief bloomed in Skye’s chest because she could answer this one truthfully. “No. We’re staying at the Blue Royal Hotel. Only decided to come last night.”

Fred nodded earnestly. "I've always been fascinated by the metaphysical. Tarot, crystals, you name it."

Was he laying it on too thick? Skye studied the constables, but neither flinched at Fred's polished charm. If anything, they looked faintly amused. Perhaps the Blue Mountains' reputation as a mystical haven rubbed off on its law enforcement as well. They'd be used to crystal shops, moon rituals, and people who claimed to see ghosts in the gum trees.

"Did you touch anything?" the stern officer asked.

Her tag read Bilton.

"Didn't need to," Fred said. "The door was already open when we arrived."

Constable Bilton's brow lifted. "The front door?"

"No, the back one," Fred replied with an easy shrug. "We walked around to have a look—bit curious, really. You know how it is with these charming little towns. All laneways and hidden corners. It's fun!"

Skye fought the urge to elbow him, but Bilton didn't pounce on the answer. Instead, she scribbled something in her notebook.

Fred gave her a disarming smile. "Honestly, if we hadn't been nosy, she might not have been found until much later."

Skye held her breath, but thankfully, neither officer turned to her for confirmation.

Constable Marsden pulled out a small notebook and pen. "Names and contact details, please."

Fred answered with his usual poise, supplying his full name, the hotel's address, and a contact number. Skye added hers without fuss.

The officer jotted everything down, her pen scratching against the page. Skye opened her mouth to comment on the inefficiency of paper notes in the twenty-first century, but Fred gave her hand a warning pat.

She closed her mouth with a tiny huff.

Constable Bilton gave a brisk nod and escorted them out. "We'll be in touch if we need anything further."

The moment the door shut behind them, the crisp mountain air hit Skye like a slap. They'd barely reached the car before a black-and-white streak dropped from above, landing on the roof with a metallic thunk.

Bob puffed up. “So? What’s with the ambulance? Did we find the villain? Was there a dramatic confession?”

Skye opened the car door. “Bob!” she chided. “Tess is in a bad way.”

“Oh.” Bob paused. “Then she *might* be cursed, poisoned, or romantically entangled with the enemy, yes?”

Fred slid into the driver’s seat, muttering, “You really lucked out in the familiar department. Mine would’ve been a mildly sarcastic cat.”

Bob preened. “Mild sarcasm is for amateurs. I’m a professional.”

## CHAPTER 9

They spent the next hour weaving through Leura's quaint streets. Their mission was ostensibly to gather supplies for Zephyra's disguise. Yet somehow, they'd found themselves in the famed lolly shop, its windows a kaleidoscope of jars filled with rainbow-coloured sweets.

"This is a waste of time," Skye muttered as Fred debated the merits of fairy floss versus honeycomb with far more intensity than the situation warranted.

Bob, perched on a liquorice display, chimed in, "Ooh, get the sour snakes! Perfect for bribing informants or, you know, snacking during stakeouts."

Fred tossed a bag of each into their basket. "It's better this way, darling," he said, absorbed in a display of chocolate-coated ginger. "If the police decide to track our movements, 'tourists buying treats' reads far more innocently than 'suspicious characters purchasing wigs and burner phones.'"

Skye sighed. The logic was sound, but every minute spent debating lollies was a minute Boreas slipped further away. Her mind kept returning to Tess's cottage—the overturned vial, the abandoned tea service.

Absently picking up a bag of mint leaves, she replayed the scene: three chairs at the table, two plates, cutlery and two cups of untouched tea—or were they? A sip could have been enough if the poison was potent. On the ground, a single fork had lain abandoned under the table. Careless, or dropped in haste?

The police would test everything, of course, but without Boreas's DNA on file, they wouldn't get far.

*If it was him.*

Worry for Tess had kept Skye rooted to the kitchen. It meant she hadn't gone snooping through the rest of the house while the ambulance sirens wailed closer.

The window of opportunity had closed, and she hadn't disturbed a thing, like she was supposed to. A thin thread of regret tugged at her. There might've been answers in that house. Now, with the place cordoned off, gaining access would mean breaking at least three laws Skye could think of off the top of her head.

"Earth to Skye." Fred waved a shirt under her nose. "You're brooding louder than Seb at a sunrise."

Skye read the slogan on the shirt. *I Hiked the Leura Cascades and All I Got Was This Damp Shirt.* It featured a cartoonish depiction of the Leura Cascades.

"Subtle," Skye said.

"Exactly." Fred grinned. "Nothing says harmless tourist like questionable fashion choices."

*It's going to be a long afternoon.*

Armed with shopping bags full of clothes, lollies, and a late lunch they'd picked up from a cosy café, they trudged back to the hotel under the fickle Blue Mountains weather.

The rain had been on and off all afternoon—brief bursts of sunlight quickly smothered by another downpour, leaving the streets glistening and her boots damp.

Skye had texted Seb earlier to let him know they were out shopping and would be back soon, in case he was awake and starting to worry. The last thing she needed was him turning up in town like a protective shadow with fangs.

Then again, knowing Seb, he'd have traced every possible path between the hotel and the lolly shop, quietly calculating how long it would take to reach her if something went wrong.

When they finally reached Fred and Seb's suite, Skye pushed open the door and was met with an unexpected sight: Zephyra and Seb sitting at the coffee table, steaming mugs in hand, engaged in what looked like... *civil conversation*?

Breezing in behind her, Fred dumped the shopping bags. "Brought supplies," he announced. "Including a late lunch."

Bob fluttered in after them and landed on the back of a chair with a smug trill. "Behold," he declared, flipping open one of the bags with his beak, "a treasure trove of sherbet bombs, chocolate frogs, and one very questionable nougat I heroically rescued from the bottom shelf. You're welcome."

Seb's eyebrow arched as he took in the obscene amount of gourmet chocolates Fred had somehow acquired without Skye noticing. But before she could question it, Zephyra's eyes lit up like a kid on Christmas morning.

"Is that more of that chocolate food?" she asked.

Fred grinned. "Indeed, Sugarstorm. Thought you might appreciate it."

Skye braced for the inevitable explosion at the nickname, but Zephyra didn't even flinch. She was too busy staring at the cocoa truffle Fred held out as if it were a sacred relic.

"Just the one. You can have more *after* you've eaten proper food," Fred said.

To her shock, Zephyra nodded, eyes still fixed on the offering. "Fine."

Skye blinked. *Who is this sylph, and what has she done with my sister?*

They gathered around the coffee table, unpacking the food—crusty sourdough sandwiches filled with smoked salmon and herb cream cheese, a warm pumpkin and feta tart, and a container of golden, twice-cooked chips still crispy despite the drizzle outside.

Bob pecked at a stolen chip while Skye and Fred recounted their break-in.

"So we waltzed right in," Fred said, adding some chips to his plate. "No alarms, no wards, and a sad little latch that Skye here picked with her eyes closed."

"I had the crucial role of lookout," Bob added, puffing up. "Also snack coordinator."

Skye frowned. "Honestly, for a witch, her security was laughable."

Zephyra nibbled at her tart. "What kind of magic did you sense? Any air traces?"

Skye shook her head. "Hard to say with all the potion ingredients everywhere. But Tess was definitely the real deal. That garden was *alive* with magic."

Fred dabbed his mouth with a napkin. "Speaking of Tess, should we call the hospital? Check if she's—"

A sharp knock at the door cut him off. At the same moment, Seb's phone buzzed on the table. He answered it without missing a beat. "Sebastian Thornhill." A pause. "Appreciated. Thank you for the warning."

He ended the call and looked up, voice cool but unhurried. "Reception. To tell us the police are on their way up." He jerked his chin towards the door.

“How thoughtful. It’s nice when an impending interrogation comes with a courtesy call.”

Fred rose, extending his arm to Zephyra with a bow. “Milady, your disguise awaits.”

Zephyra hesitated, then took his arm, allowing him to steer her towards the bedroom, a shopping bag of clothes in his other hand. The door clicked shut as the knocking came again, louder this time.

Seb crossed the room in three strides and opened the door.

Two figures stood framed by the hallway light, wearing plain clothes.

Everything about them screamed *police*: the way the woman’s hand hovered near her hip where a badge or weapon might be, the man attempting to scan the room.

But Seb held the door open only wide enough to be polite, allowing Skye to take a look at the officers. “Can I help you?”

The woman flashed her badge. “Detective Sergeant Patel, and this is Detective Inspector O’Connor. We’d like a word with Fred Bancroft and Skye Sanders.”

Patel had sleek black hair pulled into a tight bun, sharp cheekbones, and eyes that missed nothing.

O’Connor was older, grey streaks threading through his hair, his lined face and solid build lending him an unhurried presence. A man who measured twice before reaching for the knife. His jacket looked rumpled, like he’d been up since dawn and wasn’t thrilled about it.

Skye’s instincts prickled. Patel moved with contained grace. A shifter? Cat family, maybe. Something that prowled. O’Connor, by contrast, radiated plain, solid human, but she’d bet he had plenty of experience given his confidence.

Seb stepped aside, and Bob squawked. “Ooh, detectives. Should I call my lawyer or just start confessing now?”

Standing, Skye held out her hand. “Skye Sanders.”

Seb didn’t follow suit, but he inclined his head. “Sebastian Thornhill.”

Recognition flickered across the sergeant’s face. “House Bellmont,” she murmured.

Seb’s lips quirked. “You’re well informed.”

The sergeant's cheeks pinked. "I was at the police charity gala last year. Lord Bellmont gave a speech—very generous donor."

*Had Seb been at the gala too?*

Seb gestured towards the coffee table. "Can we offer you tea? Or a sweet?"

The inspector's gaze landed on the spread, and his eyes narrowed briefly at the four place settings. Skye could practically see the calculations ticking over in his head.

"We're here about your visit to Mystic Tess's shop this morning," the inspector said, brushing off the offer with the disdain of someone who hadn't had tea since 1998. "You and Mr Bancroft?" His gaze swept the suite as if Fred would pop up from behind the curtains.

A lightbulb went off in Skye's mind. "Which division did you say you were from again?"

The inspector didn't smile. "I didn't." A brief pause. "Homicide."

The sergeant's voice was softer. "I'm afraid Teresa Lindell passed away."

Skye sank back onto the sofa, her fingers curling into the cushions. Dead. And if homicide was involved, that meant foul play. Her mind raced. Fred had been a suspect before, but this was new territory for her.

As if summoned by the mere mention of his name, the bedroom door opened and Fred strolled in with his usual insouciance, a vision of relaxed charm in motion.

His smile was polished to a professional sheen, his hands tucked casually into the pockets of his pale blazer as if he didn't have a care in the world.

Trailing him was Zephyra, or at least someone who must have been her sister.

Skye did a double-take.

Gone was the windswept sylph with wild hair and a perpetual air of defiance. In her place stood a composed figure with softly waved blonde hair that brushed her shoulders. The tailored designer suit hugged her petite frame with ruthless elegance, and her heels—towering, vicious stilettos—sank into the plush carpet with each step.

If Skye attempted to walk in those, she'd probably break both ankles before reaching the coffee table. And yet, despite the slow, deliberate pace, she

couldn't help but admire the way Zephyra managed it. She strutted, like the carpet was a catwalk and danger another accessory.

She looked like she'd walked out of a glossy fashion magazine and into the wrong genre entirely. Skye didn't need magic to sense the nerves coiled under that polished exterior.

*What on Earth was Fred thinking, dressing Zephyra to stand out this much?*

Skye's initial jolt of shock twisted into full-blown dread. Parading a wanted fugitive into the middle of a police conversation was madness.

Her instincts screamed to intervene, to shove her sister back into the room and slam the door.

Instead, she inhaled deeply. The air crackled with tension—her own. The breath cleared her thoughts enough to push back the rising panic. These detectives were sharp; any misstep would tip them off.

Allowing logic to take over, Skye studied Zephyra. In this polished getup, she was unrecognisable. No windswept hair, no elven poise, no hint of sylph magic. A high-end socialite in a sea of Blue Mountain's tourists.

And now that she thought about it, four guests had checked into the suite. Trying to hide one would only raise more questions. *Better to put her in plain sight and let the disguise do the work.*

A jolt of realisation shot through Skye. Seb had checked them all in. And if he'd used Zephyra's real name... Her stomach did a slow turn. *Zephyra* was a *fae name*. It would've stood out like a spell book in a tax office.

Seb's voice sliced cleanly through the static of Skye's spiralling thoughts. "They're the police. I'm afraid they've brought bad news." He turned to Zephyra. "Hello, Sophia. I'm glad Bancroft coaxed you out of bed. I'd hate for you to miss out on the chocolates."

*Sophia.* Relief flooded Skye's veins. At least they had a cover name.

Fred gave an almost imperceptible nod towards Seb. "You had to go and spoil the surprise, Thornhill."

He slung an arm around Zephyra's shoulders, pressing a kiss to the top of her wig.

Zephyra stiffened for a heartbeat, then melted into the role, turning wide, guileless eyes towards the detectives. "What bad news?" Her voice was all airy concern, the perfect clueless companion.

Skye bit the inside of her cheek. Nothing for it now but to play along and pray Fred's gamble paid off.

Bob gave a solemn nod. "Sophia is very sensitive. Best break it gently or we'll be mopping up tears and mascara for hours."

Her nerves were shot. Skye had no other excuse for the giggle that slipped out.

"Don't listen to the bird, officers," Fred said, smoothly redirecting all attention towards Bob. "Sophia is perfectly brave, aren't you, darling?" He lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles.

Zephyra—no, *Sophia*—fluttered her lashes and smiled up at him with believable coyness. Skye nearly choked on her own tongue.

"But let's sit down," Fred continued, guiding Zephyra to the sofa with the same aplomb and pomp as if she were royalty. "Bad news is always better with a strong cup of tea and sweets." He pressed a chocolate into her palm before turning to the officers. "I'm sorry, Thornhill hasn't the best manners."

Seb scoffed.

"We haven't been properly introduced, and you *must* have some tea," Fred said, ignoring Seb.

Where Seb's earlier offer had been brushed aside, Fred's words worked like a spell. DS Patel stepped forward, shaking his hand. "DS Patel," she said, "and this is DI O'Connor."

Fred murmured something charming about the detective's impeccable taste in blazers—Skye didn't catch the exact words, but Patel's lips tilted in a half-smile.

"It's the mystic you insisted on dragging Skye to," Seb interjected with a dismissive wave as he settled beside Skye, claiming her hand in a possessive grip.

O'Connor's sharp gaze flicked between Zephyra and Seb. "But *you* two weren't there?"

Seb's reply was cool. "I was asleep, Officer. I keep nocturnal hours."

Patel's eyebrow arched at Zephyra.

Fred patted Zephyra's hand. "I'm afraid *we* indulged in one too many fruity cocktails last night, didn't we, darling?"

Zephyra nodded, her smile so convincingly vacant that even Skye started to believe the act. Between Fred's silver tongue and her sister's sudden talent for playing the airheaded socialite, they could have sold enchanted snow to a winter sylph.

Bob muttered, "I'll be over here, plotting my memoir: *Thirty Years as the Only Sane One*."

## CHAPTER 10

Patel dragged a wooden stool over and perched at the coffee table, her notebook in hand. O'Connor scanned the room, then crossed to the sideboard and retrieved a straight-backed chair. He lowered himself with the careful grace of someone used to tense conversations—and possibly about to start one.

Fred poured tea into a delicate china cup, steam curling towards the ceiling.

“Darjeeling? A splash of milk?” Fred asked, the picture of hospitality.

Patel accepted with a nod as O'Connor held up a hand. “No thanks. Let’s focus on why you broke into private property this morning.”

Fred’s cup clinked against its saucer. “The gate and backdoor were open, officer. We merely stepped inside when no one answered our calls.”

Bob, pecking at a discarded crust, muttered, “Yes, very civic-minded of them. Local crime watch volunteers, really.”

Skye found herself speaking without thinking. “The security was shockingly lax—no cameras, a basic latch,” she trailed off as five pairs of eyes turned her way.

“Skye’s a talented tech mage and security consultant,” Seb interjected, his thumb tracing circles on her wrist. “Professional habit.”

Patel’s eyebrow arched. “I see.” She flipped a page in her notebook. “Mr Bancroft, how exactly did you know Ms Lindell?”

“We didn’t.” Fred stirred his tea with nonchalance. “Overheard a guest in the lift. She wouldn’t stop raving about this Mystic Tess’s aura readings—claimed she did more good than her therapist ever had.” He shot Patel a conspiratorial smile. “I suspect the latter was a pointed dig after witnessing Sophia’s rather theatrical mojito incident.”

Zephyra gasped in mock outrage and swatted Fred's arm, her nails a blur of polished indignation.

O'Connor's jaw tightened. "You realise breaking and entering is a criminal offence, regardless of any... guests' recommendations?"

Bob fluttered onto the teapot. "Ah, but is it really breaking in if the door is left invitingly off the latch?"

Patel's lips quirked as Skye resisted the urge to strangle Bob. This was going sideways faster than a Melbourne tram in the rain.

Seb straightened in his chair. "Legally speaking, it wasn't breaking and entering. The shop was within its advertised operating hours, and Bancroft and Skye were genuine customers seeking services. The unattended premises would have been concerning to any law-abiding citizen. They entered only to investigate."

Skye's fingers tightened around her teacup. "The important thing is finding out what happened to Miss Lindell. If we'd arrived earlier, maybe—" Her voice caught, the unspoken *maybe she'd still be alive* hanging in the air. "Did you check the meal? Two plates, two cups. If she was poisoned, that's the obvious vector. And where's her companion? Have you dusted for prints or—?"

O'Connor's face flushed crimson. "I think we know how to do our jobs better than a civilian," he snapped.

Skye met his glare. "I'm a police consultant."

*Technically true*—after her last case, the area superintendent had added her to the books as a specialist advisor.

Frustration bubbled up, hot and useless. With Boreas slipping further out of reach and the detectives tangled in their precious procedures, she was stuck and helpless to act.

Seb's hand squeezed hers, a silent reminder to breathe.

"Easy enough to verify your credentials," Patel said, as if challenging the truth of her statement.

O'Connor took it as a cue, thumbing through contacts on his phone, bringing it to his ear with a grunt. "Yeah, it's O'Connor. I've got a Skye Sanders here. Claims she's a registered consultant, tech-magic qualified..." His voice trailed off, brows knitting. "No, probably the Sydney District."

The room quieted. Skye tried not to fidget under the weight of the attention. Seb nudged a cocoa truffle towards her. She picked it up, more for something to do than any real desire. Beside her, Zephyra plucked one as well, turning it slowly in her fingers like it might reveal secrets.

“...Right, I’ll hold,” O’Connor said, his tone shifting—less sure now. He absently tapped his finger on his thigh. “Oh. Yes, sir. Suspected homicide, yes. The victim was certified as a witch level four. Yes. Yes, I see.” His spine snapped straight. “Understood. Yes. Of course.”

A beat later, he ended the call and tucked the phone away, his mouth set in a grim line. He adjusted his jacket, as if stalling, then finally said, “That was the Chief Inspector. He... ah... instructed us to formally request your assistance with the investigation.”

Skye blinked. She hadn’t expected to be made an offer of consulting on the spot.

Bob chirped. “Well, well. Turns out the bird was the only one who saw this coming.”

Seb’s grin stretched, slow and satisfied—equal parts pride and pleasure.

Patel’s sceptical snort shifted to something closer to interest. “A certified tech mage, did you say?”

“Level five,” O’Connor muttered, the words sounding like they’d been pried out with pliers.

Such a rating was rare for any magic wielder, and almost unheard of for a tech mage.

Skye remembered the shock when her test results came through. Grandpa had been so thrilled he’d nearly stuck a megaphone to a drone and flown it around Sydney Tower.

“Top of her class, actually,” Fred added.

Skye’s gaze snapped to him. How did he know that? She wheeled on Bob, who shook his head.

“Nope! Didn’t spill your darkest secrets or glittering academic record. Scout’s honour.”

Seb leaned in, all shark-teeth grin. “What darkest secrets?”

“Please,” Zephyra drawled. “If Skye had skeletons in the closet, she’d dust them, label them, and file a report.”

She caught herself, the slip from polished socialite to big sister almost imperceptible, but the officers had proven sharp. With a quick recovery, she flicked an elegant brow. “A lady of Sydney’s elite must master discretion—a skill our dear tech mage clearly considers optional.”

Seb tucked a rogue curl behind Skye’s ear and hooked a finger under her chin. “Why bother,” he murmured, “when you’re already running the game?”

Patel’s curiosity finally combusted. “So, you’re both couples?”

O’Connor gave her a side-eye sharp enough to cut glass, but she only shrugged, unapologetic.

Seb answered with trademark calm, pulling Skye closer by the waist and pressing a lingering kiss to her temple. “Indeed.”

Fred rose with theatrical flair, sauntered over to perch on the armrest beside Zephyra, and draped an arm around her shoulders. “Absolutely,” he purred, eyes locked on hers. “Isn’t that right, darling?”

Zephyra held his gaze, slow and calculating, like a breeze curling around a cliff edge, playful but with the promise of a sudden gust. She lifted the chocolate she’d taken earlier and pressed it against his lips.

Fred’s smirk faltered for a half-second, his throat bobbing.

“Knew you’d sweeten the deal,” he murmured, and bit into the chocolate with a crunch, his grin snapping back into place.

All eyes turned to Skye as she stood, her movements brisk with barely contained impatience.

“We should search the shop,” she said, not bothering to soften the edge in her voice. They’d already wasted enough time.

Seb was up in a fluid motion, Zephyra and Fred rising as well. Skye resisted the urge to glance at the officers. If they looked too closely, they might notice the shift in Zephyra’s demeanour. The polished socialite façade was gone; her eyes burned with barely restrained urgency, a storm gathering behind the charm.

O’Connor heaved himself to his feet, though his frown could have soured milk.

“Now?” Patel’s eyebrow arched, also standing.

“Magic doesn’t stay active for long,” Skye said. “This is our window to catch whatever residue’s still clinging before it fades completely.”

Any trace of Boreas would've begun unravelling the moment he fled, if it hadn't already vanished.

O'Connor crossed his arms. "You're a consultant. They're not."

Skye's pulse kicked. She needed Zephyra to read Boreas's signature. "Sophia's... particular resonance makes her an ideal conductor."

Not a lie. Energy always took the path of least resistance; something that applied as much to arc welders as to sylphs in disguise.

Fred reached for Zephyra's hand. "She does have a wonderfully... clear channel, if you will. Practically no interference."

Skye fought a twitch of her lips.

"She'll be able to assist with my investigation," she said.

*Just not in the way they'd assume.*

Before O'Connor could scoff, Fred chimed in again. "And I should be present too. I might recall crucial details without a poor Miss Lindell sprawled on the floor."

True. At the time, they'd been focused on getting Tess help, assuming it was a straightforward case of food poisoning.

His smile was smooth as silk.

Seb's voice was velvet over steel. "Vampire senses are exceptionally attuned. I'll detect what your tools can't."

O'Connor's mouth opened, but Patel placed a hand on his arm. Her whisper was a scalpel: "House Bellmont. Donors."

A beat passed. O'Connor's jaw flexed, then he gave a curt nod. "We'll meet you there in fifteen minutes."

He spun on his heel and stalked out. Patel lingered long enough to offer a polite wave, then followed.

"Well, that was fun," Bob said, preening a wing.

"Oh, I don't know," Fred replied. "But I still have my head on my shoulders. Well played, by the way," he added, tipping an imaginary hat to Zephyra. "Apologies for the improvisation."

She strolled up to him with a mischievous smile and patted his cheek. "You keep faking it that well, Fred, and I might start expecting an ongoing supply of chocolates."

Skye narrowed her eyes. Zephyra... joking? That confirmed it—someone had swapped her sister for a lookalike.

“I don’t understand why the regular police are getting involved?” Skye said to no one in particular.

“Why wouldn’t they be?” Zephyra asked, brows lifted.

“Because they usually don’t touch cases involving supernaturals. Tess was a registered witch, so I expected the Witch Council to take charge.”

“Things are changing,” Seb said. “The Supernatural Council recently reached an agreement with their human counterparts to create a dedicated supernatural unit. It’ll work alongside the police, though not directly under their command.”

Fred leaned forward, frowning. “But the ones we dealt with today were regular officers.”

“It’s early days,” Seb replied. “This is an interim arrangement. They are trialling shared jurisdiction until the full unit is operational.”

Which meant they’d have to deal with the police—like it or not—but at least they were officially allowed to investigate.

Without further fuss, they grabbed their coats and made their way downstairs. Outside, in the curved driveway of the hotel, the limo waited.

They cruised through Leura’s quaint streets at a sedate pace, the car’s engine a gentle hum beneath the soft patter of evening rain.

Outside the window, the town unfolded like a picture book: fairy lights twinkled under shop awnings, casting golden reflections on the damp footpaths.

Heritage storefronts glowed with warm lamplight. Bakeries, bookstores, and art galleries nestled shoulder to shoulder, their windows fogged from the chill. The scent of wood smoke drifted in as they passed a shop closing for the night, and beyond that, the dusky silhouettes of the Blue Mountains rose like sleeping giants under a sky bruised with twilight.

“Right,” Fred said, stretching his arms behind his head. “I’ll play the charming distraction. O’Connor’s team can focus on my dazzling personality —”

“—and not on her,” Seb finished, nodding towards Zephyra, who sat statue-still, her hands folded in her lap.

“Precisely,” Fred said.

Zephyra studied Fred. “You’re not magical, and yet you somehow manage to charm like a fae noble at a gala.”

“What can I say?” Fred flashed her a grin. “Natural talent and years of practice.”

Bob snorted. “Or decades of shameless flirting.”

“Pity,” Zephyra said, brushing her fingers over the seam of her cuff. “All that charm and none of it real.”

“Not real?” Fred placed a hand over his heart. “I may exaggerate, but I don’t lie.” He paused. “And I always save my best for the truly dangerous ones.”

Their banter fizzled as the limo rolled to a stop.

Skye was first out, Fred and Seb close behind, while Zephyra followed with steel in her spine and stilettos clicking against the pavement.

Patel waited under the flickering awning of Mystic Tess’s Enchanted Curiosities, its windows cluttered with crystal balls and dried herbs dangling like skeletal fingers. The moment they stepped inside, the air thickened with the scent of sage and the metallic whisper of old magic.

Skye’s boots thudded against the hardwood as she moved past shelves of twisted candles and jars of murky tinctures, their labels peeling with age. The shop felt eerie, like a set stage after the actors had fled.

The lighting was dim and uneven. A few mismatched lamps and strings of fairy lights cast soft glows and long shadows.

Patel led them towards the kitchen, where O’Connor stood watchful, his gaze sharp as a hawk’s.

Fred trailed beside Zephyra, hand brushing the small of her back as she paused by the kitchen counter. A faint stir threaded through the air—barely enough to lift a page on the bench or send a curl drifting across Skye’s cheek—but she caught it.

Bob flapped his wings loudly. “So, hypothetically, if a cursed teapot exploded, would that fall under ‘reckless endangerment’ or ‘act of God’?”

Officer O’Connor turned to Bob. “What?”

Patel laughed. “Depends. Was the teapot malicious or just having a bad day?” She threw Bob a mock-stern look. “And please tell me this isn’t a confession.”

"I'll have you know, the teapot in question was *deeply provoked*. Too much chamomile, not enough respect."

Patel laughed again, shaking her head. "Right. Reckless endangerment it is, pending magical temperament review."

"Fair ruling," Bob said. "Justice with nuance. I approve."

Sometimes Skye genuinely couldn't tell if Bob was spinning tales for fun or pulling memories from a past far stranger and older than he let on.

Patel handed out gloves with brisk efficiency. "Forensics have already been through, but we'd still prefer you not leave any additional prints."

No one argued. One by one, they slipped the gloves on—tug, snap, silence.

Skye turned back to her inspection. The one dish on the rack, but nothing in the sink. No crumbs on the counter. Dozens of jars, the labels facing outward like books at a library. The tea towels hung damp, smelling of lavender.

Padding down the hallway, Skye searched for technology devices. At the end, a cramped office waited. Barely large enough for the desk, filing cabinet, and a wheezing old desktop computer, one that likely hadn't had a proper update since dial-up. She entered cautiously, scanning for wards or other security. Nothing.

Patel appeared behind her, footsteps soft. "The forensic team already downloaded all the data."

A question was buried in the statement.

Skye's eyes remained fixed on the dusty monitor. "I'm sure they did." Her tone was polite as her fingers hovered above the keyboard.

The official team might not catch everything. Plus, she wasn't about to wait for bureaucratic generosity.

She tapped the mouse. No password.

Most of the files were mundane—appointment logs, herb stock lists, receipts. But a string of recent emails, one flagged as urgent, made her frown.

"May I copy the data?" she asked, not looking away.

Patel hesitated. Then, with a sigh, she gave a short nod. "Go for it."

"What about Tess's phone?"

No mobile phone had been lying around Tess, but then, she'd been more focused on getting help than trying to find it.

Patel pulled a clear evidence bag from her coat pocket and held it up. Inside sat Tess's mobile—an older model, scuffed at the edges. "You can't take it out."

"I won't," Skye said.

She reached out, gloved fingers brushing the plastic.

Threads of invisible magic slid into the phone's circuitry like a whisper, pulling fragments of data—texts, location history, call logs—and relaying them silently to her own device. It took seconds.

She stepped back. "Done."

Patel arched a brow. "Didn't think you could do that through plastic."

"Bluetooth," Skye said mildly. "Plastic bags don't block data."

Of course, that also required getting past the phone's password, though in this case, it hadn't been hard. Her third guess, in fact. *Boreas*. Subtle as a sledgehammer.

After rejoining the others in the kitchen, Skye turned to the DS. "Who was Tess close with?"

"Local coven," Patel said. "The Sable Circle. Her best friend's a member, Lilith Vance. She runs the apothecary in town."

O'Connor cut in, his voice clipped and cold as snapped wire. "Interviewing witnesses is our job, Ms Sanders—not one for a consultant." The warning was clear: stay in your lane.

"Knowing their rituals could explain the murder method," Skye argued.

"And we'll share those answers," he said. "Your job is the magical forensics."

Before she could retort, Seb's hand slid around her waist, his lips grazing her ear. "Firefly, you've had a long day. How about a spa break? Massage, champagne..." His thumb traced her hip, a distraction as deliberate as a chess move.

Fred mirrored him, tucking Zephyra against his side. "What a wonderful idea, Thornhill. My darling Sophia's exhausted. We should all recharge."

Skye blinked. What the heck were they doing?

Then she caught Zephyra's barely-there nod. She'd found something. Time for a debrief and some data mining.

"Fine," Skye sighed, playing along. "But I'd appreciate it if you could pass on whatever you find."

Seb pressed a kiss to her temple. "I'm sure the officers will oblige."

As they turned to go, he shot O'Connor a smile edged like a scalpel. "We'll be in touch."

## CHAPTER 11

Back at the hotel suite, everyone collapsed into chairs with the kind of exhaustion that only came from dodging both questions and consequences.

Skye and Zephyra caught each other's gaze across the coffee table and spoke at the same time. "What did you find?"

"Jinx!" Bob crowed, wings flapping in delight.

Both women glared at him.

"What? Just pointing out you're not as different as you pretend to be," Bob said with a cheeky trill.

Zephyra arched a brow and turned back to Skye. "You first."

"Tess definitely knew Boreas," Skye said, stretching out her legs. "Her password was his name. Honestly, who does that? That's security 101. Never use your partner's name. Or your birthday. Or *their* birthday. No pet names, no predictable words, no strings of 1-2-3s. You need symbols, numbers, a mix of upper and lowercase. Something no one can guess."

Seb cleared his throat.

Skye blinked, then shot him an incredulous look. "Wait. You didn't, did you?"

A small, unrepentant smile tugged at his mouth. "Your name. Plus the date we met. And a symbol."

She tried for a stern expression, but her lips twitched traitorously. The warmth curling in her chest was completely disproportionate to a password choice, but there it was, blooming like spring air through an open window.

"That's... sentimental. But it has enough maths to make it tolerable."

"Does that earn me a kiss?" Seb asked.

He crossed the space in two smooth steps, cupped her cheek, and pressed a kiss to her lips—light, teasing, but full of promise. Skye leaned into it before she could think better, heart thudding like someone had typed the right code into her emotional firewall.

Fred groaned. “I’m going to need a second dessert to cope with this level of saccharine.”

Bob’s head popped up from the fruit bowl. “Honestly, the real crime here is that no one uses *my* name as a password. I’m very secure, full of mystery and poor impulse control.”

Skye managed to pull away from the kiss, her cheeks warm but her thoughts snapping back into place. Ignoring the commentary, she turned to her sister.

“What did you find?”

Zephyra didn’t hesitate. “Boreas was there,” she said. “And recently.”

“As in last night?” Fred asked.

“Yes.” Zephyra tugged off her wig with a sigh. “Probably.” She turned—not to Skye—but to Bob. “His magical signature was strongest in the kitchen,” she said, almost like she was seeking confirmation.

Skye’s brows drew together. Why direct the question at Bob?

“That means,” Bob replied, “it’s where he spent the most time or where his emotions ran deepest.”

“Wouldn’t his air signature have the same presence, regardless of his emotions?” Skye asked.

Even as the words left her mouth, she winced. That might be the case for tech and witch magic, but what about fae magic? It sounded painfully naive, especially coming from a sylph. But while air was in her blood, it wasn’t in her training. She’d spent her life fine-tuning circuits and surveillance wards, not studying wind patterns and resonance fields. Still, the theory was logical. That counted for something, right?

“Not necessarily,” Bob said, preening one wing before lifting his head. “Think of it like a pressure system. If his emotional state was high—grief, guilt, rage—it compresses the signature. Like a storm front trapped in a valley, it rebounds, folding back on itself. Indoors, it leaves what we call a resonance loop. Repeating echo. Stronger magic lingers longer, even as a trace.”

Seb tilted his head, brows lifted in interest.

Right. Skye had suspected for a while that Bob played the fool when it suited him, but this was another level entirely.

Under the scrutiny, Bob let out a nervous squawk. "Anyway, the real issue is Boreas. What's our next step?"

Skye twisted a curl around her finger. "We need to interview Lilith Vance and the other coven members. Someone must know more."

"Oh, darling," Fred said, placing both elbows on his knees and offering her a grin. "Who would have thought my little law-abider would break free of her rule-prison?"

"Yours?" Seb's voice came low, like the rumble of distant thunder.

Zephyra jerked her gaze towards him, startled.

Fred's eyes narrowed, as if preparing a retort, but then he simply waved a hand. "Must be your influence," he said airily and completely ignored his question.

Skye braced for Seb to bristle. Instead, he threw his head back and laughed, warm and rich.

"I claim first influence," Bob said, hopping along the edge of the table. "I practically raised her, after all."

"Let's stay on track, shall we?" Zephyra said in a clipped voice.

"You can't go near the coven," Skye said.

Zephyra's jaw tightened, her chin tipping up a notch. Shoulders squared, arms rigid at her sides, she looked every inch the sylph on the verge of a verbal gale. The flare in her eyes was a storm signal, warning of an argument gathering force.

Skye lifted a hand to stop the protest she saw coming. "If the other witches are anything like Tess, they'll pick up your air magic the moment you walk within fifty metres. Doesn't matter if you're disguised or not. We can't risk it."

"You're assuming Boreas told them about me," Zephyra said.

"Do you want to gamble that he didn't?" Skye countered. "If he did—and they alert him—he vanishes again. And next time, we might not catch him at all."

"Skye is right," Bob chimed in. "Your emotions are throwing sparks, and your magic's flaring up like it's trying to audition for a weather channel."

"You're siding with her?" Zephyra turned, affronted.

*Siding with me?*

"I'm siding with logic," Bob said, casually cleaning a feather. "We magpies are nothing if not practical."

"Unless you've developed a grudge," Fred muttered.

"A grudge," Bob said solemnly, "is a sacred duty."

Which was not an exaggeration. Magpies were known to remember faces and hold vendettas for *years*.

But Skye's mind had snagged on Bob's mention of *seeing* sparks.

She turned her senses inward, calling up a breeze. Her skin tingled, the shift of energy brushing against her consciousness as she focused on her sister. Something about Zephyra's aura... it pulsed. Not out of control, but close. The magic around her glowed like a thunderhead lit from within.

After too many failed attempts to master air magic as a child—barely managing more than a breeze—Skye had given up and thrown herself into tech magic instead.

Leaving Fairyland for Earth had only deepened her instinct to bury her fae magic. The move had been a fresh start, and an escape from the taunts, the sneers, the bullies who'd called her magic *tainted* like it was something rotten.

Grandma had tried, now and then, to coax her back onto the air path, but young Skye had already been stung too deeply by the ridicule of her sylph peers and the shame of her own repeated failures.

Pride bruised, she'd shoved her sylph heritage into a locked drawer and thrown away the key.

Grandma, admitting defeat, had let her be.

Bob, on the other hand, never quite gave up. His prodding came less in lectures and more in sardonic encouragement and inconvenient truths.

Lately, though, things had shifted. Recent adventures had seen her calling on air magic more and more. Reluctantly, she could admit it had saved her life once.

She would never match Zephyra's raw power, not even close, but what she had was no longer negligible. With precision and purpose, even a modest wind could knock someone off their feet. And it felt as if she was getting stronger,

which was nonsense. Magic was something you were born with, not something you developed over time.

As if sensing the magical ripple of Skye's scrutiny, Zephyra turned, head tilted. For a heartbeat, her piercing gaze searched Skye's face, and then a twitch of a smile touched her lips.

Skye flushed and promptly shut the power down, pulling the wind back inside herself, a secret she wasn't ready to share.

"To approach Lilith, you'll need a reason," Seb said, bringing the conversation into focus.

"We could use the same story," Fred suggested, placing his arm on the back of his armchair. "I'm dragging along a reluctant girlfriend to dabble in the mystical arts."

"Why can't I be the one playing that part?" Seb asked. A challenge thrummed beneath his calm tone.

Fred gave him a slow once-over. "Please. Have you looked in the mirror lately?"

Seb raised an eyebrow.

"And no, I'm not referring to your smouldering good looks," Fred added.

*Smouldering?* Zephyra mouthed at Skye, who didn't reply—too busy watching the exchange with poorly concealed interest.

Bob snagged a sherbet sweet. "By the way, the whole 'no reflection' thing? Total myth. Same with holy water."

"How do you know that?" Zephyra asked, obviously a believer in the myths.

"Don't ask," Skye said quickly, recalling the unforgettable disaster of her first meeting with Seb. An ill-judged defence involving holy water, a prototype drone, and one very unimpressed, very drenched vampire.

Seb, slipping back into his British accent, asked, "Do enlighten me. What exactly are you referring to, Bancroft?"

Fred gestured grandly. "Surely, you're aware of the sheer menace you radiate? The calculated intensity? The way grown men cross the street and small dogs whimper when you scowl?"

Seb didn't deny it.

Skye opened her mouth to say, *He's not scary*, but stopped herself. That first encounter had been terrifying enough to warrant an entire list of regrets and a very dead drone. No, Seb might not be scary *to her*, but there was no denying he could be.

"I agree," Bob said brightly. "He's definitely got that ancient predator vibe. All shadows and intensity." He paused. "Not that I was ever scared. Obviously. Never been. Not once."

"I don't like leaving Skye unprotected," Seb said, and for him, that was practically a concession.

He wasn't even glaring at Fred like he was picturing him drained dry and served with a sprig of mint. Skye marked that down as a win and then wondered when her standards had got so catastrophically low.

Zephyra tossed her hair over one shoulder in a move that almost competed with Fred's flair. "Did you say my power could be felt at fifty metres?" she asked Skye, not bothering to wait for confirmation. "Surely there's somewhere nearby Seb and I can wait. Close enough to intervene if needed. I'm assuming the other myths about vampires—super strength, speed—those are true?"

Seb gave a single nod.

Given the apothecary was in the centre of Leura's main street, that was *technically* possible. Still, Skye argued on principle. "The fifty metres was a guess, not a fact. I don't actually know how far your magic can be detected."

"Fifty metres would require a level five witch," Bob said. "I sincerely doubt we're dealing with that. If we were, she'd be Council-affiliated and heavily monitored by the High Witch."

There was a tiny shift in Seb's expression. Barely perceptible, but Skye noticed. She'd been cataloguing those micro-expressions like a seasoned spy building her own private Seb-Wikipedia.

"You know the High Witch?" she asked, curiosity sharpening.

Seb hesitated. "She's... a close acquaintance of Raphael. Lord Bellmont," he clarified after a beat.

*Interesting.* The firm set of his jaw said that was all she'd get for now, but Skye mentally added it to the ever-growing list of *Seb's Secrets: To Be Unlocked Eventually*.

Zephyra's dramatic reappearance had delayed that project, but like Seb had once warned Bob, Skye didn't let go. And she *would* get her answers—just not today.

"So we're in agreement?" Zephyra asked.

Fred leaned back in his seat, eyes glinting. "What exactly can you do from fifty metres away? Besides deliver a killer glare?"

"Oh, I don't know," Zephyra said, "create a gust strong enough to blow the smug expression off your face?"

Fred grinned. "Admit it, you like me, Zephyra. It's written all over your scowl."

Before the banter could spiral into another round of verbal fencing, Skye flicked her wrist, conjuring a glowing map of Leura that hovered above the coffee table like a holographic blueprint. A pulsing blue dot marked the location of the apothecary—only a few doors down from Mystic Tess's shop. Across the street, a café with shaded outdoor seating offered a clear line of sight.

"That would make for a good lookout," Skye said, studying the glowing map. "Roughly forty metres, but with the elevation and shopfronts, it should be far enough to hide Zephyra's power."

"And with all the magical signatures wafting around like perfume at a fairy ball," Bob added, "no one's going to pick out our little tempest's aura in that mess." He preened. "Honestly, I should give Zephyra a lesson in masking her magic—could do wonders for her stealth game."

Skye's brow twitched. Again with the impressive magical know-how. For a self-professed magpie with flair, Bob certainly had a suspiciously deep toolkit.

A sharp knock interrupted her train of thought. Seb sauntered over and opened the door to reveal a bellboy, barely visible behind a trolley stacked with garment bags and parcels in elegant packaging.

Seb offered a cool nod and a discreet tip. "Thank you."

The bellboy wheeled the load inside, murmured a polite thanks, and backed out quickly.

Seb closed the door with a soft click, then turned to face the group. "Looks like we might be here a few more days than expected," he said. "I've arranged

additional clothing. Between this and Fred's boutique haul earlier, we're well stocked."

Skye didn't voice it, but she hoped they wouldn't be stuck much longer. Boreas was proving as elusive as the mountain fog. If he decided to vanish into the wilderness surrounding them, it would take more than skill and good tech to find him. Statistically speaking, they'd be working with a margin of error wide enough to fly a dragon through.

"Back to the Pyrite Dagger," Skye said. "Why would Boreas want it?"

"If his magic is strong," Bob said, puffing up like a professor about to drop bad news, "he could use it to tear open a rift between realms. But only if he's at his peak."

Fred leaned forward, brows drawn, a sandwich halfway to his mouth. "Why would he want to do that?"

Bob's eyes lit up in that tell-tale way when something bizarre caught his attention, as if he was watching a tutorial on how to summon a djinn.

"To bring in things," Bob said darkly, "creatures with too many heads and too few morals. Monsters that obey only the one who summoned them—at least until they don't." He shuddered. "It's a nasty bargain. Blood-soaked contracts, ancient rituals, the whole sparkly mess." He fluffed his wings. "Someone tried it back in 1872 Earth calendar. Got about as far as opening a rift the size of a dinner plate before the backlash turned him into a lawn ornament. Lovely water feature, though."

"You were alive *then*?" Fred asked.

*Good question.*

Zephyra's frown deepened, arms folding tighter across her chest. She clearly wasn't keen on diving into magical theory or Bob's age. "Boreas won't be at his peak. I may have landed a hit when I confronted him downtown. Maybe. But even if not, he would have depleted some of his reserves."

"He'll also likely wait for a full moon," Bob said.

Zephyra drummed her fingers on the chair. "True."

"If he's planning to open a rift," Bob added, "that's when he'll try. The stars, the magic, all that good old-fashioned alignment stuff."

Skye opened the moon phase app on her phone. "Next full moon is in four days," she said. "That would be when the barriers are weakest, right?"

The room fell into thoughtful silence.

“Do you think Tess was the only one who knew him?” Skye asked. “Or are the rest of the coven involved?”

“If she was his only help,” Fred said, cleaning his lips with a napkin, “why would he hurt her?”

Zephyra exhaled through her nose, sharp as a blade. “It doesn’t make sense. If he wanted to kill her, poison’s not his style. Boreas never paid attention to biology lessons. He’d be more likely to suffocate her, quick and direct.”

Skye winced. “Comforting.”

“I’m saying,” Zephyra muttered. “The murder, if that’s what it was, doesn’t feel like him.”

She didn’t, however, argue that Boreas was capable of murder.

Skye tried to summon memories of the handsome teenager she remembered, the one with eyes like frozen sky and a voice like velvet. But beneath the charm had always been a dark thread—an edge honed by privilege and hidden cruelty.

Yes, her assessment was firm: not only was he capable, he wouldn’t hesitate.

During further discussion about the logistics, Skye put her foot down: they wouldn’t visit the apothecary, *Myrtle & Rue*, until one in the afternoon.

Zephyra, of course, lobbied for an earlier start, practically vibrating with the need to *do something*. But Skye, masking her own impatience behind logic, coolly argued that the lunchtime bustle would offer better magical cover for Zephyra’s signature—unless, of course, she was happy to stay at the hotel.

That shut her up.

Seb shot Skye a look of undisguised admiration, and she was almost certain he hadn’t bought a word of it. The truth, annoyingly sentimental, was that she’d timed it late on purpose—winter sun peaked before noon, and she didn’t want Seb anywhere near it.

Bob ruined the moment, swooping in with a smug, “Skye’s cranky before ten, and her thinking doesn’t take flight until at least eleven—more fluffed feathers than streamlined falcon. And I say that with love.”

Since his statement only bolstered her argument—and happened to be entirely true—Skye wordlessly passed Bob an extra sweet from the lolly shop

haul, a silent bribe for well-timed loyalty.

Fred leaned back in his chair, swirling the last sip of his tea. "Honestly, a morning to properly come up with a strategy sounds ideal."

He flashed a grin. "The questions we need answered have nothing to do with remedies. We'll need the right cover story, and it has to be convincing."

Skye didn't miss the glint in his eye; he was enjoying this far too much. Normally, her apprentice Josh was her go-to for conducting interviews, but the teen was currently buried in his High School Certificate preparation. And no matter how tempting it was to call him in, she wasn't about to derail his education for a magically suspicious murder.

Not unless the world was ending.

And they weren't *quite* there. Yet.

Zephyra and Skye rose to return to their room, and as they crossed the suite, a wave of unexpected regret swept over Skye. Her gaze lingered on the elegant fireplace, the armchairs angled for quiet conversation, the glow of lamplight softening the room's opulence. Not that this was romantic in any official sense. They were on a mission.

But had it been... this would have been the perfect place. Just her and Seb, no crises, no sisters, no magical murder investigations. She could imagine getting lost in the warmth of his kisses, the gentle brush of his fingers across her skin.

And in that solitude, perhaps she could have finally coaxed some answers out of him. His secrets, and something deeper. Something closer to a promise.

The realisation hit like a voltage spike: it wasn't answers she wanted. It was commitment.

The idea was so enormous, so utterly un-Skye, that her brain stalled long enough for her feet to betray her. She stumbled, nearly catching the edge of the rug.

Seb was there before gravity had a chance. His arms wrapped around her with ease, steadying her against his chest. His lips brushed her temple. As if he'd guessed her earlier thoughts, he whispered, "Next time," he tucked a curl behind her ear, "I'm booking every suite on this floor. And Bob can visit his magpie mates for a few days. Just you and me."

Before she could respond—or deflect or think—his lips found hers in a kiss that burned through every wall she had been holding up. It was deep, unhurried, claiming and soft all at once. Like he had all the time in the world, and she was the only thing in it.

She clung to his jacket for a few extra seconds, steadying herself against the emotions unspooling inside her, and when she finally managed a nod, her voice came out quiet. “That would be... nice.”

Seb chuckled low in his throat. “If I had any less confidence,” he murmured, “you’d have me reduced to misery.”

She opened her mouth to protest, to explain that she hadn’t meant to sound dismissive, but he pressed a finger gently to her lips, eyes warm.

“You do you,” he said softly. “It’s who I love.”

The world stilled.

Every argument, every word she might have uttered, was swept away in the storm of his gaze. It couldn’t be what it sounded like. People threw around the word *love* all the time. But not like that. Not with that look.

Her heart stuttered. She had nothing. No comeback, no tech analogy, not even a nervous joke. And the echo of that impossible word still ringing in her ears.

Thankfully, Zephyra chose that moment to seize Skye’s arm with an exasperated sigh.

“Goodnight,” Zephyra said, before steering her firmly towards their room.

Skye let herself be guided, legs a little wobbly, brain short-circuiting. Because no matter how she tried to rationalise it, Seb’s words had detonated something inside her that she wasn’t sure how to contain.

## CHAPTER 12

Once inside the room, Zephyra closed the door with a quiet click and spun on her heel, fixing Skye with a piercing stare.

Her blue eyes, bright and unrelenting, held the kind of intensity that usually preceded a lightning strike.

“How well do you know the vampire?”

Bob flapped up to the top of the lamp, wings rustling like parchment. “Ooh. Bold move. And here I was hoping for a peaceful evening.”

Skye blinked, the unexpected question cutting through her wayward feelings. She straightened and crossed her arms. “His name is Seb.”

Zephyra didn’t flinch. “Fine. *Seb*. How well do you know him?”

Skye’s jaw tightened. Heat crawled up her spine, shoulders stiffening. It wasn’t the question—it was the implication beneath it. The challenge to Seb’s character, to her choice.

Her voice came out clipped. “Why are you asking?”

“I may not have been to Earth before, but tales of vampires abound in Fairyland,” Zephyra said. “He’s dangerous.”

“And what? You’ve decided to play big sister now?” The words slipped out like flint sparks, and Skye took a step forward, anger simmering.

Zephyra’s chin lifted, equally bristling. “The fact you’re not answering is telling in itself.”

“Good point,” Bob said.

Skye glared at him.

But Zephyra’s tone shifted. “Please, am I not allowed to be worried about my little sister?”

“I’m not little anymore,” Skye said through gritted teeth, but her defiance deflated. She leaned against the wall, arms loosening at her sides. Silence

bloomed between them, and doubt crept in like a draught under the door.

What did she really know about Seb?

Her mind flipped through the catalogue of memories like pages in a well-worn book: midnight picnics by the harbour, Seb's smiling eyes catching the light during the Vivid Festival in The Rocks, the way he cooked her dinner—flawlessly, of course—before absolutely annihilating her at Scrabble. Every. Single. Time. Apparently, *cacoethes* and *desiderata* were real words. She'd looked them up and then spent far too long wondering if he'd picked them as some kind of secret message.

Also, he hadn't let her check her devices for spelling. Honestly! Who played Scrabble in hard mode for fun? The thought made her smile, despite herself.

"He's a great cook," she said at last, slowly. "His spinach lasagne is amazing. He's read every Agatha Christie novel. We debated for *hours* about who's better—Miss Marple or Poirot."

Zephyra blinked, clearly not expecting that, and sank into an armchair with a rustle of fabric.

"He's a brilliant fighter and an even better teacher," Skye added, moving to perch on the couch's arm. The shift in her posture defused the tension in the room. "He prefers merlot over pinot gris and has a thing for chocolate-covered strawberries."

The memory hit her unexpectedly—Seb feeding her one with a teasing smile, the warmth of his hand on her knee, laughter bubbling between bites.

"He's risked his life for me. More than once. And he helped Fred, even though," she tilted her head, "for reasons unknown, he doesn't like Fred."

Zephyra gave an inelegant snort.

Skye narrowed her eyes. "You don't like Fred either?"

Zephyra shrugged with studied indifference. "He's charming. I'm just not convinced he's sincere."

"Oh, don't let the charm fool you," Skye said. "He's honest. People get so dazzled by the smile and the voice that they forget to listen to what he's actually saying."

If he chose, Fred could insult someone undetectably. Like a stiletto hidden in a bouquet: elegant, unexpected, and usually sheathed.

Zephyra didn't answer immediately. But the faint uptick at the corner of her mouth said enough.

Skye smirked. "You *like* him."

"I do *not*," Zephyra said, a touch too quickly and with far too much dignity.

"Ha! You're not even fooling your sister, and Skye is usually clueless," Bob cackled from his perch.

Skye turned to him, unimpressed. "Really?"

Bob rubbed his beak against the lamp's brass frame. "Come on, Babycakes. You've got many talents, but reading people isn't one of them."

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Fair. She'd trained herself to study patterns, to analyse behaviour like data. Emotions, though—those were less predictable. She could spot an error in a piece of code fast but sometimes missed the truth in a glance. She could if she focused, looking for each expression marker, but it was *exhausting*.

Just thinking about it made the weight of the day press harder on Skye's shoulders. Her eyes stung with fatigue, and she rubbed them, trying to push away the blur.

Zephyra must have noticed, because she stood, smoothing an invisible wrinkle from her sleeve. "Okay. You know Seb better than I expected. But I still think he's dangerous."

"Oh, he is," Skye murmured, her voice softer now. "But not to me."

Not in the way Zephyra meant.

Seb wouldn't hurt her physically. Of that, she was certain.

But her heart? That was another matter entirely.

Because when he looked at her with those dark, steady eyes, it felt like gravity shifted. Like she was standing on the edge of something deep and beautiful and terrifying—and all it would take was one step forward.

\* \* \*

When Skye woke the following morning, Zephyra was nowhere in sight, but Bob was perched on the bedside table, preening a wing with great importance.

“She’s next door,” he said without looking up. “Plotting with Fred, I think. There was tea. And scheming.”

Right. That tracked.

Skye wasn’t entirely sure the two of them together was safe. Either for her sanity or anyone else’s. They could outdo each other in sheer force of personality: Fred with his polished charm and theatrical flair, Zephyra with her regal poise and razor-edged snark. Different approaches, same intensity.

Fred disarmed with humour, turning teasing into an art form. Zephyra, on the other hand, wielded her sharpness like a blade—direct and utterly unapologetic. But both had a gift for commanding a room, for making people lean in when they spoke.

And now they were allies. Skye groaned and flopped back onto the pillows. *Data gods, help me!*

But after a moment of self-indulgence and a resigned sigh, she shoved off the covers. Brooding wouldn’t catch a fugitive or stop a potential murderer. Like it or not, the day had begun—and she had work to do.

Showering quickly, she let the hot water clear the remnants of sleep and settle her thoughts. She dressed in dark jeans and brown boots, tugging on a rose-pink jumper spun from soft wool—warm, elegant. Had Seb picked it? By the time she checked the clock, it was already half past midday.

She went to the other suite and found Fred and Zephyra ensconced on the couch. A teapot and a tray of golden croissants sat on the table.

Without a word, Skye reached for one, still standing as she bit into the warm pastry. Flaky layers gave way to buttery softness, and for a moment, she almost forgave them for plotting in her absence. Almost.

“Good morning, darling,” Fred said to Skye, eyes crinkling at the corners. “Would you like me to order you a green tea matcha? It looks like you could use one.”

The bedroom door swung open, a familiar voice cutting through the hum of the room.

“No need,” Seb said.

Skye turned as Seb stepped into view, dressed in jeans and a high-necked brown jumper that hugged his frame. His platinum hair was damp, pushed back in a way that made him look aristocratic. Her breath hitched, and tingles ran down her spine.

In four long strides, he crossed the room and stopped before Skye. Reaching out, he brushed a croissant flake from the tip of her nose.

“Usually, you eat them rather than inhale them,” he said, voice low with amusement. Then he leaned in and kissed her—brief but thorough enough to short-circuit her brain.

Bob huffed. “Good morning, everyone, even though I don’t know why I bother. I might as well not be here. Playing the violin is *very* difficult with wings, you know.”

Then Seb moved to open the front door, catching a very startled delivery boy with a metal trolley. The kid froze, hand suspended mid-air, eyes flicking up at Seb. But recognition dawned, and his posture relaxed into a grin. It was the same bellboy from the night before.

Seb took the trolley from him with a graceful nod, sliding another folded note into the boy’s palm. “Many thanks.”

The boy beamed, eyes lighting up as he clutched the money like it might grant him three wishes. “Anytime, Mr Thornhill.”

With the door clicked shut behind him, Seb wheeled the trolley inside and produced a large cup of matcha latte like a magician revealing a dove.

He held it out to Skye. “See? *He* wasn’t scared of me.”

Bob snorted. “With the tip you gave him, he’d probably carry your groceries through a haunted graveyard and thank you for the exercise.”

Skye sipped her tea and sighed. Warm and fluffy—like being hugged from the inside. “How did you know to order it?” she asked, eyeing Seb over the rim of her cup.

"I heard you get up," Seb said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"So," she said, narrowing her eyes at Fred and Zephyra, "what did you two come up with?"

"Only a refinement of the strategy," Fred said with a dismissive flick of his hand. "The rest of the time we got chatting about Fairyland. Did you know your sister once summoned a mini cyclone during a school duel?"

Zephyra shrugged. "He insulted my flying form. It was self-defence."

Fred chuckled. "And apparently, she once redirected a weather pattern to avoid a picnic being rained out—"

"It was my birthday," Zephyra interjected, "there was a big cake."

"And she did it without being noticed by anyone from the Council." He grinned. "That takes serious subtlety."

"Interesting," Bob said, tilting his head like a scholar contemplating a riddle.

Skye set her cup down with a soft clink. "I guess we'd better get going." Her gaze slid to Zephyra, who was now lounging on the sofa as if she had all the time in the realms.

Odd. Yesterday, she'd been all fire and urgency. Maybe a good night's sleep had cooled her heels.

Skye reached into her pocket and handed Zephyra a tiny black earbud. "Here. So you can listen in."

Zephyra turned it over between two fingers, brow furrowing. "What is it?"

"A comms device," Skye said. "To enable you to hear us while you're playing lookout."

Fred stepped in, plucking it gently from her hand. "It goes in your ear, like this." With a flicker of amusement, he carefully fit it for her, making sure it nestled correctly. "Welcome to the wonders of Earth tech."

Zephyra arched an eyebrow but didn't object, her fingers brushing the device. "Feels weird."

"You'll get used to it," Skye said.

Seb didn't need an earpiece—vampire hearing had its perks—but she'd still installed a tiny mic so he could speak to her if needed.

For appearances' sake, they'd decided to take separate cars. Leura was a small town—two trips in the same limo with the same odd-looking group, and tongues would wag before the doors even shut. Better to be discreet.

If someone happened to clock Zephyra as a sylph, the fact she was with a vampire might throw them off the scent. At the very least, it would keep Fred and Skye in the clear.

Zephyra and Seb left first in the limo. Moments later, the valet rolled up with Fred's Mercedes. When the attendant opened the passenger door for Skye, he blinked as Bob fluttered down and perched himself on the centre console.

Skye slid in with a nod of thanks. The door clicked shut, and the attendant rounded the front as Fred strolled up, flashing a charming smile as the driver's side was opened for him.

"You'll need to up your tech magic, Babycakes," Bob said, as Fred pulled into the street.

Skye blinked. "What do you mean? Magic is not something you turn up and down like a volume knob."

Bob sighed, the sound eerily like a disappointed schoolteacher. "It's about control, not volume. You use a trickle when you're doing something precise. But when you need to fire off a full-strength jolt like the one you launched at your sister the other day —bravo, by the way, very dramatic—that's when you let it rip. Lots of oomph. Very flashy."

"That's application," Skye replied, though her brain was already cross-referencing every field theory she knew. The principles of sustained current, not pulsed bursts. The difference between a battery on standby versus firing a taser.

"It's like this." Bob hopped a little to keep balance as Fred took a curve. "The trickle is tied to your baseline awareness—how you hold the magic. Focus for a second."

Skye did, and sure enough, her smartwatch pulsed with a responding glow.

"No, no! Don't release it." Bob flapped at her. "Just *hold* it there."

Hold it? She'd always channelled and discharged, never... parked it.

Still, she was a quick study. With a bit of effort, she did as he asked.

“Good, good,” Bob murmured. “Now imagine you need to do one of those big zap thingies, maybe picture *Candy* at the other end, but don’t let go. Feel the build. Let it sit there.”

*Candace of House Bathory.* The mention of the female vampire sent a surge of anger through her as she remembered their last clash—Candace’s crushing grip and Skye’s taser defence.

Spoiler alert: Technology had trumped brute force that day. And Skye had walked away with the win, and a few bruise marks to show for it.

The watch crackled. Bob squawked in alarm. “Hold it!”

With a grunt, Skye reined it in. The current hovered under her skin like static clinging to her nerves, tingly, and itchy.

“That’s it. Maintain that,” Bob said, his tone proud.

“You’re joking,” Skye muttered as the discomfort persisted. It was like trying to ignore a tickle in your throat during a library exam.

“Tsk, tsk,” Bob scolded. “Think of it like a diagnostic subroutine. You want it ticking along in the background—low power, no fuss, but always on.”

*I can do this.* She adjusted her breathing until the buzz faded to feedback noise. It still sat there, as if she’d had too much caffeine paired with not enough sleep. Manageable, but annoying.

“You’ll need to practise until you can do it without effort,” Bob said.

“And why would I want to?” Skye asked once she felt the metaphorical code had stabilised enough not to crash.

It was telling how rattled she was by everything going on that she hadn’t asked that from the start. She trusted Bob, sure, and following instructions came naturally to her—she’d been wired for rules. But if something didn’t compute, logic always overruled obedience.

“To mask your air magic,” he said patiently. “If the coven is in contact with Boreas, they’ll be alert for anything sylph-related.”

“But my air magic’s negligible,” she argued. “I thought the only risk was Zephyra. She’s the magic flare. Mine’s more like a scented candle on a breezy day.”

“It’s still a risk,” Fred said from the driver’s seat, making Skye jump. He’d been so quiet she’d almost forgotten he was there.

Bob went quiet, too. Which, in Skye's brain, tripped the same alert as a system suddenly freezing mid-process. Bob didn't *do* quiet unless something serious was coming.

When he finally spoke, Bob's tone was tentative. "Your magic's not as weak as you think."

Skye opened her mouth to challenge him, because that was plain wrong, but then Fred turned the wheel and slid the car into a parking spot.

They'd arrived. Only a few metres down the footpath, the apothecary beckoned.

Nestled between a candle shop and a vintage bookstore, the shop's façade wore age with quiet pride—moss creeping through the cracks in the stone, ferns unfurling from narrow gaps like green whispers. Hand-painted signage curled across the glass: Lilith's Remedies and Rituals, in lettering that shimmered when the sun caught it.

A carved broomstick hung above the door, swaying gently. Small vials and bundles of herbs lined the display window, alongside polished stones, old tomes, and a single black cat statue that seemed to follow their approach with its painted yellow eyes.

Skye clocked the soft glow of protective wards around the doorway, standard and subtle. Nothing aggressive. But alert.

As expected, they were dealing with another skilful practitioner.

Fred slowed his pace, gesturing to Bob, who hopped from planter to post. "You know, darling, if they're scanning for air signatures, our feathered friend might be a red flag. Talking birds aren't all that common."

Skye snorted. "Oh, come on. There are all sorts of magical animals that talk."

At the Academy, nearly half the mages had a familiar, although a bird was unusual for a tech mage—typically, theirs leaned towards creatures with innate affinities to circuitry or information flow. Cats that could short-circuit Wi-Fi. Lizards that doubled as heat sinks. One student even had a memorable ferret that could type.

But a magpie?

It had raised a few eyebrows. Still, no one had dared question it. Partly because Bob was terrifyingly articulate, and partly because he had a knack for

turning up dirt on anyone who tried.

Skye hadn't chosen him. He'd simply shown up. One morning, when Skye was eleven and walking to school, a bundle of monochrome feathers and attitude landed on the fence beside her, declared himself "her partner," and never left.

And despite everything—his theatrics, his nosiness, his uncanny ability to recite embarrassing anecdotes at the worst times—he'd always had her back.

To her surprise, Bob inclined his head with uncharacteristic solemnity. "True, but let's not assume they're familiar with all the lore. We don't know what they know or what they think they know. Better not to tip the scales, eh?"

Skye's brows lifted. That was... unusually cautious for him.

She gave a quiet nod and turned her attention back to the apothecary, steeling herself. The door ahead beckoned, and with it, answers.

Hopefully.

As Skye stepped inside, the scents hit her first—sharp eucalyptus, warm clove, crushed mint, and something floral and elusive that made her think of twilight in an enchanted garden. It was heady but comforting, like a memory she couldn't quite place but didn't want to leave.

Display glass jars crammed open shelves, filled with dried herbs, colourful powders, and suspiciously glowing roots. Sage green coated the walls, and delicate mobiles made of pressed flowers and feathers hung from the ceiling. Wooden drawers were labelled in looping script: *Lungwort*, *Bone Dust*, *Cicada Shells*.

At the back of the shop, a wide counter carved from reclaimed timber took up most of the wall, its surface bearing the marks of years of use. Behind it, a round, freckled woman with an auburn braid and sleeves rolled to the elbows gave them a warm smile.

Having done her research the night before, Skye had no doubt about the woman's identity: Lilith.

She waved a hand—one still dusted in what looked like powdered lavender—and called out cheerfully, "Welcome! You're just in time. The anxiety blend's been steeping for exactly three minutes."

Her eyes sparkled with a kind of easy mischief that made Skye instantly wary. Friendly, yes—but the sort who knew exactly what herb to put in your

tea to make you spill your secrets. Or poison you.

Threat level: Medium.

## CHAPTER 13

With an expectant smile, Lilith brought forth two porcelain teacups, each painted with delicate watercolour florals—cornflowers and dandelions—and rimmed with thin gold.

“Oh, that sounds delightful,” Fred said, sauntering to the counter. “I have an incredibly stressful job. Tea that soothes the soul? Just what the practitioner ordered.”

“If it works,” Skye muttered under her breath.

A twinge of unwarranted scepticism curled in her chest—she couldn’t quite put her finger on why the witch’s calm demeanour rubbed her the wrong way. She had done nothing objectionable. Perhaps it was the excessive earnestness.

*Or the possibility she’s a murderer.*

Undeterred, Fred waved a dismissive hand. “Don’t mind her. She hasn’t had her coffee yet. But I’m confident your tea will work wonders and coax out her sunny disposition.”

Lilith chuckled, reaching behind her to retrieve a clear glass teapot from a warmer. Pale yellow tea glowed within, steam curling in elegant wisps.

“Lemon balm, chamomile, a touch of St John’s wort, and a pinch of star anise,” she said, pouring with a steady hand. “No preservatives. Your heart will approve.”

Skye gave the cup a discreet once-over with her tech scan. Everything checked out. The ingredients matched the list. Still, she approached the teacup like it might bite.

Fred took a sip. “Exquisite,” he said, eyes fluttering closed. “Soothing flavour, subtle but layered. I feel ten years younger and twice as charming.”

"You're already too charming," Skye muttered, then raised the cup. The first sip brought a surprising warmth—notes of citrus and honey with the faintest trace of spice at the end. Smooth, calming, and... fine. It was genuinely nice.

A pleased smile curved Lilith's lips.

*Ah, yes.* The witch took pride in her teas and tinctures, her whole demeanour humming with satisfaction. Would someone like that commit murder using the very ingredients she used to heal? Maybe. But the warmth in her eyes made Skye's suspicions recede, if only a little.

"I'm going to need a couple of tins of that," Fred said, setting his cup down with theatrical reverence. "It'll be a hit at the office. We're a rather tense lot."

"Oh?" Lilith leaned forward. "What do you do?"

Skye, who had been cataloguing the items in the shop, turned her attention back to the conversation. That question wasn't idle. Fred had planted the stockbroker seed deliberately. She narrowed her eyes, watching for the reaction.

"Stockbroking," Fred said breezily. "I know that sounds terribly dull, but it does have its moments of drama."

"I'm sure it does," Lilith replied with a knowing smile, but her gaze sharpened.

Skye caught the flicker of interest. Odd. She wouldn't have expected a green witch to care about share prices or market volatility.

"So you're a stockbroker yourself?" Lilith asked, her eyes skating down Fred's frame.

No suit today, but everything Fred wore whispered wealth in a cultured accent: an open-collared ivory shirt, linen-blend blazer in soft grey, jeans tailored within an inch of their life, and a vintage Omega watch Skye wouldn't have noticed—except Bob had chirped earlier that the "shiny wrist clock" was worth more than her van.

"Indeed," Fred said, resting his elbows casually on the counter.

"A partner, actually," Skye added before she could stop herself.

Fred flashed her a quick wink.

"Success," Lilith said, folding her hands, "finds those who align their energy with purpose."

Fred nodded solemnly. “Do you think you could help us realign a little more? We’ve had a few... *disappointing* events lately.” He raised two fingers in exaggerated air quotes.

Skye hid a smirk behind her teacup. When she’d told Zephyra that Fred was honest, it had been the truth. But that didn’t mean he didn’t bend things like light through a prism, enough to shine in a certain direction. Being arrested for a murder you didn’t commit a few weeks prior definitely counted as *disappointing*.

Typically one for embellishment, he’d gone the opposite way this time—right into understatement.

“Maybe a few crystals—” Lilith began, but the words caught. Her smile faltered for the first time, and Skye noticed what the careful makeup had almost concealed—red-rimmed eyes and the faint puffiness of someone who’d spent part of the day crying.

Fred tilted his head. “Like the ones from the shop across the road? We tried to visit, but it looked closed.”

“A friend ran that shop,” she said softly. “I’m afraid she’s no longer on this plane.” The words wavered, but she pressed on with a shaky smile.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Fred offered, his usual gaiety tempered with sincerity.

Lilith’s chin lifted. “Don’t be. Tess would’ve scolded me for letting grief weigh too heavily. She said when we pass, we return to the earth’s embrace—our magic becomes stardust, our spirits part of the great weave. She believed endings were simple transitions, never final.” A small smile tugged at her lips, wry and faint. “She never stayed long enough to see what lasting looked like. Always onto the next thing, the next spark of wonder. To her, the world was a series of open doors, and she couldn’t resist walking through every one. Standing still made her uneasy. Consistency wasn’t her thing.”

A beat of silence followed.

Skye rocked on her heels, the words catching somewhere between her chest and her throat. She never knew what to say in moments like this—*sorry* felt flimsy when she hadn’t known the person, and probably meant even less to someone still nursing the hollow ache of absence.

“If that was her belief,” Skye said quietly, eyes on her teacup, “then maybe holding to it is the best way to honour her.”

This time, Lilith’s smile held. It steadied like a flame catching its breath.

“Very true.” She studied Skye a moment longer, head tilting slightly. “You have a very interesting aura.”

Under the weight of the pronouncement, Skye shifted, unsure what that meant, or if she wanted to know.

Thankfully, Fred jumped in. “Not sure a few crystals would’ve done the trick, though,” he said breezily, drawing Lilith’s attention. “Even if your friend had been able to supply them.”

“There are other sellers,” Lilith said, composing herself. “But none quite like Tess.” A pause. “Her crystals were... attuned. More potent than most.”

The calm that settled over her voice held firm this time.

“If not crystals, what would you suggest?” Fred asked, waving his cup with careless flair. Skye tensed, bracing for a spill until she saw it was mercifully empty.

Then he leaned in, voice lowering as two middle-aged women entered the shop. “Money’s not an issue,” he added with a conspiratorial wink.

“Fred? We haven’t discussed costs,” Skye said, surprised.

Money, to her, was a tool—useful, not infinite, and definitely not a lever for buying cooperation. Then again, maybe that was easy to believe from the comfort of financial stability. Her mortgage was manageable, her job paid well, and the glittering trappings of wealth didn’t hold much appeal.

Skye had never been comfortable around excessive money. Quite a few of the more privileged tech mages at the academy had oozed it from every pore—unsurprising, given tech magic devices weren’t cheap.

Skill and natural talent could only take a person so far in a world that required access to expensive materials to harness them.

Seb and Fred were both undeniably wealthy: Seb’s fortune revealed itself in subtle, tasteful details and unpretentious items. Sure, the limo was a dead giveaway, but she supposed it belonged to Lord Bellmont.

Fred, on the other hand, wore his like a tailored blazer: sharp, eye-catching, and only occasionally bordering on flamboyant. Hence the shiny watch Bob had remarked on.

It still made her skin itch a little—the weight of money, the assumptions that came with it—but with those two? She'd learnt to ignore it. Mostly.

Fred turned, caught her expression, and grinned. She immediately regretted saying anything, fearing she'd just torpedoed whatever chance they had of tempting Lilith to open up. They needed her to connect them with the rest of the coven. But Fred didn't seem fazed.

"My darling's terribly practical about things," he said smoothly.

*See? The truth*, Skye thought wryly.

"But I believe good karma," he gestured around the shop, "is worth the investment."

Something shifted in Lilith's posture, a tiny easing of her shoulders. Skye watched as the woman assessed them once more—this time, perhaps seeing potential rather than performance.

"Let me serve these customers," Lilith said at last, her voice quieter but more certain. "Then we can go to the back room and talk... properly. About what you may need."

With a customer-service smile firmly in place, Lilith swept out from behind the counter and made a beeline for the two women admiring a particularly ornate teapot.

Within minutes, she'd not only sold them the teapot but also several tins of tea, each with its own mystical benefit, if her pitch was to be believed.

"Be sure to brew before bed each night," she said, placing the tin into their bag. "Your complexion will thank you."

"I could do with fewer wrinkles," one of the women replied with a rueful laugh.

Skye bit back a sigh. She *really* hoped Lilith wasn't peddling snake oil. To her knowledge, no potion could reverse ageing. There were glamour spells, sure, but no brew could genuinely turn back time. Lilith ushered them out with soothing reassurances and a pat on one woman's shoulder, then flipped the sign on the door to *Closed* and twisted the lock.

Returning to the counter, Lilith collected the still-simmering teapot and arranged it on a tray with three fresh cups and a small plate of buttery biscuits. She gestured for them to follow.

They moved through a narrow hallway that smelled of rose geranium and old wood polish, past shelves crowded with old leather-bound books, and into a cosy room. A round table sat in the centre, surrounded by mismatched but well-cushioned chairs. Skye noted with relief the absence of a crystal ball. If one had been present, she might have walked out. That nonsense had always grated.

No one could predict the future. The logic for that was irrefutable: infinite variables, micro-decisions leading to macro-consequences, a chaotic chain of possibilities. The so-called butterfly effect. She'd always found it an irritating analogy—no butterfly was going to cause a category-five cyclone—but she grudgingly admitted it made the point well.

They all sat, the clink of china filling the silence as Lilith poured the tea. Skye reached for a biscuit—golden, buttery, and still faintly warm, its crisp edges crumbling at the lightest touch. That lone croissant earlier hadn't been enough, and her body was staging a carb rebellion.

She took a bite, the richness melting on her tongue, then lifted her teacup for a sip of the new brew. The liquid was pale amber, delicate in colour but surprisingly bold in flavour—floral with a citrus twist and an undercurrent of something earthy. Lemon balm, maybe. Or was that verbena? Whatever it was, it lingered in a way that made her sit up straighter. A gentle pick-me-up.

"This blend is to promote clarity," Lilith said, setting the pot down on the table. "Lemon myrtle for calm, vervain to sharpen thought, and a hint of wattle seed for grounding. Whenever I can, I forage for local ingredients."

Fred took a sip, his eyes widening. "Delicious. Like insight with a citrus finish."

Skye nodded. "Nice." Which, for her, was practically a glowing review.

"I'm Fred Bancroft," he said. "And this is Skye."

Her heart gave a small jump at the introduction. He'd deliberately left out her surname, likely to shield her identity, in case Boreas had shared more than he should. A smart move. But surnames didn't work the same way in Fairyland. And even if Boreas had been loose-lipped, it was unlikely he'd know the name she now used—her grandfather's, not the one she was born with.

Guest duties dispensed with, Lilith's demeanour shifted. Her spine straightened, her hands folded neatly before her, and her gaze became half-

lidded, watchful.

"You spoke of disappointment... and karma," she said. There was a subtle question in there, like a card held close.

Was she fishing to see how much money she could extract from Fred?

"Is that important?" Fred asked, his fingers drumming the table in an uncharacteristic show of tension. Skye clocked the flicker of unease, and she was certain Lilith did too.

Maybe Fred was wondering about her motives. Or maybe the ghosts of that arrest still shadowed him. Probably both. He wasn't the sort to share feelings. Sarcasm was his shield, wit his armour.

"It helps me determine the best course of action," Lilith said, giving nothing away.

If they wanted her help involving the rest of the coven, they needed to sell the stakes—truthfully, but without humiliating Fred.

What would Seb say?

"Reputation's everything in business," Skye offered.

Fred shot her a questioning look.

"Years building it up, and one rotten apple, one public scandal, can burn it to the ground," Skye added.

Or two rotten apples, actually.

All of it was true, except Fred had rebranded, rebuilt, and as far as she knew, the firm was thriving. But that was the problem, wasn't it? *As far as she knew.*

She suddenly realised how little she understood about Fred's work. And that was on her. She'd never asked. He'd been off lately, quieter, more guarded. She'd noticed. She'd even brought it up. But he'd deflected, and she'd let him. Now, the guilt lodged like a stone in her chest. She should have pushed.

"Not something I'm keen to have shared outside this room," he said, but his voice had lost some shine.

"Of course." Lilith's tone gentled. "We often act as therapists, in a way. Our work requires the same discretion and care. Not sure if you're aware, but witches train for years, we follow a strict code of ethics, and we're governed by the Witches' Council. Confidentiality and quality practices are enforced."

And Lilith was a member. Skye had checked.

Fred leaned in, palms open. “Look, as my girlfriend said,” he gave Skye a wink, “this is serious. If I lose my reputation, the business folds.”

A change came over Lilith’s demeanour. Her eyes lifted towards the ceiling as if consulting something unseen. Then, slowly, she nodded.

“I could perform a general cleansing ceremony,” she said, biting her lip.

The gesture struck Skye as staged.

Fred reached out a hand, coaxing. “But...?”

Lilith smoothed her braid. “A basic cleanse might not be enough. This would require more than dispelling negative energy. We’d need to influence the energy of... others. Realign their perceptions.”

“And a cleansing won’t cut it,” Skye said, letting a note of scepticism sharpen her tone. She could tell Lilith was leading them somewhere, but the theatrics grated.

Still, it suited her role as the doubtful girlfriend.

“Probably not,” Lilith admitted, though the quick flash of satisfaction in her eyes slipped through before she could mask it.

Fred made to rise, a picture of polite disappointment. “So there’s nothing you can do?”

“I didn’t say that,” Lilith said quickly.

“Oh?” Fred paused mid-gesture, then sank back down.

Skye couldn’t help but admire the finesse; he’d struck the perfect balance between curious client and guarded professional.

“This might be another let down,” Skye said, surprised by how easily the words left her mouth. She was wielding words like tools—nudging, prodding, steering Lilith—and the fact it came so naturally unsettled her more than she cared to admit.

Was that Seb’s influence? Skye shook her head. Just as likely, it was Fred’s flair for misdirection, or Bob’s uncanny knack for saying absolutely everything while technically saying nothing at all. Logic steadied the unease. She hadn’t lied. And finding Boreas mattered. Yet good intentions had to be weighed against outcomes. She hoped she was getting it right.

Lilith let the silence stretch, likely to build tension and make whatever she said next seem important. Skye didn’t rise to the bait, keeping her expression neutral. Fred followed suit—unmoving, composed, not even a flicker of

impatience. If Lilith was waiting for one of them to fidget or prompt her, she'd be waiting a while.

"I don't usually suggest this to clients," Lilith said at last.

*Sure you don't. Unless their bank accounts have a gravitational pull.*

They held their silence.

Lilith sighed, as if they'd wrung it out of her. "We witches have magical circles."

"I've heard of those," Fred said, nodding.

Skye didn't speak, but her analytical mind turned over the concept. Circles appeared everywhere in nature—tree rings, moon phases showing the interplay of circular shadows, ripples on water. The list went on.

Magical circles had long been theorised to operate as amplifiers—closed systems that limited energy leakage and reinforced resonance. If enough practitioners focused intent through a controlled perimeter, the feedback loop could increase the spell's precision and strength. Like directing a high-frequency signal through a finely tuned antenna array. In short, if someone believed in the system and had magical conductivity, it was a functional piece of spell architecture.

Fred steepled his fingers as he rested his elbows on the table, gaze bright with anticipation. "So you can do one for me?"

Lilith gave a slow blink, then lowered her eyes demurely. "I can't."

Skye caught the deliberate pause in her cadence. A little too theatrical. Fred's shoulders dipped in visible disappointment—very convincing. Skye, increasingly irritated by the pageantry, pushed back her chair with a subtle scrape.

"Not by myself," Lilith amended, her eyes never abandoning Fred. "I'll need the assistance of our coven. Small, but well-trained."

"I see," Fred murmured, as if that explained everything.

"There are many requirements for a working circle," Lilith went on. "The correct number of casters—usually three or five. An attuned space with excellent flow. Personal items from the target to connect the intention. And, of course, alignment—celestial, emotional, magical. It's not something we rush."

And all of that would, *of course*, cost extra. Yet she could admit the use of symmetry for energy focus made sense. Like in tech magic circuits, stabilising

magical energy probably relied on closed-loop systems. And if the participants were in tune, it would be like frequencies syncing in resonance. As far as she could tell, it was more physics than hocus pocus. Which, begrudgingly, she respected.

“How quickly can you organise one?” Fred asked.

## CHAPTER 14

Time to turn up the pressure.

“Yes, Fred has to return to work soon,” Skye added, letting practicality harden her tone. “Time is money.” The phrase made her cringe inside, but Fred tossed it around so often it felt almost authentic.

Lilith didn’t flinch. “Oh, you wouldn’t need to stay. We can conduct it ourselves, as long as we have the required items.”

“Ah, no,” Fred said, his whole demeanour shifting in a heartbeat. The relaxed front dissolved into the steely focus of the corporate tactician beneath. “I’d like to observe the process. Ensure I’m getting value for my investment.”

Lilith’s brow arched. “Clients aren’t typically present during magical circles. It can be... disruptive.”

“I insist,” Fred replied. “And I’m prepared to pay extra to cover any additional safeguarding you deem necessary during your event.”

That gave Lilith pause. Probably greed battling with pragmatism—and rightly so. Whether or not the spell would achieve its supposed goal, witchcraft was still involved.

Magic had very real consequences. Interference could trigger unexpected results, especially when power levels fluctuated.

Skye remembered one academy incident with grim clarity: a classmate had been stabilising a long-range cloaking ward when another mage—just observing, not even participating—walked too close, their aura flaring out of sync. The interference had triggered a feedback loop that crashed the entire grid. Half the floor’s wards had shorted, two doors exploded, and someone’s hair hadn’t grown back quite right.

“Is your coven able to protect us from any magical backlash?” Skye asked.

“Of course we are.” Lilith lifted her chin, pride lacing her words. “As I said, we are all professional witches.”

Impatience warred with allowing Fred to handle the conversation.

“How many of you are there? And who exactly?” Skye pressed.

Fred caught her hand under the table, a subtle nudge.

*Too blunt again?*

But Lilith took it in stride. “I understand the need for due diligence.” Her gaze sharpened, more inquisitive than defensive. “I can see you’re not a believer.”

That probing look made Skye instinctively check her inner workings—yes, the background tech-magic routine was still humming.

“Are you a tech mage?” Lilith asked.

Relief swept through her. No hint of her sylph heritage had slipped through. *Cheers, Bob!* But what surprised her was being identified as a tech mage. No one had ever managed that before. Then again, she didn’t exactly *look* the part, so most people never thought to look for the telltales. But the extra signal she’d layered had done its job, broadcasting her speciality. Clever. And very interesting.

Bob would get a grilling soon.

*So many questions, so little time.*

Lilith must have taken her silence for assent. “It makes sense. Mages who work with tangible systems often rely on logic. You like things measured, testable.”

Fair. That was true. And Skye could admit, at least internally, that she carried her share of mage-witch prejudice. Not personal but based on anecdotal cases.

A few witches out there sold charms to cure heartbreak and warts in the same breath.

But most witches had beneficial magic and used it accordingly. Some packed a punch, like the High Witch. She’d once, allegedly, turned a witch who tried to hex her into a popsicle mid-council. Another who had crossed her, so the rumour went, had sprouted hair over every inch of her body, a condition that apparently lasted an entire month.

Not that anyone could confirm it. The witch in question had vanished from sight for the duration, presumably to shed in private.

Yes. Some witches were the real deal. And if Lilith and the others in the coven were too, they'd need to tread carefully.

"I do prefer tangible results," Skye said, replying to Lilith's earlier remark. "Which is why I'd like to know more about those in your circle."

"Fair enough," Lilith nodded. "There are five of us." She hesitated, breath catching. "Were five. Tess, as you know..."

"Were you good friends with Tess?" Fred asked, the interruption softened by the sincerity in his voice.

Lilith's expression shifted, her composure slipping. "Yes, Tess was... joyful. Bright. Someone who'd talk to plants and actually wait for a reply." She gave a small, sad laugh. "She loved nature, adored crystals. Always had a new project—sometimes three at once. Fickle, some called her, flitting from one interest to the next shiny thing."

"A big loss for the coven, then," Skye said, keeping her tone mild but aiming the words like bait.

Lilith paused, fingertips brushing her teacup. "Of course, the circle won't be the same without her. She was passionate. Fierce, in her own way. When something or someone caught her heart, she went all in... at least until something else stole her focus."

A breath, deeper this time.

"She was a powerful crystal channeller. One of the best I've ever met. Sensitive to energy, and sometimes she'd catch glimpses—flickers of other realms." Lilith's voice dropped, almost reverent. "It was through that sensitivity that she... met people. Unusual people."

She cleared her throat, tone brisk again as if realising she'd said something she shouldn't have.

Skye exchanged a glance with Fred. That had to be how Boreas had linked up with her—through a glimpse, a flicker, a crack in the veil. Tess, chasing the next bright thing, had initiated contact, and Boreas had taken advantage of it.

Skye clasped her hands together to still their twitch. Every part of her wanted to press Lilith for more—names, details—but even she recognised that now wasn't the moment. Patience was a strategy as well.

Lilith sipped her tea. “The rest of the coven,” she said at last, “includes Wilma, Sandra, and Logan.”

Skye blinked. A man?

Lilith’s eyes sharpened slightly, as if anticipating the reaction. “Yes. Logan is a witch.” Her gaze flicked between them like a challenge.

Fred smiled. “Excellent. I’ve always found mixed teams deliver better results—diversity and all that.”

Lilith’s mouth tilted at the corners, a hint of approval showing through.

Male witches weren’t unheard of, but they were rare and often scrutinised more harshly than their female counterparts. Not every coven welcomed them, even if the Witch Council officially recognised them as equals. Lilith was watching her closely. Was she scanning for bias?

She’d be searching in vain. If anything, Skye knew exactly what that felt like. Female tech mages made up less than seventeen per cent of the field. She could have pointed that out, but instead, said nothing. Let her draw her own conclusions.

When no reaction was forthcoming, Lilith continued, “Wilma is an emotion-weaver. She can detect and influence subtle emotional energies—very helpful when dealing with cursed objects or unsettled spirits. She can also work with crystals. Sandra’s a sigilist. She crafts protective symbols that can be embedded in physical items—teacups, walls, jewellery.”

“And Logan?” Fred asked.

“Metal manipulation and energy shaping,” Lilith replied, her voice warming with genuine respect. “He can reroute magical flows, dispel chaos magic, even convert negative energy into neutral.”

Skye nodded slowly. That skill would be crucial for such a major spell, if this wasn’t all just theatrics. The way Lilith spoke about the others—pride threaded through grief—suggested she saw them as friends, not mere coven affiliates. They sounded like they were in harmony with one another.

But was Lilith presenting a polished portrait to sell them on the idea? Skye wouldn’t be surprised. In her experience, no team was flawless, though hers came close on most days.

Her original crew—Jimmy, Fred, Dina, and Luna, a pack of parkour-happy daredevils—had gradually expanded to include her apprentice Josh and her

maddeningly mysterious (and utterly alluring) boyfriend, Seb.

Together, they'd wormed their way into her heart, proving time and again that leaning on a team didn't mean weakness—it meant choosing not to face the world alone.

In a world full of bugs and bad connections, she'd found a strong and stable signal—her people.

Even if the coven was as balanced as Lilith claimed, would the presence of Boreas or his influence throw it off? Disrupt one thread of the weave, and the whole spell could unravel.

Skye glanced down at her tea, the floral scent mingling with the trace of something heavier: unease. If the coven agreed to a magical circle, that could either be their best breakthrough or their biggest risk yet.

Fred leaned back in his chair, the picture of casual interest. "So, how do the five of you—well, four now—work together? I assume it's not everyone chanting in a circle and hoping for the best?"

It was such a natural question, Skye couldn't tell if Fred was genuinely curious or expertly digging.

Because Fred was human, Lilith would likely assume he wasn't in the know. Witches tended to be tight-lipped about their ways, especially with outsiders. Although social media had done more to unravel magical secrecy than any spy ever could. Nothing cracked open a vault like a thirst for followers. Only the vampires managed to keep a vice-tight grip on their image. And Skye had tried.

Lilith's smile flickered. "It's a bit more structured than that. Each of us has a specific role, based on our affinities. That's what makes it effective."

Skye sipped her tea and stayed quiet, watching carefully. This was the kind of thing Lilith wouldn't have otherwise told them if pressed directly. But Fred, ever the master of conversational nudging, had the right touch.

"Wilma anchors us," Lilith said. "She's the grounding force. Her wards are strong enough to repel most interference."

Fred chuckled. "Every circle needs a blunt instrument."

"She's more chisel than hammer," Lilith corrected, though not without amusement. "Then there's Sandra. She handles illusions, glamours. The more

fluid aspects. She's the intuitive one. Sensitive to shifts in energy and can mask a spell in layers of concealment if needed."

Skye raised an eyebrow. Glamours weren't easy. If Sandra was half as good as Lilith claimed, that would make her valuable for a covert operation. Could she be shielding Boreas?

"Logan is our balancer," Lilith went on. "He reads and directs energy flow, ensuring we're not overwhelming or undercutting the spell's structure. Subtle adjustment is essential for complex magic. He also does the reinforcing."

Fred tilted his head. "Is that rare? That kind of nuance?"

Lilith nodded. "It's why we work well together. We're attuned to each other. You can't force harmony in a magical circle. The intent has to align. The energy has to flow."

It sounded good. Too good. In Skye's experience, no team ran on pure synergy. Her own crew functioned well, yes, but even they had the occasional short circuit. Seb and Fred, for example. And would the introduction of something volatile like Boreas unravel that delicate weave?

Lilith glanced between them. "Tess used to joke we were a musical group. Each of us brought a different tone. But when we played together, magic could sing."

It was a lovely image.

If that harmony was real, it would make the coven formidable.

And dangerous—if someone had corrupted the melody.

"What about you?" Skye asked.

Gesturing around her, Lilith smiled. "Potions, obviously, but I also have some energy transmutation abilities. It's helpful for healing."

"Would it be possible to meet them? Before the circle, that is," Fred asked, adjusting his collar. The laid-back charmer had retreated; in his place sat the calculating businessman—eyes sharp, posture crisp, tone level.

Lilith's smile cooled a degree. She laced her fingers on the table like she was preparing to negotiate a merger rather than perform a magical rite. "And how do I know you're genuinely committed to this?"

Fred mirrored her posture, all effortless poise. "Well," he said, "why don't we discuss costs then? Commitment is easier when we're all speaking the same language."

Lilith named a figure. Skye, who hadn't planned on contributing a single word, sputtered into her tea. The number practically sucked the air from her lungs.

Fred's expression didn't so much as twitch. Skye made a mental note never to play poker with him. In that moment, she realised he and Seb had more in common than either would care to admit. Cool under pressure, masks for days.

Except with Fred, it felt... odd. He was her easygoing friend, the one who turned tension into jokes. Seeing him like this—sharp, unreadable—threw her.

"You must be very confident in your results," he said.

Lilith's smile thinned. "I stand by the potency of our work."

What followed was a verbal dance, part measured steps, part tango for dominance. Numbers were tossed like spells—some inflated, others dismissed. Fred whittled away at her price with the precision of someone who knew exactly where the soft spots were.

Eventually, they landed on a figure still substantial enough to make Skye's stomach curl, but significantly less than the original quote.

"As a gesture of goodwill," Fred said, slipping back into relaxed mode, "I'll put down five per cent today. But before we proceed with anything further—" his gaze locked on Lilith, "—I want to meet the rest of your coven. Talk to them. Look them in the eye. If this needs everyone aligned, I'd like to be sure of who's holding the line with me."

Lilith tapped her fingers once, twice, before finally nodding. "That's fair. I'll make the arrangements." She got up and disappeared down the corridor.

Skye let out a long breath. Fred winked.

Lilith returned a few minutes later, her braid askew and a gleam of success in her eye.

"They've all agreed," she said. "Logan's at work up at his magical tools shop—it's a couple of blocks behind here. Wilma and Sandra are both at *Cauldron & Kettle*, their café. Best scones in town, and they use my tea blends."

"Of course they do," Fred murmured with a smile, pulling out his phone and transferring a deposit.

The deal was simple: fifty per cent after the magical circle's completion, the rest upon results.

Skye's cynical mind noted the alacrity of the coven's agreement—perhaps less a sign of confidence in their success and more a reflection of how generous the payment was.

Lilith led them back through the softly lit corridor, the scent of lavender and dried citrus clinging to the air as they returned to the front of the apothecary. The shop was quiet, the “Closed” sign still flipped, sunlight slanting through the windows to catch on the rows of glass jars.

Reaching beneath the counter, Lilith produced a portable payment terminal. “Tap whenever you're ready,” she said, placing it on top.

Fred withdrew his phone and tapped the device. It gave a bright chirp in response.

“Thank you,” Lilith said, tucking the device away. “I'll let the others know. Just pop in. They'll be expecting you.”

“I'll give you a call once I've made a final decision,” Fred said, extending his hand.

Lilith shook his hand and nodded.

As they stepped out into the afternoon air, Bob swooped down from a nearby awning and landed on Skye's shoulder.

“What's the story?” Bob asked.

“They're organising a magical circle to help restore Fred's business reputation,” Skye murmured under her breath.

Bob clicked his beak. “Well, the business might bounce back, but I'm not sure even magic can polish *his* reputation.”

“That's because brilliance doesn't need polishing,” Fred replied. “It blinds on its own.”

Bob fluffed his feathers. “Blinds or burns?”

“Depends on the angle,” Fred said.

They made their way down the leafy street, passing sandstone façades, pots of lavender outside bookshops, and shop windows brimming with crystals and handmade soaps.

A breeze rolled down the avenue, ruffling Skye's curls. The scent of baked goods wafted from somewhere nearby, warm and inviting.

Her phone pinged, and Skye answered with a flick of her wrist, the soft chime echoing before Seb's voice came through her earpiece.

“Nice job in there, Firefly,” he said.

“Yeah, well, Fred can take most of the credit,” she replied, brushing a crumb from her jumper. The praise made her cheeks warm.

“You played the sceptic to perfection,” Seb said. “That sold it better than if you’d gone along with his little scheme.”

“It doesn’t count,” Skye muttered. “I wasn’t acting.”

There was a long-suffering sigh on the other end. “Firefly...”

Bob, who had been listening by pressing himself against Skye’s ear, turned to Fred and stage-whispered, “Seb says she played the sceptic perfectly.”

“For the record,” Fred said, “I agree with Thornhill.”

“I want that in writing,” Seb replied drily.

Bob repeated it, mimicking Seb’s voice.

Fred snorted. “Careful, Thornhill. If we keep agreeing with each other, people will think we’re bonding.”

Bob flapped his wings, “I knew it! This is the start of a beautiful frenemy-ship.”

Seb made a sound suspiciously like a choke. “Zephyra and I are on the move; we’ll be across the road.”

## CHAPTER 15

The *Cauldron & Kettle* cafe sat on the corner, a charming converted cottage with big planters at the front and a painted wooden sign in looping gold script.

As they approached the front entrance, Bob flapped off Skye's shoulder and landed atop a post box. "I'll stay out here," he announced.

A bell chimed overhead as Skye pushed the door open.

Inside, the room brimmed with cosy charm and the comforting scent of freshly brewed tea. The space was inviting, filled with the gentle clink of cups and the murmur of cheerful conversation.

Hints of spiced chai, rosehip, and something citrusy—perhaps lemon myrtle—alongside the buttery allure of warm scones and delicate pastries filled the space.

Behind the counter stood an older woman with silver-streaked hair tucked into a knitted headband and spectacles resting low on her nose. *Wilma?*

She moved with the ease of long-practised ritual, pouring from a line of gently steaming teapots. Her apron bore flour smudges and dried herb stains, and three large glass jars stood beside her: one filled with crescent-moon shortbreads dusted in sugar, another stacked with pale round biscuits marked with delicate symbols, and a third with sticks dipped in glossy chocolate.

The other woman—likely Sandra—glided between tables. Her tunic, dyed in rich autumn shades of rust, amber, and mossy green, shimmered as she moved. A deep violet headband wrapped around soft waves of chestnut hair. Her skirt, sewn in a patchwork pattern, swirled like fallen leaves on a breeze—the outfit a blend of earthiness and joy.

She balanced a tray in one hand while sliding teacups onto tables with the other, laughing with patrons and adjusting a vase of fresh daisies on a nearby

shelf.

Wilma glanced up, spotted them, and lifted a hand in greeting. She gestured towards a corner table tucked away from the crowd and marked with a wooden sign that read *Reserved*.

Given how busy the tea shop was, Skye doubted they'd get much meaningful information here. Both Wilma and Sandra were clearly in their element—juggling orders, refilling teapots, and chatting with regulars like they were old friends. Not the kind of environment for subtle questions or strategic probing.

Suppressing a sigh, Skye settled into her seat.

Well, if intel wasn't on the menu, at least the food looked promising. She glanced down at the board propped near the counter and spotted a listing for scones with jam and cream. A silver lining, she thought, as Sandra appeared with a notepad in hand.

"I'm Sandra," she said. "You must be Skye and Fred."

She was prettier up close—cornflower-blue eyes, a small upturned nose, and a smile so dazzling it could sell out every blend of tea they stocked. Her gaze lingered on Fred a beat longer than necessary.

Magic output: Decent. Potential threat if provoked or poorly supervised.

Threat level: Medium.

"Would you like something to eat, or just tea? Once I've taken your order, I'll come back and join you. Everyone's sorted for now, so I've got a few minutes."

She gestured to the room with casual confidence. "I believe Lilith said you were curious about what we can offer."

An undercurrent thrummed beneath Sandra's words, one even Skye couldn't miss. Fred certainly hadn't, if the grin he aimed at her was any indication. Skye studied the exchange, then focused on Fred.

Objectively speaking, he was attractive—his easy charm sharpened by that smile that hovered between cheeky and irresistible. And right now, he was dialling it up to full wattage.

Zephyra's voice echoed in her mind. *Is he honest, or is it all performance?*

Watching him now, Skye couldn't help but wonder.

"I do indeed, and I'd love a chat. In terms of food and drink, what do you recommend?" Fred asked.

"The scones are excellent—homemade by Wilma. I made the strawberry jam myself," Sandra said with a proud smile. "And I'd suggest letting Wilma surprise you with the tea. She has an uncanny knack for picking the perfect blend for both the person and the moment."

"Sounds good," Fred said, flashing her another grin.

Sandra turned to Skye with the same brightness. "And you?"

"I'll have the scones, too, thanks. But I would like a green tea if you have it?"

"We do," Sandra replied. "Several types, actually, and different preparations as well. Would you like to see the tea menu, or shall I let Wilma choose?"

"Wilma can decide," she said, wondering how many ways you could serve green tea.

Sandra nodded and moved off.

Skye leaned in. "What did you think?"

Fred shrugged. "Too early to call. Friendly, though."

"Too friendly, Zephyra says," Seb's voice murmured through her earpiece, dry as ever.

Skye snorted.

Fred arched a brow. "What did I miss?"

"Zephyra's assessment," Skye said, trying to keep a straight face. "She thinks Sandra's *too* friendly."

A splutter of outrage crackled in her ear, and she had to bite her lip.

"Did she now?" Fred said, and his lips twitched. "She might have a point, but it works in our favour."

Skye spent the next few moments observing Wilma from across the café. With her silver-streaked hair, apron, and no-nonsense manner, she projected an energy that wouldn't feel out of place in a fairy godmother's role. Sandra, as Zephyra had unnecessarily pointed out, also exuded friendliness.

But looks could be deceiving.

Both women clearly played an active role in the kitchen. Sandra had proudly mentioned making the jam, and Skye wouldn't be surprised if she

handled some of the baking as well. She'd also said Wilma had made the scones.

If someone had poisoned Tess, slipping it into her food would've been a subtle and effective method. Zephyra was adamant it hadn't been Boreas. But these two? The means suited them perfectly. And more importantly, Tess would have trusted them.

A few minutes later, Sandra returned with their order—fluffy, piping hot scones nestled beside a generous swirl of jam and cream, and two steaming teapots. She set down a third cup for herself and took the empty chair at their table.

"Tell us about yourself," Fred said, lifting his teacup with one of those smiles that somehow managed to be both casual and coaxing.

Sandra tucked a loose wave behind her ear and leaned in, her smile bright and ready. She would have anticipated the question and likely had the answer gift-wrapped.

"Well," she began, her voice all warm honey, "when I'm not cooking, I love a good walk through the national park—there's something about the mist and the birdsong, don't you think?" She paused for effect, then added with a playful lilt, "And I'm an absolute sucker for a romantic movie. The classics, of course. *The Lake House*, *Pride and Prejudice*, even that old one with the ghost in the lighthouse..."

"Oh, *The Ghost and Mrs Muir*," Fred said. "A favourite of mine too. Bit of tragic yearning never hurt anyone."

While Skye hadn't consciously considered it before, Fred being a romantic made perfect sense. He was witty, charming, and good-looking, not to mention thoughtful when he let the flippant mask slip.

A quiet unease stirred in Skye's gut—nothing she could name. Something about this flirty, surface-level witch didn't sit right. And not because she was a suspect.

If Skye had to imagine someone for Fred, it would be a woman with bite—sharp-minded, cool under pressure, with a little chaos tucked behind a stubborn streak. A female who wouldn't be dazzled by his grin but challenge him with one of her own. Strong-willed enough to call him out, yet curious enough to keep up.

Sandra beamed, clearly delighted by the shared taste. “Exactly! It’s the pining that gets me every time.”

In lieu of commenting, Skye busied herself with her scone. She slathered on enough jam and cream to violate at least three structural codes, then took a generous bite. The bun was hot, the jam tangy-sweet, the cream thick and luxurious—divine. She moaned.

A deep voice hummed in her ear. “Should I be jealous of the scone?” Seb asked. “Because the noise you just made...”

She choked mid-swallow and covered it with an awkward cough, reaching hastily for her tea. Across the table, Fred shot her a look that teetered between amusement and suspicion.

Sandra either didn’t notice or chose not to. “Sometimes I think the world needs a bit more love,” she added, swirling her spoon in her cup. “Don’t you agree?”

Skye finally swallowed and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Romantic, check. Possibly a little naive, check. Whether the softness was genuine or carefully curated remained to be seen.

Fred smiled. “Hard to argue with that.”

Skye reached for another scone as the investigator part of her brain kicked in. Something Sandra had said earlier tugged at her memory. Ah, yes, she’d mentioned enjoying cooking. But not baking. Making jam could be loosely called cooking, sure, but it was interesting that she hadn’t claimed credit for any of the pastries or scones.

Maybe she was overthinking it. Or maybe it was time to deploy one of her famously blunt questions.

“You said you’re a cook?” Skye asked.

If Sandra found the question odd, she didn’t show it. “Oh yes. There’s something magical about cooking. And out here, nature hands you the ingredients. That’s what I love about living in the mountains. Not only can you gather wild berries, but the bush is beautiful.”

“Fascinating,” Fred said.

“I’d be happy to show you the area sometime,” Sandra replied, then tacked on, almost as an afterthought, “Both of you, of course.”

*Uh-huh.* Skye arched an internal eyebrow. Surely there was some kind of universal etiquette against flirting with someone's supposed boyfriend right in front of them? Because even her logic-oriented brain caught the subtext in that invitation.

Filing it away, she switched gears.

The Blue Mountains were rich with options—pepperberries, warrigal greens, lemon myrtle, native mint, bush tomatoes. Add in mushrooms if you knew what you were doing (or wanted a quick trip to the emergency department), and even edible flowers like nasturtiums or violets.

"Do you forage for your ingredients?" Skye asked.

"Other than the berries? No. But I have my own little green patch." Sandra launched into a list that included some of the expected—wild herbs, rosella flowers, native thyme.

"Do you dry any of what you pick?"

Sandra smiled. "Of course. It's the only way to store some of the flavour long-term. Especially the delicate ones."

Skye nodded slowly, her mind already noting the answer down. Delicate indeed. And sometimes dangerously easy to mislabel. Could Tess's death have been an accident? It wasn't impossible. Some plants looked nearly identical, and even experienced witches could slip up. Sandra had said she cultivated ingredients, so those would presumably be safe. Unless she grew poisonous ones?

"I bought the strawberries for the jam, don't worry," Sandra said, misreading Skye's pause.

Unconsciously, Skye reached for another scone, and before she knew it, half had disappeared. Fred reached across, eyes twinkling. "You've got a little cream," he said, gesturing near her mouth but not touching.

A low growl vibrated in her earpiece.

Skye blinked, grabbed her napkin, and wiped quickly. Yep. Seb had definitely seen that. She resisted the powerful urge to glance around for a vampire-shaped shadow, knowing any obvious reaction might tip their hand.

"Yummy," she said, scrambling for the first word that came to mind.

Sandra beamed. "You should try the lemon ones next."

Then, casually, she jotted something down on a scrap of her notebook, tore it free, and handed it to Fred. “My number. In case you’ve got more questions about the circle... or fancy seeing the local sights. I love playing tour guide.”

*Do you also offer private tours to Fairyland fugitives?*

Sandra rose smoothly as a customer lifted a hand. “Hope to see you both soon,” she said with a cheerful wave, then made her way over to the nearby table. After taking the order, she drifted back to the counter and exchanged a few quiet words with Wilma.

They didn’t glance in Skye and Fred’s direction, but that only made it more obvious.

*They’re talking about us.*

Skye sighed. It was a shame she didn’t have access to all her tools and her workshop here. The directional microphone she’d once built to spy on Seb would have been handy—a brilliant piece of tech born out of mild (okay, maybe an unhealthy dose of) jealousy and far too many matcha lattes. That incident had been carefully archived under *Not My Finest Hour, but it worked—so let’s not rehash it*. Luckily, Seb never brought it up afterwards.

The prototype, however, was back home. Still, with a few components, she could probably throw another together. Might be worth the effort.

By the time the customer received their order, Sandra remained at the counter, and Wilma removed her apron, giving it a quick dust-off. She approached their table with confident steps and took a seat.

“I’m Wilma,” she said.

Skye couldn’t help but feel assessed, weighed, and quietly dissected. Whatever internal checklist Wilma was running, they must have passed muster, because the older woman gave a slight, satisfied nod.

Her magical presence was palpable, like a coiled ward humming. And from the way she held herself, Skye had no doubt she’d use it without hesitation.

Threat level: Medium to High.

“Fred and Skye,” Fred supplied, gesturing to Skye.

“Such a lovely name,” Wilma said.

Skye managed a smile, trying not to shift in her seat. *Lovely*, yes, and suspiciously common among sylphs. Wilma wouldn’t know that... would she? It was popular enough on Earth to pass unremarked.

"I see you enjoyed my scones," Wilma added with a grin.

Skye glanced down. Nothing but a dusting of crumbs remained on her plate. Before she could say anything, Fred slid one of his untouched scones onto her plate.

"Most definitely a hit," he said. "We might have to take a few with us."

"They're best fresh," Wilma replied, shaking her head. "But if you want something to take with you, the shortbread travels beautifully."

That, more than anything, reassured Skye. Honest advice. From someone who took pride in their work and wasn't trying to impress.

"Do you want me to tell you about myself, too?" Wilma asked, eyes twinkling.

Yep—Sandra had absolutely briefed her.

Fred reached for his other scone, spreading jam and then cream with delicate restraint, nothing like the mountain of indulgence Skye had attempted.

"I have no doubt you've got stories worth listening to," he said.

"You know my speciality—wards," Wilma said, folding her hands on the table.

Skye's interest spiked. Now *that* was something she could get behind.

"Containment for artefacts or beings?" she asked, careful to sound like a curious tech mage rather than someone who built custom magical defences for a living.

Wilma's eyes glinted. "Both. Though I prefer objects—less screaming involved."

Fred gave a low chuckle, but Skye leaned forward, intrigued. "Do you favour layered wards or dynamic?"

"Layered, almost always," Wilma replied without hesitation. "Set properly, they self-correct minor breaches. Dynamic wards are like teenagers—moody and prone to overreacting."

"I knew a ward once that electrocuted a mailman," Fred offered helpfully. "He was delivering pizza."

"Runic base?" Skye asked, ignoring him.

"Always," Wilma said. "Norse or Hermetic, depending on the caster's affinity. Though lately, I've been experimenting with hybrid patterns—laid in

salt and ash. Takes longer, but the resonance is cleaner.”

Skye nodded slowly, already mapping out the possibilities in her head. Tech magic and witchcraft didn’t usually play well together—too many interference points—but she’d found ways to reinforce traditional warding structures with stabiliser matrices, micro-thrum anchors, and pulse-locked code.

*If she spliced a containment loop around a static rune structure...* Skye bit the inside of her cheek. It might bridge the delay lag and prevent signal degradation. She’d have to run a sim.

“I’d love to compare notes sometime,” she said, forgetting for a minute she was meant to be interviewing Wilma, not discussing best practices.

*Oh well, two birds, one stone, right?*

Wilma gave a short nod, but her eyes held a flicker of something—caution, maybe. Witches didn’t often open their practice to outsiders.

“Well,” Fred said, breaking off a piece of his scone. “At least *one* of us speaks the same language.”

## CHAPTER 16

Wilma's gaze flicked between them, sharp and appraising. "So, how did you two meet?"

"You mean, how did a smart, gorgeous tech mage end up with a tragically *magicless* human like me?" Fred asked, eyes sparkling as he reached across to take Skye's hand.

The calculation in Wilma's expression softened, and suspicion dimmed to something closer to approval.

Skye winced, bracing herself as Seb's voice crackled to life in her ear. "He's right about all of that," he said and sighed.

Fred held her gaze with exaggerated affection. "I'm a very lucky man. But even brilliant mages need sound investment advice now and then."

"Oh, so it was a professional connection first," Wilma said with a knowing nod.

"As they say, the rest is history," Fred added.

"Well, you make a lovely couple," Wilma said, adjusting in her seat. "Now, was there anything else you wanted to ask?"

Skye suspected Wilma had decided she'd shared enough. Which was reasonable. Skye had got a tad too excited about rune layering and containment fields.

But Fred wasn't done. "Actually, yes," he said, as Wilma began to rise.

She paused, eyebrows raised.

"I'm a bit ignorant about magical practices," Fred continued, "but I know one of your members is... gone. I'm very sorry for your loss, by the way."

He let the sentiment hang, quiet and respectful. A flicker passed through Wilma's eyes, the barest tightening at the corners before her expression smoothed.

“You’re wondering if her absence will weaken the circle,” Wilma said, her hands folded tight.

Fred nodded. “I imagine something like that requires balance.”

Skye let the silence stretch, watching Wilma with quiet patience, but her mind, as always, wandered into numbers.

Fred might’ve been guessing, but his instinct about magical balance wasn’t wrong. The logic held. Nature, after all, was deeply mathematical.

The Fibonacci sequence—One, one, two, three, five, eight, thirteen—was more than a pretty pattern on charts. Lilies had three petals. Buttercups had five. Cosmos? Usually, eight. Daisies came in like enthusiastic overachievers, with fifteen to thirty. All neat, numerical precision hiding beneath soft petals and bright colours.

Sunflowers especially fascinated her—how their seeds spiralled outward in opposing curves, following Fibonacci numbers to pack in as many as possible without wasting space. Efficient and elegant.

When Wilma still didn’t answer, more examples came to mind.

Pinecones, pineapples, leaf arrangements. Plenty of things in the world bent towards maths, as if it were a secret language only some could hear. Even symmetry followed rules: radial, like snowflakes and starfish, or bilateral, like the animals people kept mistaking for *normal*.

Magic, the same as nature, was shaped by formulas and ratios.

The witches’ circle now stood at four. It didn’t fit. Not with the Fibonacci sequence, not with circular harmony. It was off-kilter—like a chair with one leg shorter than the rest. Someone could sit on it, sure, but not for long. When patterns didn’t align, problems followed.

*Clever Fred.*

Skye’s gaze slid back to Wilma, who was now staring off to the side, eyes unfocused, as if grasping for an answer that refused to land.

Had she truly not considered it before now? Maybe the shock of Tess’s death, combined with the whirlwind of Fred’s request, had clouded her judgement. Skye frowned. Or maybe Fred’s generous deposit was smothering her usual ethical checks.

Either way, her next words would be telling.

Wilma's brow furrowed. "You're right to ask," she said at last. "Losing Tess has thrown our balance. The circle still functions, and our power will yield results, but they may not be as stable or as focused without her. Magical work thrives on harmony."

Skye sat a little straighter. That kind of honesty, especially when money was on the table, earned points in her book. So, she hadn't entirely misjudged Wilma.

"Then what do you suggest?" Fred asked.

Wilma's mouth curved upwards, satisfaction in her eyes. Likely pleased he wasn't bolting at the first hint of complication.

"Finding another witch who's compatible at this stage would be tricky," Wilma admitted. "Trust and alignment don't come easily. We've worked together for years. Bringing in someone new... it's a risk."

She paused, gaze shifting to Skye. Assessing. Measuring.

*Oh, no. Absolutely not.*

Skye shook her head, hands flat on the table. "Different kind of magic," she said quickly. "And I'm not trained in coven work." That wasn't a lie. But her real concern gnawed beneath the surface—what if joining a circle exposed her sylph nature? Even the smallest magical misstep could out her in front of witches powerful enough to sense the magic.

Fred must've caught the tension in her voice because he jumped in. "Could I do it?"

Both women let out twin snorts of amusement.

"Sorry, dear," Wilma said with an apologetic smile. "Without power, your presence would be a neutral at best, disruptive at worst. Magic flows through circles like a current. You'd short it."

Fair enough. And accurate. Unless Fred was a conductor. She dismissed the fanciful notion almost immediately. Conductors were rare, at least according to the old lore texts, and required a unique bond with the caster. A mutual appreciation of baked goods and well-timed sarcasm wouldn't cut it. And mindless flirting with Sandra also didn't qualify.

Skye tapped a finger against her teacup. "If you tried without Tess, is there any way to strengthen the result? Supplement it somehow?"

Wilma tilted her head. "There might be someone we could call on. Someone the others also know a little. But..." she exhaled, her fingers fidgeting with her necklace, "he's not available for a couple of days. Maybe more."

Fred leaned back, lips pursed. "Sooner would be better."

Wilma nodded once. "Leave it with me. I'll see what we can do."

With that, she rose from the table; the conversation had reached its end, at least in Wilma's eyes.

They left after Fred paid, with a bag of shortbread tucked under his arm. As they stepped into the crisp afternoon air, Bob swooped down from his perch and landed on Skye's shoulder.

"Well," he said, eyeing the bag, "you were in there a while. Looked a tad serious. No one turned into a frog, I assume?"

"I think they all know Boreas," Skye said. "And that's who Wilma was thinking of when she mentioned someone might join the circle."

"It could be another witch," Seb said into her ear. "They're likely to know more of their kind."

"True," Skye said. "But covens are notoriously closed off, even to each other. Bringing in a witch from outside would be a gamble. Assuming anyone would agree to it and risk angering their own group."

"Why do you think it's Boreas?" Zephyra's voice came through, slightly muffled.

Skye stiffened at the tone, catching the thread of scepticism. Was Zephyra doubting her theory or just doubting her?

"If it's not another witch," Skye said, keeping her voice even, "who else would have enough magical power to stabilise a working that complex? And you said it yourself—Boreas is strong."

"Yes," Zephyra allowed, "but he doesn't play well with others."

Skye snorted. "But he does if it suits his needs. Manipulation is his favourite game."

Fred raised an eyebrow, clearly trying to track the conversation he could only hear half of.

Bob piped up helpfully. "They're debating whether the mysterious additional witch is secretly an egomaniac with teamwork issues. So, just your average coven circle, really."

Fred held up the bag of shortbreads. "Will a biscuit get me a more reliable transcript of that earpiece chatter?"

"Bribery works," Skye said, "but Bob's version might come with a few added flourishes to extract more out of you."

"I would never—" Bob paused. "Well, maybe a little creative retelling. Depends. How many biscuits are we talking?"

"None," Skye said, steering them towards the next street. "I'll catch him up."

"Spoilsport," Bob muttered, fluttering over to Fred's shoulder. "You and I should talk later," he said to Fred. "Incentives work better off the record."

Fred chuckled. "A bird after my own heart."

Skye rolled her eyes. "Zephyra doesn't think it's Boreas. Says he prefers flying solo."

Fred's expression turned thoughtful as they rounded the corner. "Possibly. But someone like him—selfish, ambitious—would still team up if it got him closer to his goal. Didn't he rope Zephyra in once already?"

"He lied to me," Zephyra's voice rang through the earpiece, all sharp edges.

"He lied," Skye echoed, "and she believed him."

"That only proves he's persuasive," Fred said, choosing diplomacy. "If he tricked Zephyra, he'd be capable of charming the coven, too. Helping enough to stay useful. Until he gets what he wants."

"That's probably accurate," Zephyra conceded.

"Glad you agree," Skye said tightly. Hadn't she made that exact point two minutes ago? Then, it had been met with resistance. Fred says it, and suddenly it's all enlightenment and agreement? She bit down on her irritation and took a slow breath.

High road. She could take the high road. Once in a while. "I believe at least Wilma will want the magic circle done properly. Which means they'll likely invite Boreas."

"They might ask someone else instead," Zephyra countered. "We could be wasting time."

"Of course we could," Skye said through a clenched jaw. "So why don't you take a scenic hike through the mountains and find him the old-fashioned way?"

Fred pointed ahead. "We're here," he said.

They were a good fifty metres away, which meant Fred had timed his interruption to cut short the brewing sibling bicker-fest. Not Skye's fault, of course. If only Zephyra would be logical for once. But whatever. Skye let it go.

Ahead, a rustic timber sign carved with rough letters read: *Arc & Anvil*.

The inside of the *Arc & Anvil* might as well have been conjured straight out of a high fantasy artisan's dream—if said artisan also had a practical streak.

Installed in a double garage annexed to a weathered sandstone house, the workshop carried the marks of long, industrious years—soot-stained walls, timber beams darkened by smoke and time, and tools nestled in racks like sleeping relics.

A forge hummed in the far corner, its chimney drawing the heat and smoke cleanly outside, and the scent of scorched metal mingled with lavender polish.

The space pulsed with enchantment. Shelves lined the walls, crowded with finished implements—wand cores, ceremonial daggers, brooches, even what looked like a rune-etched hair straightener. A dozen softly glowing sigils rotated in lazy circles above the anvil like lazy fireflies with attitudes.

Logan stood at the centre, hammering a curved blade on his anvil with steady, rhythmic strikes. The metal's glow deepened with each blow.

He wore a sleeveless leather apron, dark jeans and heavy boots. A protective mask obscured his face as he worked, the forge's glow reflecting off the visor.

A boy stepped forward, broom in hand. No older than seventeen, he had a mop of sandy curls, warm brown eyes, and a smudge of ash on his cheek. His shoulders squared nervously when he saw them, but he gave a polite nod.

"Hi," he said. "Logan will be with you in a sec. You're from the tea shop, right?"

Skye studied him. There was nothing supernatural in his aura, just some enthusiasm and a lot of teenage uncertainty. Human. He reminded her a bit of Josh: eager to help, probably underestimated, and destined to one day surprise everyone.

The boy turned and whistled loudly, and Logan stopped mid-swing. He set the hammer down, pulled off his gloves, and lifted his mask.

He was... unexpectedly handsome. Not in the brooding or chiselled way Seb was, but boyish and warm—smiling eyes, strong jaw, curls damp from the forge heat.

Skye wasn't sure if it was the workshop lighting or the easy way he crossed the floor, but he had an understated charm—like Fred in soft focus, minus the polished cheekiness and dressed down in soot and sincerity.

"Fred and Skye, right?" he said, voice mellow and deep. He extended a calloused hand first to Fred, then to her. His handshake was firm but not crushing. "Logan. Sorry for the mess. Today is repair day, and I'm behind."

His magic signature pulsed strong but laced with grounded calm. Despite herself, Skye liked him. That was rare. She didn't usually form opinions so fast. Still, instincts didn't get a free pass.

Threat level: High.

Skye returned the handshake with a half-smile. "Of course. Do repairs happen often?"

Her devices were calibrated down to the decimal. Unless something got physically smashed, there was rarely a need for fixes.

Logan chuckled, swiping a soot-streaked forearm. "More than you'd think. Turns out, magic-proof doesn't mean fool-proof—especially when people get creative with their clumsiness."

Fred had stayed quiet, hands in his pockets, content to let Skye take the lead. That alone bolstered her. His confidence in her ability to interview Logan felt like a gentle nudge between the shoulder blades, steadying her.

"Could you show us around?" she asked.

Logan nodded, pushing back a strand of hair that had fallen forward. "Sure. Always happy to show off the toys."

He guided them past a row of workbenches lined with enchanted chisels, heat-proof gloves, and rune-carved vices. One station was dedicated to metal etching—sigils already half-inscribed onto a copper band.

"This one's for stabilising fire charms," Logan said, tapping the ring with the back of a callused knuckle. "It holds heat until the exact moment it's released. Took a few burns to get the calibration right."

"Is that a compression seal on the outer layer?" Skye asked, stepping in for a closer look.

Logan gave her a slow smile. "Yeah. Not many spot that right off. You've worked with rune conductors before?"

She nodded. "Some. Mostly in shielding rigs and proximity alarms. Not quite this intricate."

"I'd love to see your work sometime," he said.

Fred raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Logan continued the tour, showing them a forge-charged anvil that absorbed shock to prevent magical ricochet, and a glowing punch tool that transferred enchantments with more accuracy than a wand. The more they talked, the more Skye noticed the subtle ease in Logan's manner—how he angled his body towards her, how he listened.

Maybe this was the time to ask the tough questions.

"I'm sorry about your coven member," Skye said.

The words made Logan pause mid-step. His easygoing smile faltered, then faded altogether. "Yeah... Tess was something else."

Skye didn't rush to fill the silence. She held his gaze and waited. His tone suggested more, and she sensed that if she left the space, he might fill it.

Fred, perhaps sensing the moment, drifted a few steps away to inspect a rune-forged sword mounted on a rack.

Logan dragged a hand through his hair, wincing when it caught in the curls. For a beat, he looked so disoriented, so young and raw, that Skye's hand moved of its own accord. She reached out and gave his forearm a light pat, then withdrew as if burnt.

A smile ghosted across Logan's lips, grateful and a little stunned.

"Tess. Short for Teresa," he said eventually. "She was more than a talented witch. She had this... wide-eyed way of looking at the world. Not quite as bubbly as Sandra, thank the stars, but always curious. Always chasing some new spark of magic. I think that's what drew me in. That wonder."

The faint quiver in his voice said more than the words did. Grief, personal and intimate. Skye's instincts tingled. Had his relationship with Tess been more than that of a coven mate?

As if reading her thoughts, Logan added, "She and I dated. On and off. For about a year. We broke up... not long ago."

“Was it you or her who decided to break up?” Skye asked and instantly winced. That was not how you phrased sensitive things. Mrs Cummings, her primary school teacher, would have tutted and written *Think Before You Speak* on the board again.

“I’m sorry,” Skye blurted. “That was—”

“It’s all right,” Logan said, lips twitching at the corners. “You’re direct. Honest. I like that.”

A faint crackle in her earpiece made her suspect Seb or Zephyra had caught that and wasn’t happy. She ignored it.

“I think it was her this time,” he said after a pause. “We weren’t bad together, not great either. More habit than harmony. We tried to keep things polite for the coven’s sake, but in hindsight, dating inside the circle?” He gave a small, ironic laugh. “Pretty dumb.”

He rubbed his thumb along the edge of a tool belt pouch. “Truth is, I don’t really fit in with most witches. Some of them treat male witches like a novelty act. If you’re not brewing love potions or lifting heavy furniture, you’re seen as ornamental.”

Skye’s eyebrows rose.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he added. “Our circle’s better than most. But sometimes you feel you’re in the wrong changing room.”

Skye nodded slowly. That vulnerability wasn’t weakness—it was clarity. And Logan, she realised, had more depth than his easy smile had suggested.

“Thanks,” she said softly. “You didn’t have to humour my nosy questions.”

Logan shrugged, but there was a flicker of something genuine in his eyes. Her curiosity hadn’t offended him at all.

“You inspire trust,” he said. “You’ve got that same spark Tess did—an inquiring mind, a bit of wonder—but more... grounded. Except you,” he tilted his head, “I suspect your feet are always touching the floor, even when your head’s full of questions.”

Skye blinked, caught off guard. Her mouth opened, then closed again. Accepting compliments wasn’t her strong suit—especially not ones that made her feel vaguely sentimental.

“It’ll be good working the magic circle with you,” Logan added, voice light but sincere.

Her brows shot up, and she took a step back.

*What?* Had Wilma said something?

What happened to *there might be someone we could call on?*

## CHAPTER 17

Logan blinked rapidly, clearly startled by her reaction.

“I’m sorry—did I say something I shouldn’t have? I thought that was the arrangement?”

Skye shook her head, hard. “Nope. Not doing it.”

The words came out sharper than she intended, and she winced internally. She scrambled for an explanation that wouldn’t sound completely irrational.

“It’s just—” she exhaled. “Mage magic and witch magic don’t always play nicely. Different theories, different structures. I’ve never worked a circle before, and frankly, I’m not keen to start now.”

Logan didn’t appear offended. Instead, he leaned in, his expression open. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” he said gently. “But... don’t you ever want to try something new? To see what it feels like?”

Skye opened her mouth, then hesitated. “I love learning,” she admitted. “But group magic? It’s not really my thing. I’ve always worked better solo. Too many variables in a team. Too many people to let down.”

There. That was at least closer to the truth.

Logan gave a small, understanding nod. “I get that. But maybe after the circle—if you’re still curious—we could talk about it. The different styles. I’ve always wondered how tech magic and traditional casting intersect.”

Sincerity underlined his words. And it made the knot in her chest loosen.

Skye offered a tight smile. “Maybe. I’d like that.”

And, surprisingly, she meant it.

Skye pulled out her phone and gestured towards his, which poked from the top pocket of his leather apron. “Mind if I add my contact details and get yours?”

Logan nodded and reached for his phone, beginning to unlock it—only for Skye to shake her head with a small smile. “Already sent.”

He blinked, then grinned, eyes wide. “Wait—seriously? You didn’t even touch it. I didn’t know tech mages could do that.”

The truth was, few could manage it; only the most skilled. As a rare level five, Skye was one of them. But she wasn’t about to boast—or spill trade secrets.

The thought made her pause. How hypocritical was that? Everyone, it seemed, was fond of keeping secrets. Hers just came with a higher voltage.

Before Logan could say anything, Fred appeared at her side, smile sharp enough to cut glass. “My girl’s full of surprises,” he said, teeth gleaming. “Dangerous, if you catch my drift.”

Logan took a fractional step back, though his smile stayed in place. His gaze didn’t leave Skye. “Right. After then?”

“We’ll see,” she replied, as Fred clasped her elbow and steered her out of the workshop.

Skye glanced sideways at him. “He was nice.”

“Beware the nice ones,” came Bob’s voice as he flapped down to one of the bollards, hopping from one to the next as he kept up with them.

“Exactly,” Fred muttered.

“There’s nothing wrong with nice,” Skye said, frowning. “Why are you both acting weird?”

“There is,” came Seb’s voice—not through the earpiece this time, but straight ahead. “If they’re pretending.”

He stood beneath the shade of a sprawling eucalyptus, arms folded, eyes fixed on her with an intensity that made her stomach flip.

A few steps beyond, Zephyra mirrored his stance—brow arched, and radiating suspicion.

Skye kept walking, slipping free of Fred’s light grip on her elbow.

“He’s right,” Zephyra said, falling into step on her other side.

Skye threw her hands up. “You don’t need to tell me to be careful. I’m cautious by nature. Goodness knows I’ve earned the right.”

Seb cocked his head. That tiny movement spoke volumes—he’d be circling back to that later, no doubt.

“And as a security consultant,” Skye continued, “I’ve seen my fair share of shady types wrapped in sunshine and compliments.”

“You’d probably invite them in, offer tea, and ask questions after they’ve nicked your silverware,” Zephyra huffed.

“Ah, no,” Seb said, a smirk tugging at his lips. “Ask me how I know.”

Zephyra glanced between them, her frown deepening.

“Long story,” Skye muttered, cheeks heating.

“One for the archives, that one,” Bob chimed in. “I played the hero.”

“More like the shrieking damsel,” Skye grumbled.

“Untrue!” Bob puffed up. “There was zero shrieking. Dignified squawking at most.”

They reached Fred’s car, and the locks clicked open with a chirp.

Zephyra and Seb kept walking as Skye slid into the passenger seat. The interior smelled of leather and Fred’s cologne. It should have been comforting.

Fred powered up the car, the soft whine fading into the background as Skye’s thoughts slipped sideways. Heat prickled beneath her skin—not the pleasant kind, but the simmering aftermath of tangled emotions. Anger. Frustration. Both curled in her chest like wires crossed and sparking.

Her friends and sister had questioned her judgement, and the doubt had dragged painful memories to the surface.

She remembered the sting of playground cruelty, not just in Fairyland but on Earth too. The way human kids had sidled up for help with their homework, only to mock her the moment they got what they wanted. Whispered names, rolled eyes.

In Fairyland, it had been worse. Her weak sylph magic made her a target before she’d even opened her mouth.

At the Academy, things had improved... and got trickier. Among mages, her level five rating earned her a wary respect. But that didn’t stop the snide remarks or the sly digs about her background.

She’d had to learn that words weren’t always currency for truth—people said one thing and meant another, and logic didn’t always apply. So, she’d observe. Body language, tone, and micro-expressions. She trained herself to read nuance the way she read code, but it was exhausting, and she often forgot. Things slipped past her shields, and she got hurt.

But if she'd shut herself off completely—walled off the vulnerable bits—she'd never have found her crew. Fred, who made her laugh when she forgot how. Who knew how to deflect tension with a well-aimed witty comment. Or Dina, blunt as a brick but loyal as a blood oath. Luna, all sharp edges and softer shadows, and loyal to a fault. Jimmy, who carried calm like a weapon and guarded their group with a quiet fierceness. Even Josh, her too-eager apprentice, who had given her a new... *purpose*.

*Huh? Where had that come from?*

And then... there was Seb.

He saw past the logic and caught glimpses of the real her. Who kissed her like he meant it and listened like it mattered. He held her gaze as if he was memorising her soul and made her feel safe and wanted. Which meant maybe she didn't have to figure everything out alone anymore.

She looked out the window, letting the trees blur past, hoping the wind through the slightly cracked window would cool the warmth that had crept up her neck. But the thrum in her chest didn't fade.

*No, I am right.*

Caution was helpful. It had kept her alive, kept her out of trouble, and made her good at her job. But never accepting anything at face value—assuming every smile hid a knife, every kindness a catch—sometimes meant missing out on something real.

Her often-ignored gut told her Logan was a decent guy.

If she was wrong, well... then she'd deal with it. That's what contingency plans were for.

Fred pulled up to the hotel, parking out front as the limousine slid to a stop behind them. Seb and Zephyra stepped out in sync, a study in contrasts—cool elegance and simmering impatience. Overhead, Bob circled once before disappearing into the thickening clouds with a cry of "Reconnaissance!" Whatever that meant in magpie terms.

Skye was still tangled in her thoughts when Fred rounded the car and opened her door.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Her brow creased. "You don't have anything to be sorry for."

"I was... worried," he admitted. "Might've overreacted to his interest in you."

*Huh?*

She exited the car.

"That witch was getting very close to crossing the line," Seb added as he reached for her hand.

"Agreed," Fred said, a rare note of solidarity between them.

Zephyra arched a brow as she fell into step beside them. "And how's that different from the witch at the café flirting with you, Fred?"

"I can take care of myself," Fred replied.

"And you think Skye can't?" Zephyra countered.

A rush of warmth went through Skye at her sister's defence, even if it came wrapped in thorns. But her instincts flared. There was a subtext here she was missing.

"Skye can be fierce," Seb said. "But she's loyal, sometimes to a fault. And people can take advantage of that."

He didn't look at her when he said it. He looked at Fred.

Right. Time to cut this off.

"Skye is right here," she said crisply. "And she can speak for herself."

Both men flinched like they'd been called to the principal's office.

A cool drop of rain landed on Skye's cheek. "Let's go upstairs," she said, tugging Seb by the hand with more determination than force. He let her lead, humouring her, since there was no universe in which she could actually drag him anywhere. When she glanced back, a familiar smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, his gaze locked on their joined hands.

Once inside Seb and Fred's suite, they gathered around the coffee table. Fred had stopped at the concierge desk on the way up, and thanks to his efforts, a tray of refreshments arrived not long after—elegant teapots releasing fragrant steam, a cut-glass decanter brimming with amber whisky beside a pair of crystal tumblers already poured, and a tiered stand stacked with delicate canapés: chicken and celery on rye, mini cheese and onion tarts, and cucumber sandwiches with crusts cut off. Skye had no idea how she could be hungry, but the sight had her stomach rumbling in betrayal.

A sudden tap-tap at the balcony window sliced through the gentle clink of spoons stirring sugar and honey into steaming cups.

Seb crossed the space, and unlocked the door. A soggy blur of black and white feathers flapped in and landed with a disgruntled squawk. Bob promptly shook himself like a dog, showering the room—and Fred—with a fine mist of rainwater.

Fred leaned back with dignity, brushing droplets from his lapel. “Lovely. Just what I needed—magpie eau de storm.”

Bob fluffed his feathers. “You’re lucky I didn’t bring the hail with me.”

“I think you *are* the hail,” Fred muttered, reaching for a napkin.

Seb reappeared with a towel, but before he could hand it over, Zephyra stepped in, plucked it from his grasp, and crouched beside Bob. Without a word, she began blotting the water from his feathers.

“Honestly, you’re worse than a soggy toddler,” she said.

Bob puffed up like a king on a throne. “Ah, at last. The royal treatment.”

“I’m drying you, not crowning you,” Zephyra replied, though her hands were gentle.

Fred raised a brow. “Careful, he’ll get used to it.”

“Good,” Bob sniffed. “About time someone appreciated my feathers *and* my flair.”

Skye curled her fingers around her teacup, letting the warmth anchor her as Bob continued to preen under Zephyra’s ministrations.

“So,” Skye said, “Let’s talk suspects.”

Fred leaned back, picking up a canapé. “Sandra’s friendly.”

Zephyra arched a brow. “Friendly enough to write her number on a napkin.”

“Flirty,” Skye agreed.

Fred smirked, unrepentant. “True, but that doesn’t make her a murderer. Still...” He toyed with the corner of his napkin. “She’s charming and used to being the one who’s noticed. I’d wager she doesn’t like being second choice.”

“You think she had a thing for the male witch,” Seb said, swirling his whisky.

“Tess and Logan broke up, though,” Skye pointed out. “Recently.”

“Jealousy doesn’t need a current relationship to fester,” Seb said mildly. “Didn’t he say they were on and off? Maybe she thought ‘off’ was temporary.”

Skye blew a curl off her face. “Okay, we have a potential motive, but nothing concrete.”

“Wilma?” Zephyra asked, passing Bob a crumb. “She sounded prideful. If she thought Tess was damaging the coven’s reputation...”

Skye frowned. “But there’s no sign Tess did anything wrong. Unless the *something wrong* was Boreas.”

Everyone paused.

Fred raised a brow. “But you said Wilma likely knows about him?”

Darn it, he had a point.

“Yes. And wanting to use him to complete the circle,” Skye said, setting her cup down with a soft clink. “She sounded confident the others will go along with it.”

“Then the others know about him too,” Zephyra said, her eyes narrowing. “They’re in cahoots.”

“Maybe,” Seb replied, lifting his glass. “Or maybe they don’t know yet. Wilma might just be counting on their trust or their reluctance to push back. She’s under pressure to make this work.”

He shifted his gaze between Fred and Skye. “And well played, by the way. Creating a bit of urgency was a clever move.”

Fred tipped an imaginary hat, his grin lazy. “Flattery, Thornhill? Careful—you’ll ruin that whole terrifying, brooding reputation you’ve worked so hard to cultivate.”

“What about that Lilith woman?” Zephyra asked.

“She said nice things about Tess,” Skye said, chewing her bottom lip.

“But also said she was flaky and unreliable,” Fred added, reaching for another canapé.

Skye frowned. “I don’t recall her saying that.”

Her memory was eidetic—perfect recall of conversations. Had she really missed that?

Fred gave her a sympathetic look. “She didn’t say those exact words. But when she called Tess inconsistent, it was all there between the lines.”

The phrase slid into place in Skye's memory like a key in a lock. "Right... she did say that. Well, that ties in with what Logan said too."

"Ah, yes, the *male* witch," Seb said.

Skye glanced at him, frowning. Was that... irritation?

"He certainly had motive," Fred said. "Breakup, unresolved feelings, jealousy if she moved on."

"A breakup isn't a reason to kill someone," Zephyra cut in.

"Pfft," Bob said. "As if you didn't consider it with Boreas."

"That's different," Zephyra said, tossing her hair. "I may have *briefly* entertained the idea, that's all."

"Uh-huh," Bob said. "So, just a little maiming, then?"

"He wasn't worth it," Zephyra said, her tone clipped. "It was the danger of the dagger. That's what got under my skin."

"Of course he wasn't worth it," Fred said, flashing a grin. "A woman like you could have her pick."

A flush crept up Zephyra's neck. "I'm selective," she said primly, but her voice was softer.

Skye didn't buy Zephyra's nonchalance. She'd idolised Boreas once, thought the sun rose and set on him. Skye would call it a massive crush in hindsight, and Boreas had surely known it. Add betrayal to heartbreak, and the equation turned volatile.

The Zephyra Skye knew wouldn't have been fooled so easily by his story about the dagger—unless, deep down, that flame hadn't quite burned out.

Now? Skye had no desire to be caught between them when they found Boreas.

The aftermath in the city had been but a preview.

Logan was different. Where Zephyra seethed behind clipped words and narrowed eyes, Logan had looked... not angry, but relieved. Grieving, but something else too. Like he'd let go of something heavy. Sure, he could be acting. And yes, Seb and Fred didn't trust him. But instinct nudged her to defend him.

"I don't think Logan murdered Tess." She hesitated, but she needed to let them see. "I get what it's like, being the odd one out. Logan didn't fit the coven image. He said as much."

“He’s earnest,” Fred said after a pause. “But that doesn’t mean we drop our guard. I vote we keep him on the list.”

Seb gave a quick nod. “Agreed. People wear masks—some so convincingly, they forget they’re wearing one.”

Skye let out a slow breath, her mind a whirl of theories and instincts. “Let’s not project what we *want* to see.”

“Or let jealousy run the investigation,” Bob said, fluttering to perch near the tea tray. “Not naming names, but someone was growling like a thundercloud earlier.”

Fred raised an eyebrow at Seb. “Was that you?”

Seb sipped his whisky with great dignity. “I do not growl.”

“Mate, I reckon the windows rattled,” Bob said, flapping his wings. “Anyway, Skye has a point. Wish more people in Fairyland thought that way. We’d have avoided at least three wars and a cursed jam incident.”

Zephyra rolled her eyes. “Please don’t bring up the jam again.”

Fred grinned. “Well, that one is going on my list of follow-up questions. Along with why Bob thinks he should be crowned.”

Bob stretched his neck. “Because I have better judgement than most royals. And excellent feather definition. And by the way. Don’t you want to know what *I* found out?”

## CHAPTER 18

All eyes turned to Bob.

“What did you find out?” Skye asked, already bracing herself.

Bob fluffed his feathers, cleared his throat, and launched into his report like it was open mic night.

“First, I had to make friends with a few of the locals—rosellas, a pair of lorikeets, and one very opinionated sulphur-crested cockatoo who thinks the council’s waste policy is a personal insult. Honestly, *the squawking*.”

Skye blinked. “Bob—”

“Anyway,” he continued, undeterred, “none of them were any help. Total chatterboxes, no actual facts. I tell you, parrots are all style and no substance. You wouldn’t believe the things they say about the butcherbird on the next ridge. *Scandalous*.”

Fred chuckled. “Sounds like your kind of crowd.”

Bob gave him a regal look. “Please. I have standards.”

“Did you find something useful or not?” Zephyra sighed.

“I *did*, thank you very much,” Bob said, a wing against his chest with wounded pride. “But *you* try locating the right kookaburra. They all laugh the same, and half of them are in a perpetual existential crisis because no one takes them seriously. One even told me he was the reincarnation of Ned Kelly. I said, ‘Mate, unless Ned came back feathered and prone to hysterics, I think not.’”

Skye pinched the bridge of her nose. “Bob...”

“*Fine*,” Bob huffed. “Yes, I found one who hangs around Tess’s shop. Heard some very interesting things. And *that*, my friends, is where the real story begins.”

Fred raised his glass. “And here I was worried you wouldn’t give us the unabridged edition.”

“Things like this require a certain subtlety, you know,” Bob said, puffing up his chest. “Suspense must be *built*. I learnt a lot from Agatha Christie. Or maybe it was a seagull that lived near her beach house. Either way, same energy.”

Zephyra threw her hands in the air. “Is that as potent as fairy wine?” she asked Fred, pointing at his whisky glass. “Because I think I’m going to need some.”

“Never had fairy wine myself,” Fred said, reaching for the decanter. “But whisky might be a fair substitute. Acquired taste. Can knock you flat if you’re not prepared.”

“Give,” Zephyra ordered, making an imperious gesture with one hand. “Or I might murder the messenger.”

Skye was tempted to say she might murder *both* of them, but she bit her tongue.

Fred, with a gallant bow, handed her the glass.

“As I was *saying*,” Bob continued, “birds don’t measure time like humans. Everything’s ‘before dawn’, ‘after the tasty grub’, or ‘during that regrettable wind incident’. Took me *hours* to get the kookaburra—Betty, by the way, an absolute lovely lady—to pin down the right day. Very chatty once she warmed up, but no sense of linear chronology whatsoever.”

Zephyra took a generous gulp of the whisky. Too generous. She choked, coughing hard.

*Uh oh*. Sylphs and distilled alcohol were never a good mix.

Fred was beside her in an instant, patting her back with the calm of someone who’d seen this coming.

“For the safety of all involved,” Seb said, his expression serious, though the twitch at the corner of his mouth betrayed his amusement, “I’d suggest you get to the point, Bob.”

Bob fluffed his feathers dramatically. “So hard to find a discerning audience these days. Everyone wants to skip ahead to the twist.”

“Bob,” Skye warned.

Bob sighed. “Fine, fine. Where was I? Oh yes, *after* the unfortunate wind incident, Betty flew up to her favourite perch on the cherry tree behind Tess’s shop.”

Skye straightened. "Please tell me you mean the night Tess died."

Bob nodded solemnly.

Even Zephyra leaned forward now, the whisky glass dangling from her fingers.

"Tess wasn't alone," Bob said, letting the silence stretch.

"We know that," Zephyra said, waving a hand vaguely before letting it brush against Fred, still perched on the arm of her chair.

"Yes, but what *we* didn't know," Bob said with a pause for effect, "is that it wasn't just *one* other person."

Fred's brows lifted. "You're saying... two others were with her at dinner?"

"Maybe. I don't know if it was the actual dinner. Birds don't run on your odd little clocks, remember? Everything's 'moon's high' or 'right after I fought with a crow over a chip.'"

Seb cleared his throat. Loudly.

Bob squawked. "Honestly, the pressure! So rude. Especially from someone old enough to have witnessed the invention of fire."

Seb raised an unimpressed brow.

"The point is," Bob continued, "it was nighttime, and it *was* the right night. Betty's sure of that. But whether it was before or after food, she couldn't say. Context, people, it's all about context."

Skye groaned softly. "And how can you even be *sure* it was the same night?"

"Ah," Bob said, bobbing his head enthusiastically, "that's the clever bit. Birds don't use clocks, obviously, but we *do* pay attention to the stars and the moon. See, there's the obvious stuff, the moon phases, for one. Then there's the way the tides nudge the big creeks, subtle but reliable. Add in how many leaves are left on a tree—we're in autumn, so that's a dead giveaway. A lot of us keep count, you know. Throw in a weather event, and voilà. For Betty, it was the night *after* the big storm and *before* the moon tipped into full. That only happens once every cycle, so yes, same night. No mistake."

Zephyra waved her glass in Fred's direction with a tipsy flourish. "Another one, please," she hiccupped.

Fred arched a brow. "It's a bit strong."

"Exactly," she said, as if that settled the matter.

With a resigned shrug, Fred stood, refilled her glass, and handed it back. He stayed beside her instead of returning to his seat.

Bob cleared his throat. "Now, back to Fred's question. There weren't just one or two visitors that night. There were three."

"Three?" Skye echoed. Had the entire coven been involved? "Male or female?"

Bob heaved a dramatic sigh. "I do wish you'd let me tell the story my way. One moment, you want speed, the next you're throwing in pop quizzes."

Zephyra giggled and took another sip. "What?" she asked when Skye gave her a look. "He's got a point. And he's funny."

"Thank you, Sugarstorm." Bob puffed out his feathers. "Anyway. Just as birds don't bother with wristwatches, we're also not especially invested in your gendered fashion constructs. Similar clothes, similar shapes. It's hard to tell who's who unless they have a distinctive scent, sound, or a particularly ridiculous hat. Most birds can't even recognise individual human faces, unlike magpies, of course. We're exceptional that way."

It would've been far too easy to expect a bird to hand over the killer with a neat little flourish, ready for them to wrap in ribbon and deliver to the police. Bob's story hadn't narrowed down the suspect pool, assuming it *was* murder. But Skye didn't let the lack of certainty stall her. Instead, she flicked into research mode, the way she always did when answers refused to line up neatly.

This was no different to isolating a deeply embedded piece of malware. Look at patterns, watch for inconsistencies in behaviour, trace access logs, and check for silent processes running out of sight. Let the evidence tell you where to look.

Same principle here: ask the right questions, scan for the emotional equivalent of corrupted code, and wait for someone's story to glitch.

Skye leaned forward, brows drawn. "All right, Bob. Start from the top. What did Betty see?"

"It was after that windstorm. Apparently, it blew over an ugly gazebo near the roundabout—"

Skye sighed. "Bob..."

"Fine, fine." He ruffled again. "Our dear Betty, perched on the cherry tree behind Tess's shop, had a clear view of the garden. She saw three people sitting

at the outdoor table.”

Fred reached for a cucumber sandwich. “All at once?”

“Yes,” Bob said. “But not all visitors arrived together. First, someone with a very strong citrusy scent arrived, like lemon verbena and drama. Let’s call them Guest One.”

“Dramatic citrus. Could be Sandra,” Seb said.

“Could be Wilma,” Skye murmured, closing her eyes to think. “Sandra said she made the jam, but it was Wilma who baked the lemon scones. And Lilith served us lemon balm tea.” She opened her eyes. “Logan’s the only one who doesn’t have any connection to that scent.”

“That we know of,” Fred said, and Zephyra nodded.

Ignoring them, Bob continued, “Then came a second person. Bit more subtle. Kind of walked like they were thinking about every step. Guest Two. The third person joined later and was agitated. Lots of arm movement. Very huffy. Guest Three.”

Skye tilted her head. “So at one point, all four of them, including Tess, were there together?”

“For a while, yes,” Bob said. “They talked. Not loudly enough for Betty to catch anything, mind you, but body language? Oh, birds are brilliant at reading posture. Tension. Unease. Guest Two kept glancing towards the house like they wanted to leave.”

“And then?” Fred asked.

“Guest Two left early,” Bob said. “Tess went back inside alone, *the nest-owner*, as Betty put it. Then Guest One and Guest Three left together.”

Skye hovered between the tart and the chicken sandwich, finally choosing the tart. It was still warm, buttery, and full of caramelised onion. “Did they leave in a hurry?”

Bob tilted his head. “Not unless your idea of urgency involves strolling shoulder to shoulder. Betty said they waddled off like pigeons full of bakery scraps—slow, unbothered, and possibly smug.”

“Could they have been drunk?” Fred asked.

Raising her glass like a trophy, Zephyra hummed her assent, and Skye considered it. It was possible.

Seb sat forward. “Did Tess come out again?”

“Betty isn’t certain,” Bob said. “She was distracted by a rather obnoxious starling trying to talk to her. But she doesn’t think so.”

Skye drummed her fingers on the armrest. “So either most of the members of the coven were there with her at some point or—”

“Or,” Fred added grimly, “Boreas was one of them.”

“Zephyra already identified his magic signature there, so that’s a fair assumption,” Bob said, lifting one clawed foot like a professor making a particularly interesting point.

Skye tapped her chin. “Except he could have been there earlier in the day and then left.”

Yet, she didn’t think so. Boreas had been there.

“For sure,” Zephyra said, the words tumbling out in a blur. “My bat... bet, I mean bet, is on the one making all the fuss. He’d be rattled. After our... you know... dramatic confrontation.”

Skye got to her feet, brushing imaginary crumbs from her jeans. She took a few slow steps, then pivoted, pacing along the edge of the rug like it was a circuit board she needed to troubleshoot.

Zephyra waved her hand. “What are you doing?”

“Shhh,” said Seb.

“She’s thinking,” Fred added.

Bob chirped. “Remember how she used to rock on the swing in the moon willow tree back in Fairyland? This is the grown-up version.”

Skye’s brain whirled. Three people shared dinner. One of them was Tess. One, she was almost sure, was Boreas. But the third and fourth? They were the elusive variable.

She paused mid-step and rubbed her forehead.

Five known people, plus Boreas. Only four had been at the house that night.

Of those, three sat down to eat.

She muttered under her breath. “Out of five, groups of three...”

Her fingers tapped her thigh in rhythm. Ten. Ten possible sets.

And one of them included a killer. And maybe an accomplice. Or someone who’d turned a blind eye.

"Tess, and... who?" she said, mostly to herself. "Lilith? Sandra? Wilma? Logan? Boreas?"

Skye kept pacing. "Too many combinations," she murmured. "Three visitors, one left alone... and two left together."

She stopped pacing mid-stride.

"Wait. Does it even matter who sat down to dinner?" she said aloud, turning to face the others. "If it *was* poisoning, it could've happened at any point that night—before, during, after."

Her fingers twitched at her sides. What she needed wasn't the seating arrangement. It was the absence. Who *wasn't* there?

And while her heart very much wanted to strike Logan off the list, her brain... didn't.

"Wilma, Lilith or Sandra," she said slowly. "Two of them didn't attend."

Seb lifted an eyebrow. "What makes you say that?"

"They have the weakest motives," Skye replied, resuming her pacing with a distracted wave. "Which might mean they weren't involved or at least weren't present that night."

But even as she said it, she knew it was an assumption. A comforting one, maybe. Still, in for a penny...

"Logically," she muttered, mostly to herself, "Boreas had to be at dinner. He'd just arrived in a place that was unfamiliar and not exactly welcoming. He'd need food, shelter. Hospitality."

She glanced up. "So, who was giving him that? Was he staying at Tess's house, or someone else's?"

"Boreas was one of the two, the ones who left together," Fred said, voice certain.

Skye nodded, thoughts ticking fast. "That tracks. Even if he *had* been staying with Tess, he couldn't after that night. A sick or dying Tess would draw attention."

Bob huffed. "So they waddled off like little criminals full of cake crumbs."

"Exactly," Skye said. "Which makes it feel even more like him. Boreas would calculate risk the same as a game of chess."

"Pity no one flipped the board on him sooner," Bob muttered.

"That's too callous," Zephyra said.

At least she was still tuned in.

“Are you saying Boreas is incapable of it?” Skye crossed her arms. “Because if you think that, you’re deluding yourself.”

Zephyra staggered to her feet, not quite steady. “Why do you always have to be right?” she hissed, jabbing a finger at Skye. “Miss goody two-shoes, the clever one, the one who always has the answer.”

“Spoiler alert,” Bob said. “That’s because she usually is and has.”

But he might as well have tossed his words into a high wind; neither sister so much as blinked in his direction.

Skye’s temper flared. “And you were the pampered princess with magic dripping from your fingers, who let me tag along like a stray, tossing out long-suffering sighs like confetti!”

They stood facing each other now, the air between them charged. Literally.

A gust curled through the room, not from the open balcony doors, but from the rising swell of air magic. Zephyra’s anger ignited her natural affinity: currents stirred her hair as if a storm had entered the suite, the curtains whipping. The whisky glass beside her rattled across the table, and only Fred’s quick reaction prevented a spill.

At the same time, the glow from Skye’s smartwatch flared bright green, brighter than her commands elicited. Her fingertips sparked with golden filaments, tiny threads of raw code-laced energy coiling around her knuckles like electric vines. The lights flickered. The thermostat beeped. A ripple of unseen force pulsed through the walls; tech reacting to her emotional surge.

Magic met magic.

The collision of their power created a strange resonance. Air pressure tightened, then released with a metallic pop. The chandelier gave a flicker as if uncertain it wanted to stay mounted.

“Enough,” Seb said, rising to his feet, voice low but commanding.

Fred stood too, stepping in beside Zephyra, his expression calm but watchful.

Bob, now behind a tea tin, muttered, “You two realise you’re setting off enough static to light up half the town?”

Skye blinked. Her hand had clenched into a fist, her magic thrumming beneath her skin. Zephyra’s shoulders heaved, and her hair lifted in the breeze

of her own making.

Silence dropped like a curtain.

Seb's arms came around Skye, his breath warm against her ear. "The rain's passed, and the night's too lovely to waste. Walk with me?"

A flicker of resistance sparked in her chest—pride, defiance, frustration—but it fizzled when Seb's hands began tracing calming circles along her side. His touch was... persuasive. Skye let him guide her a few steps before turning her head over her shoulder.

Fred leaned in close to Zephyra, speaking in a low voice. Skye caught the way his head tilted, the slight smile that wasn't his usual smug grin, and the subtle way his hand settled over Zephyra's arm.

Whatever he said, it worked. Her sister's shoulders eased, and the flaring static in the air subsided.

Seb's hand slid from Skye's shoulder to her fingers, catching them in a gentle but unyielding grip. Without a word, he gave the lightest tug, guiding her towards the door with a quiet insistence that trusted she'd follow.

## CHAPTER 19

Skye strode down the corridor, her body still humming with errant tech magic, faint blue threads trailing like static ghosts.

Seb walked alongside her, settling a coat over her shoulders without a word. It was soft wool, warm with his scent, and the gesture slowed her racing thoughts enough for her to breathe again.

They stepped into the lift, the mirrored walls reflecting every taut line of Skye's body. Her shoulders sat high, her jaw locked, and the flush in her cheeks hadn't yet faded. Stray wisps of hair clung to her temples, frizzed from residual magic, and her fingers flexed at her sides, still vibrating with a low pulse of energy.

As the lift dinged open and they crossed the threshold into the foyer, Seb leaned in, his voice soft against her ear.

"Your smartwatch is sparking."

Skye glanced down—yep, tiny arcs danced along its edge like it was trying to send Morse code to the moon. She clamped her hand over it, muttering, "Oops," and focused on slowing her breath as they crossed the marble floor.

The uniformed attendant gave them a low bow and opened the large glass door.

Night air greeted them in a crisp gust, brushing Skye's cheeks with the cool breath of the mountains. The stars above looked close enough to touch—bright pinpricks against a velvet sky, unmarred by light pollution. The tang of eucalyptus tickled her nose, and she welcomed the hush of a town curled in for the night.

Seb's hand found hers, their fingers lacing together as they started along the quiet road. The world behind them faded to give way to the crickets' song and the soft crunch of gravel beneath their boots.

Neither of them spoke as Skye concentrated on reigning in her magic. Her nerves thrummed like exposed wires, each breath snagging in her chest as though her lungs couldn't quite remember how to function.

Anxiety prickled across her skin, sharp and restless, and her smartwatch glowed with a stubborn pulse broadcasting what she was trying to hide.

They turned down a narrow path leading into the park. Each step further from the street, deeper into the trees and starlight, helped smooth the jagged edges of her mood. But the soft glow at her wrist remained—a beacon of unsettled power.

Hadn't Bob said that to dampen her sylph signature, she needed to amplify her tech magic? It stood to reason the reverse was also true.

She focused inward, drawing her attention away from circuits and codes, and instead reaching for the quieter, older current inside her. The sylph magic didn't hum like tech. It whispered, brushing gently against her awareness, like wind threading through leaves. Not artificial, but instinctual. Not manufactured but born.

She exhaled slowly, letting that thread of magic weave its way through her limbs, wrapping around the heat of her anxiety. Her smartwatch dimmed.

Emboldened by her success in calming the magic, Skye decided distraction would help settle the rest. The tangled remnants of her clash with Zephyra, and the jagged pieces of the murder still jabbed at the corners of her mind.

"We haven't finished our chat," she said.

No other walkers wandered the trail, and Skye allowed a trickle of tech magic to spill out, casting a faint, silvery glow ahead of them. Enough to light the path without announcing their presence.

Whoever said the country was quiet had never stood at the top of the Megalong Valley after dark.

Crickets chirped with the enthusiasm of a thousand tiny fiddlers. A possum skittered through the underbrush, followed by the snap of twigs and the soft rustle of leaves. Somewhere deeper in the valley, a mopoke hooted—a low, eerie call that echoed from the trees.

Bats zipped overhead, wings flicking like paper in the breeze, and in the distance, a fox's yip broke the rhythm of the night before slipping back into silence.

Shadows danced along the trail's edges, cast by the play of light against gnarled trunks and mossy rocks. Nature was a chorus.

And for the first time that day, Skye let herself breathe.

"Ask away," Seb said.

The words jolted Skye out of her quiet observations, her gaze snapping from the path ahead. Caught off guard, she blurted the first thing that crossed her mind.

"I've seen you eat and drink, but only once drink blood."

Seb chuckled. "Is there a question in there?"

She opened her mouth to respond, but he leaned over and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. It derailed her thoughts in the best possible way.

"I'm sure you already know vampires need blood to survive," he said, straightening again. "But how much we need depends on several factors—age, power level, control."

Skye's brow furrowed. That implied power wasn't strictly tied to age, as she'd assumed. But she didn't interrupt. Seb looked more at ease than usual, less guarded, and she wasn't about to squander the moment with a tangent.

"There are many reasons why some of us are... unhappy about the need for it."

"Because it makes you scary?" she asked, then immediately regretted it.

*Let him talk, you goose.*

"It is a bit of a PR problem," he said with a dry twist to his smile. "But it goes deeper than that."

He drew in a breath and exhaled slowly. A pale puff of condensation formed in the cold night air, visible for a heartbeat before it vanished. Skye shivered as the breeze caught the edge of her coat, and she tugged it tighter around her body.

"The need for blood triggers our most primal instincts, those of a predator. We believe... it interferes with our ability to act with higher reason when the hunger takes hold."

Skye latched onto the word. *We*. She wondered who that included. Other vampires like him? Or someone else?

She didn't ask. One question at a time.

Stopping, Seb helped her shrug into the coat, his movements careful, almost reverent. As he buttoned it, his fingers brushed her collarbone in a touch that felt unexpectedly intimate.

The chill in the air faded beneath the warmth that bloomed in her chest. It wasn't the coat. It was him—how naturally he moved around her, as if he'd always meant to stand that close. For a second, she was tempted to forget about her questions. But the need to understand him, this being who had carved out a space in her heart with quiet intensity, burned too strongly. Curiosity tugged at her like a tide.

"So," she said, voice a little quieter, "you don't need to drink that often?"

"Once a week at the moment."

That told her a lot. Power. Age. Control. She'd suspected all three, but this was the first real confirmation.

They resumed walking, the wet ground absorbing the sound of their steps. He went quiet, and she worried he'd retreated again and folded himself back into the polished mystery that was so much easier to admire than understand.

But then, to her surprise, his voice returned.

"What I'm about to tell you is top secret."

"I would never—"

Seb placed a finger over her lips. It was absurdly unfair how her first instinct was to nip at him, playful and maybe a little flustered. She caught the impulse and locked it away.

"I know," he said. "Which is why I'm telling you. But this isn't idle gossip; this goes to the heart of vampirism. Our lore, our culture."

He let out a breath and raked one hand through his hair, tousling it in a way that made him look younger. Vulnerable?

"Not all vampires agree with how things are changing. Many still cling to the old ways—formal, rigid, hierarchical. It's... understandable, I suppose. The older you get, the more conservative you become. Less curious. Less open to change. Sometimes even less willing to learn."

Skye absorbed that in silence. It sounded like more than an observation. Personal and painful.

"Raphael—Lord Bellmont—he's been working on a... let's call it a project," Seb said, "and has enlisted the help of a powerful magical practitioner to

eliminate the need for blood.”

“The High Witch,” Skye blurted out before she could stop herself.

Seb startled, then smirked. “My bright, irrepressibly clever Firefly. I should’ve known you’d make the leap.”

“But why would she help?” Skye frowned. “Witches don’t exactly play nice with vampires. The factions are barely civil under the Supernatural Council, and the High Witch—” she shook her head. “She’s got a reputation for being calculating. She wouldn’t help without gaining something significant in return.”

And it wouldn’t be money. Rumour had it she was already sitting on millions, possibly older treasures too.

“Now *that*,” Seb said, with a slight edge of amusement, “is not my secret to share.”

The hesitation, the slant in his words, gave her pause. As if he was guarding something delicate.

Skye closed her eyes and conjured up images, drawing on her eidetic memory. The High Witch: strikingly elegant, blue-eyed with rich brown hair, ageless in the way only witches could be. Always perfectly poised. And Lord Bellmont: pale, impeccably dressed, dark-haired, sharply featured with a signature air of old-world charm and danger. Both powerful. Both political. Both highly visible in supernatural affairs.

And yet... no images of them together. None. No galas, no councils, no joint statements. Odd.

Unless...

The realisation hit like a firework bursting behind her eyes. “They’re together,” she said, a note of glee sneaking into her voice. “They’re actually together!”

“Firefly,” Seb said, a thread of exasperated fondness in his voice.

Skye mimed zipping her lips, but the giggle that escaped completely ruined the effect.

The thought lit her up from the inside, a fizzy sort of joy bubbling through her chest. Seb probably thought she’d gone a little crazy, but her brain had already sprinted ahead, assembling facts, weighing probabilities, running a full analytical breakdown like a system scan.

A romance between the High Witch and Lord Bellmont wasn't just gossip-worthy—it was monumental. It meant that love across supernatural lines was possible. Better, it could thrive.

Those two were powerhouses in their own right, and neither would risk their influence, their reputation, or the carefully orchestrated balance between factions, unless the reward was immense.

Even friendship would have been enough to raise eyebrows, but this? This had to be love. And if they could have it...

Hope bloomed in her chest. It meant maybe she wasn't foolish for what she felt. Maybe wanting more wasn't foolish.

He must have caught the hope in her expression, and he smiled in that slow, secret way that made her pulse jump.

She tugged him along the path, nearly skipping with the sudden surge of energy. "So," she said, questions piling up in her head, "what is it that you really do for Lord Bellmont?"

*Please don't say valet.*

"A great many things," Seb said with a wry tilt of his lips. "And I realise that's a non-answer."

He went quiet then, as if weighing whether to continue. Skye didn't push. Not this time. Because suddenly the road ahead didn't seem quite so blocked, and all it required was a little patience. She could be patient. For him.

"Is it all right if I give you some background on vampires first?" he asked. "It's important for context."

More than all right. Context was everything. If you debugged a corrupted line of code without the full environment loaded, all you got were errors and frustration. So, she nodded.

"As much as our PR team likes to paint us as elegant immortals who dine politely and collect art," he said, "we're a race of predators. That instinct to hunt is hardwired into us," Seb said. "And the thirst doesn't only make us dangerous to other supernaturals, it turns us against each other. We're territorial—obsessively so. Over places, people, power, even ideas. If we're not careful... well, we've come close to wiping ourselves out more than once."

"Hence the houses," Skye said.

That made sense. She'd seen the layers during the case with the murdered vampire butler. The politics between the vampire houses could be more brutal than fangs.

That reminded her of Candace. A powerful vampire with a grudge and a spiteful smile. Skye might have come out on top during their last encounter, but she wasn't naïve. In a raw duel, Candace would eat her for breakfast.

"Yes," Seb said, a glint of approval in his eyes. "We're not pack creatures like werewolves, and we don't have the bloodline links of fae. We build our own loyalties, and they're usually to the house first and the vampire race second."

Unspoken, but loud, was that other races came teetering last.

"So that's why lone vampires are considered more dangerous than lone werewolves," Seb said, his tone clinical, but something in the tightness of it tugged at Skye's focus. "Left alone, we devolve. It doesn't take long. The instincts win. We can become... dark. Destructive. Irredeemable. The standing order, across all Houses, is clear: if a lone vampire is found, they're to be eliminated. No questions. No appeals. No chances to prove otherwise."

Skye's heart skipped a beat. That sounded far too personal. She hesitated, then, against her better judgement, asked softly, "Did that happen to you?"

Silence dropped like a curtain. For a long moment, she thought he wouldn't answer. The night pressed in around them, and her mind raced for a way to take it back, to steer the conversation to safer waters.

"Yes," Seb said at last, the single syllable clipped and tight.

Skye bit the inside of her cheek, holding back the flood of questions that surged forward.

"Raphael found me," he said. "I'd only arrived a few weeks prior in Australia. I was... not in a good place."

She clenched her free hand into her coat pocket. *Don't push. Let him talk.*

As if he sensed her need for more answers, he went on. "A long life isn't some endless masquerade of indulgence and immortality. It sounds thrilling—debauchery, freedom—but without purpose? It turns grey. Everything loses colour. So you chase sharper experiences. Risk more. And you suffer unforgivable betrayal."

His voice caught. He'd tripped on that word like it cut him mid-step.

*Betrayal.*

What had happened to him?

And just as strong as her curiosity was the ache to reach out and make it better.

Seb's gaze drifted somewhere far beyond the path ahead, though his hand never left hers. "Raphael should have killed me on sight. Or at least tried."

He let out a short laugh, entirely void of humour. "I would've given him a run for his money. I had the advantage of not caring whether I lived or died. But he is terrifyingly clever. Because fights are about strategy. Control. Knowing what someone wants, and how far they'll go."

Skye's fingers tightened in his. That kind of insight wasn't learnt easily—or without scars.

"He taught me a lot. We still joke sometimes about who would've won if it had come to a real fight." A pause. Then, casually, "I'm a good fighter. The best, actually."

The quiet certainty in his voice sent a ripple along her spine.

"Oh?" she asked lightly, arching a brow.

Seb glanced at her with the smallest smirk. "I've been tested, although I no longer do duels for fun, but I've competed plenty of times in the vampire games over the years."

A pause. Then, simple and unbothered:

"And I always came out on top."

*Games?* That word pulsed like a warning. But she shelved the question.

"In any case," Seb went on, "Raphael broke the rules that night. And if you met him, you'd understand how rare that is."

Skye opened her mouth, but he cut her off with a knowing smile.

"When you meet him," he said, correcting himself.

He slowed his pace. "He talked to me. Let me rant. Let me rage. And when the sun came up, I crashed on his couch. He could've ended me while I slept, but instead, the next night, he offered me a deal. Stay. Help him manage House Bellmont. There was no threat, no ultimatum. I understood the stakes, but that was not what drove me."

Skye held her breath. "And what convinced you to stay?"

Seb's eyes met hers—dark, intense, sincere. "He saw me. Not what I'd become. But what I still could be."

“So you owe him your loyalty,” Skye said.

“I owe him more than that.” Seb’s tone dropped, thoughtful. “I’d got to a point where my life didn’t matter. I was willing to risk it all—and did. Luck must have been on my side, considering some of the things I pulled.”

A shiver slid down Skye’s spine, and not from the cold.

“So now you work for him,” she said quietly.

“With him.” Seb shrugged. “It suits me.”

There were so many threads to pull here, Skye didn’t know where to start. The biggest one, the betrayal he’d mentioned earlier, still tugged at her curiosity. Instinct told her that was a boundary she shouldn’t push. Not yet.

“Why the valet story, then?” she asked. “Was that part of the whole low-profile thing?”

“I never meant to deceive you,” Seb said at once.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” he said gently. “But I want you to know. Old habits die hard.”

He stopped, turned to face her, and placed his hands on her shoulders, anchoring her in place as he looked her straight in the eye.

“When I met Raphael, I was still adrift. It took time to learn how to forgive myself... and to forget. Hence the title of valet. It gave me freedom of movement with zero expectations.”

Not forgive *others*, Skye noticed. Just *forget*.

Whatever had happened, it had left a scar deep enough he didn’t even try to hide the damage.

“But eventually, we realised it worked in our favour,” Seb continued. “People treat the valet differently. I like being underestimated. I like watching the board before the pieces even realise they’re in play. It’s the long game. That’s what I’m good at—ferreting out secrets and conspiracies.”

A crooked smile played on his lips. “And trust me, there are more of those than you’d believe.”

“Oh, I’d believe it,” Skye muttered, thinking back to the Academy—her former gold standard of integrity—rife with backroom deals and hidden agendas. Vampires weren’t the only ones playing the long game. But they were probably the best at it.

Seb had been more generous with his truths than she'd expected. Though a dozen questions still crowded her mind, this wasn't the moment for interrogation. It was time to acknowledge what he'd offered—not with words, but something more tangible.

She reached up, fingers curling around the collar of his coat, the fabric cool beneath her touch. "Thank you," she murmured, though the gratitude ran deeper than the words could carry.

Then she tugged him closer.

Their lips met—slow, searching at first, like they were feeling out new territory between them. But the moment stretched, deepened, and the chill night faded into irrelevance.

One of Seb's hands slid around her waist, the other tracing up to cup her face, his thumb brushing her cheekbone with reverence. The kiss warmed with unspoken depth, pulsing with meaning.

A soft *buzz* vibrated from Seb's coat pocket.

They both froze, lips still touching.

He let out a breath that could have been a laugh or a growl of frustration and reached down, retrieving the phone without looking at the screen. "It's Raphael," he muttered, "he'd better be dying."

"That's a bit dramatic," Skye said.

He raised an eyebrow, voice low and teasing. "You haven't seen dramatic yet."

## CHAPTER 20

Seb lifted the phone to his ear. “Not a good time, Raphael.”

A pause.

Skye watched the way his body stiffened, his brow drawing low.

“I see,” he said quietly. “Why now?”

The shift in his tone was enough. Skye took that as her cue and drifted a few steps away, giving him space. She wandered over to the nearby railing, the cool iron biting her hands as she held onto it.

Below, the Megalong Valley stretched wide and silent, cloaked in silver and shadow. The moon cast its quiet glow across the treetops, painting the gums and bushland in a wash of pale blue and pewter. Silhouettes of escarpments loomed, softened by mist that pooled low between the ridges. No lights, and the hush of wind rustling through eucalyptus and the occasional distant hooting of a boobook owl. The world below looked suspended in time, as though it had been holding its breath for centuries.

Beautiful. Unnerving.

Letting her gaze trace the winding threads of ridgeline and shadow, she hoped whatever call Seb was on didn’t pull them out of the moment they were sharing.

Seb stood with his back to her, voice low and tense. With her presence forgotten for now, Skye let herself sink into the hush around them. The wind tugged at her hair, not with urgency, more like an enticing whisper. That’s when she realised her connection to the air was still at the forefront: the faint thrum of sylph magic humming under her skin.

The breeze shifted.

A gust or a stray swirl of air, intentional, though. Magic threaded through it, subtle and teasing, dancing at the edge of her senses. Skye straightened,

caught by the glimmer of it. Not strong, not dangerous, but calling. Or maybe it was her own curiosity responding.

She turned from the lookout and followed it a few steps down a narrower, less-worn trail that slipped between the trees. She wasn't going far—that would be reckless—but the breeze teased her like a fragmented melody. Definitely a call.

There! Half-hidden beneath the sprawling roots of an old oak, a trinket gnarled and moss-draped like something out of a fairy tale. A shimmer at the tree's base. A ripple in the atmosphere or glass catching moonlight?

She crouched to examine the item, careful not to touch. Her fingers hovered just above its surface.

The magic flared.

With a sudden crackle, the air snapped shut around her.

A ten-metre-wide circle sprang up, runes scorching into the earth with a hiss like steam on hot stone. They slithered and clicked into place, forming an intricate lattice of glowing lines that pulsed once.

A barrier shot upward in response, translucent, bright light caught in polished stone. The sound was sharp and final, like molten glass cooling into form.

She was trapped.

And she wasn't alone.

A rustle. A thud.

Three blurs tumbled into the circle through different parts of the underbrush—a wallaby, a possum, and a spiky little echidna, startled and dazed.

Skye froze.

The animals jerked. Magic coiled around them like smoke, thickening. The wallaby jerked upright, its eyes turning a molten gold. The possum hissed, an unearthly sound, and its tiny claws elongated. Quivering, the echidna's spines doubled in length, glinting under the moonlight like thrown knives.

They weren't animals anymore.

Distortions of their native selves, the trap had corrupted and agitated them as they grew larger.

The possum's oversized arms scraped against the edge of the barrier, sparks flying as it hurled itself again and again at the invisible wall. Meanwhile, the wallaby circled the perimeter, its powerful legs bunching as it tested for weaknesses, snorting steam with every breath.

Both looked desperate to escape, their jerky movements filled with frenzied energy.

The echidna emitted a low grunt.

It sniffed the air, snorting through its extended snout, paws tapping in slow rhythm across the scorched soil. Its eyes found Skye and locked on. The creature's quills, now unnaturally long and tipped with a green shimmer, bristled like spears on a drawn battlefield.

Skye's pulse kicked into high gear.

The echidna struck.

It launched with surprising speed, a blur of sinew and quills, its spines rattling like a war drum.

Skye twisted sideways, the hairs on her arms lifting as the wind shifted with her. One spine grazed her coat sleeve. A clean slice.

Too close.

She grounded her stance, feet sliding across the grass-etched runes as she channelled air through her limbs. A breath—short, focused—and she spun low, a sweeping kick that carried a blast of wind with it. The echidna flipped mid-air and crashed to the earth with a thud.

It snarled.

Its dark eyes glinted red, and more spines bristled along its back, twice as long as they should be.

"Sorry, mate," Skye muttered.

She vaulted over it, channelled a gust downward, and pinned the creature against the tree trunk with a burst of compressed wind. Her fingers flicked, twisting the current like thread, wrapping it tighter. The echidna struggled once, twice, then slumped, shrinking back to its natural shape in a puff of mist.

She barely had time to breathe before the possum lunged from the shadows.

A grotesque form.

Its oversized ears twitched at every sound, and its tail lashed like a whip. Its matted fur puffed up with static, and its mouth opened far too wide, revealing sharp canines no possum should have. Electricity snapped through its whiskers—raw, angry magic—and its eyes glowed a sickly violet.

It moved fast. One moment it stood across the circle, the next it was at her throat.

Skye threw up a barrier of wind, but the possum persisted and batted at it. She staggered back, trying to recalibrate.

Her martial arts reflexes kicked in, but this thing didn't play fair. It zigzagged like lightning and struck from odd angles, swiping hard.

She gritted her teeth and absorbed a slash to her forearm, rolling with the blow and dropping into a crouch. Her breath caught. This one was quicker, smarter, and meaner.

Skye reached deeper into her core, where the whisper of wind had always stirred. Once skittish and weak, her magic had grown steadier.

Summoning the wind, she layered it with sylph precision, threading control through every strand. Calm and razor-fine.

The creature hesitated, then lunged forward with a hiss, teeth bared and eyes blazing.

Skye didn't move.

She waited for that subtle shift in the air, the moment when the currents aligned and the magic stopped resisting. Like listening for a note in a song, the resonance would signal the right time.

It came—soft, certain, a click behind her ribs.

The possum was nearly on her when she snapped her fingers.

A sharp vortex tore up from the ground, spiralling with crisp intent. It caught the animal mid-leap and flung it skyward in a blur of fur and fury.

Skye winced. "I'm sorry," she whispered, guilt threading through her concentration. "This isn't your fault."

Before it could land, she leapt—spun—and delivered a roundhouse kick laced with wind power that sent the creature sprawling. It screeched, clawing at the circle's walls, before finally crumpling.

Steam hissed above its frame as it began to shrink. A blink later, it was a regular possum, twitching but not getting up.

Skye stood panting in the circle, blood on her sleeve and magic still fizzing around her fingers.

Two down.

Tension coiled in her chest—the wallaby held back, watching.

And that, somehow, was worse.

A low and rhythmic pounding echoed behind her.

Skye turned her head in time to see Seb hurling himself against the barrier.

He slammed both fists against the shimmering edge of the circle, power rippling from him in raw, furious waves. The magic hissed where he touched it, burning white-hot at the points of contact.

His jumper sleeves were singed and blackened, the thick wool smouldering in patches. Threads frayed and curled like scorched rope, the fabric charring slowly but stubbornly. Smoke rose in lazy tendrils as heat licked its way through each layer. Beneath, angry welts seared across his forearms, skin blistering, but he didn't stop.

"Seb!" she cried, heart lurching.

His mouth moved, forming her name, though she couldn't hear it through the barrier's shimmer. He hit it again. And again.

She took a step towards him.

The wallaby lunged.

It had been silent, cunning. Biding its time.

But now it launched itself with monstrous speed, claws extended and teeth bared. Overgrown, patchy fur bristled like steel wool, jaw distended far too wide, and eyes gleaming a deep, unnatural red. Its back legs cracked with each hop, too long and too flexible, like it had no bones at all. Its pouch pulsed with strange magic, veins glowing purple across its abdomen. A female.

Skye barely managed to dodge the first swipe.

The second tore through her jacket and bit into her side—a hot, searing line of pain. She staggered back, hand flying to the wound. Blood welled beneath her fingers.

She twisted sharply, wind snapping around her like a coiled whip, but the beast was faster, far faster than the others, and way more aggressive.

It feinted left, then lunged right, its thick tail sweeping in a vicious arc that slammed into her ribs. The blow rattled her bones. She hit the ground hard.

Air punched from her lungs as she wrenched herself clear of a savage downward slash aimed at her throat.

Her foot rolled hard on impact, sending a jolt of pain up her leg, but adrenaline let her push through it.

Wallabies might be cousins to kangaroos—usually all sleepy eyes and grazing innocence—but this one was no bushland darling.

Magic twisted its features: it had overdeveloped forearms, claws serrated like bone knives, and eyes that gleamed a dull, unnatural crimson. And it was trying very hard to kill her.

Skye sucked in a breath, tasting copper. Her limbs ached and her magic flared erratically, but she forced herself upright.

The air around the circle pulsed and sparked—Seb. The barrier hissed like a wounded thing, tendrils of light flashing against his silhouette.

He wouldn't give up. But she couldn't count on him breaking through in time.

If he could break through at all.

This was on her.

She scrambled to her feet, blood dripping from a new gash on her shoulder.

Too close. Far too close.

The wallaby circled, hunched and twitching, saliva trailing from its jagged maw.

Skye risked a glance at Seb. He still hammered the barrier, arms raw and bleeding now, the skin on his forearms stripped nearly to the muscle. He didn't seem to notice—only stared at her, eyes burning with fury and fear. Their gazes locked.

Gritting her teeth, Skye turned to the beast and realised with a jolt like static to the chest that she'd been fighting with one hand tied behind her back.

Wind. All wind.

Sylph magic was her heritage, her instinct.

Unfortunately, her reserves had dwindled, as if the air itself had thinned around the edges, refusing to answer the call.

But she had tech magic too.

“Come on then,” she muttered, summoning what was left of her wind for one final burst.

Her bones ached with the effort, every shred of endurance scraped bare, but she refused to go down, not with Seb outside the barrier, literally burning to get to her.

The wallaby charged.

Skye let the wind pool at her feet—fast, desperate—and launched herself skyward, flipping over the beast’s head. It snapped at her mid-air, grazing her trouser leg, and catching fabric but missing skin by sheer luck.

She landed in a crouch, twisted and switched.

Her focus narrowed, like toggling modes on a high-spec interface. Air flowed into circuits. Thought became code.

With a flick of her wrist, she fed magic into the smartwatch flickering on her arm. The display lit up, overloaded, and discharged a pulse of pure tech energy—an arc of sizzling blue that lanced straight into the wallaby’s neck.

It convulsed, let out a distorted yowl, and collapsed mid-leap, skidding to a stop a metre from her boots.

Steam hissed. Magic crackled.

And slowly the mutated creature shrank, curling into its true form: a regular wallaby, now unconscious and softly breathing.

Skye didn’t move.

Not until the barrier shattered behind her with a sound like lightning tearing silk, Seb’s arms catching her before she hit the ground.

## CHAPTER 21

Low voices stirred at the edge of Skye's awareness—muffled and blurred, like conversation underwater.

She couldn't make out the words, and for a moment, she didn't try. The silky sheets cocooned her in warmth, soft against her skin, and she was sorely tempted to sink deeper into the oblivion of rest.

But the ache in her ribs had other ideas. A deep throb flared when she inhaled. Her arms tingled with a strange mix of pins and needles and strained muscles, and something sticky tugged faintly at the crook of her elbow.

Dried blood, maybe.

Her thigh protested, and her jaw ached.

So much for staying unconscious.

With a soft groan, she blinked against the fuzziness clouding her vision. The light was gentle, dimmed, and golden. A lamp, not the sun. Her suite at the hotel, then.

The voices continued, with some hissing punctuation. She couldn't make out the words, but the cadence was familiar. It tugged at her focus. She stirred, shifting her weight, and that must have drawn attention.

A shape leaned closer.

Then a face came into view.

Seb.

His eyes were intense, the worry in them barely concealed beneath the relief blooming across his features.

She tried to smile, her lips cracked and dry. "Hi," she whispered, voice raspy.

"Hi," he murmured, the word rough.

He brushed a stray curl from her face, fingers lingering. His gaze didn't waver, as if making sure she was real and wouldn't vanish if he blinked.

"Water?" she croaked, her throat like sandpaper.

Seb vanished from view, and regret nudged her—she hadn't meant for him to leave. But seconds later, he returned, one arm slipping behind her shoulders to lift her upright. A pillow tucked beneath her back, the motion slow and careful. He pressed the rim of a glass to her lips.

She sipped, the water blissfully cool.

"More?" he asked as she paused.

She gave a small shake of her head and leaned into the pillow, chest rising with the effort.

Across from her, Zephyra stood rigid, arms tightly folded, jaw set. Her posture screamed tension, but it was her eyes that betrayed her, like someone trying hard not to shoot lasers.

Fred sat near the edge of the bed, hands clasped and white-knuckled. He watched her like he'd been holding his breath for hours. Next to him, Bob squinted as he observed her.

It was Fred who broke the tension—tension so thick even Skye, foggy-brained and half-lucid, could feel pressing in.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

A reasonable question. Very Fred.

Skye blinked slowly and launched into an internal audit. Head: aching, but no pounding. Ribs: sore but not cracked. She flexed one arm—minor twinge. The other—stiff but functional.

When she shifted, her leg protested, but it wasn't the shrieking she'd expected. Her foot, which she'd been sure she'd wrecked, was simply tender. Her abdomen—she hesitated—no tearing pain. There had been blood. She remembered blood. So why did she feel... intact?

"Honestly?" she said, brow furrowing. "Apart from feeling like I could sleep for a week, I'm fine."

She turned her head towards Seb, looking for an explanation.

The corner of his eyes tightened. That meant he didn't want to discuss her rapid recovery. Or maybe just not in front of the others.

Right. One for later, then.

“That exhaustion would be the amount of magic you spent,” Bob said. “Your aura feels like that of someone who arm-wrestled a cyclone and lost on points.”

Seb must have filled them in.

“How, by all that’s moss-woven, moon-blessed and star-singed, did you manage to get trapped in a magic circle?” Zephyra’s voice was clipped enough to cut stone.

Skye felt her own irritation rise like heat behind her eyes. “I got myself out, didn’t I?”

Technically? No. That had been Seb. But she probably could have broken it eventually. Maybe. Possibly. She wasn’t exactly at her peak at the time.

And that circle had been crazy powerful and well-built.

The thought made her glance at Seb, properly assessing him now. He’d changed shirts—this one unbuttoned just enough to show the pale skin of his collarbone. But it was his hands that caught her attention: pink-tinged, the skin raw in patches, thin blisters not quite healed. Healing magic worked fast, especially vampire healing, but for him to still show damage... it must have been bad.

He’d burned himself for *her*.

Her throat tightened.

“Seb...” she started.

“Only just,” Zephyra scoffed, dragging Skye back into the argument.

A chill settled over her, one that stiffened her spine. Her hands gripped the bedsheets. Seb had scorched himself trying to get through that barrier. She’d seen the burns, the raw skin. And some corner of her, some small, vicious corner, blamed herself. That guilt had been humming quietly in her chest, but Zephyra’s jab sparked it into something sharper.

Righteous anger, yes. But laced with shame.

“Really?” Skye snapped. “And you would’ve done better?”

Zephyra’s eyes flashed. “I wouldn’t have set the blighted trap off in the first place by touching it.”

“I didn’t *touch* it!” The words cracked out, louder than intended. Her voice rang off the walls.

Zephyra flinched, and her eyes widened. Her mouth opened, closed. “Then how—?”

“How about,” Fred cut in smoothly, “we let Skye explain what happened first?”

“Good idea, Bancroft,” Seb said. “Let’s get all the facts before we start dissecting what anyone *should* or *shouldn’t* have done.” He gave Zephyra a cautionary look.

Zephyra glanced away and bit her lip. The fire in her banked, but didn’t go out.

Fred pressed a hand to his heart. “My goodness, Thornhill. Keep this up, and I may start believing you don’t totally hate my guts.”

Seb’s mouth quirked. “Let’s not get carried away.”

Their exchange defused the tension enough for Skye to run a quick declutter program on herself. Like flushing a cache, she forced a few slow breaths to clear the emotional static and regain her usual processing speed.

“Seb took a call, and I went to admire the view,” she said, skipping over what that had interrupted. No point revisiting that blush-inducing moment. “I felt magic. Air magic.”

Zephyra swore. “Boreas.”

Skye gave a small shrug. “Probably,” she allowed. “But more of a clue than an actual presence. I thought he might’ve left a trace that could tell us where he’d gone.”

“Didn’t it occur to you it could be a trap?” Zephyra asked, though her tone had cooled—more enquiry than accusation.

Grudgingly, Skye marked that as emotional progress and decided to keep going. “Honestly? No. Why would he set a trap? But I was cautious. I didn’t touch anything.”

“Then what triggered it?” Zephyra began pacing, a precise loop, her jaw set.

Skye had a fleeting moment of amusement, watching her. Was that what *she* looked like when deep in thought? No. She didn’t look like Zephyra at all. Precision versus raw power. Trade wind versus storm. Opposites. Nothing alike.

But Skye circled back to the question that had been niggling at her. Why would Boreas bother setting a trap at all? He wouldn’t remember her, and if he

did, he certainly wouldn't consider her worth the effort. Her air magic had never been threatening.

Not that it wasn't creeping up in power lately—still, not the moment to follow that rabbit down its hole.

"If it was a trap," she said slowly, raising a hand as Zephyra drew breath to argue, "then it wasn't meant for me."

"Could your magic signatures be confused?" Seb asked, darting a glance between the two of them.

Skye and Zephyra both let out matching snorts.

*As if.*

"Unlikely," Zephyra said, though she was eyeing Skye now, curious. "And I don't mean by strength."

"They *are* similar," Bob disagreed, "but the talent needed to pick up on that? Way above Boreas' pay grade. He's about as subtle as a troll at a tea party."

"You're saying he had help?" Fred asked.

Bob lifted a foot and gave a little claw-wiggle. "Even if someone helped, I still don't think any of that lot could pull it off."

"It was a pretty powerful spell," Skye pointed out.

"Oh, sure. Loads of raw power," Bob agreed. "But finesse? None. Although that circle sounds impressive, the rest was all brute force and no grace. Like handing a chainsaw to a toddler."

Skye refrained from saying it had been effective. Near-death effective, in fact.

But she didn't question Bob's assessment. At this point, his casual bursts of deep magical knowledge barely registered as surprising. Another item on the ever-growing list of things she needed to interrogate him about later.

Over tea. And maybe biscuits. With a notebook.

Instead, she turned the problem over in her mind, fitting the puzzle pieces together.

"I was using air magic," she said at last, the realisation clicking into place.

"Pardon?" Zephyra asked, frowning.

"Bob taught me how to hide my sylph signature. I wasn't doing that. The opposite, in fact."

She left out the part about why. No need to mention that it had started as a way to cool her temper with Zephyra. Because that anger had fired up her tech magic like a spark to a dry paddock.

“Well, well,” Bob said, bouncing on the bed. “That’s it, then.”

Seb didn’t say anything, but the shift was clear. He straightened, that calculating stillness settling over him like a cloak. Zephyra’s eyes narrowed in thought as if mentally rewinding the last hour and slotting in new information.

“Can we perhaps explain it to the non-magical being in the room?” Fred asked, raising a brow.

“A trap for a sylph,” Seb said. His gaze locked on Skye. “And I take it there aren’t many around?”

“No, there aren’t,” Skye said. “My neighbour. Grandma. I’ve heard of a couple more, but that’s it. Earth isn’t exactly sylph-friendly—too much interference in the natural magic, and metal everywhere. Most can’t tolerate it. More of an allergic reaction than a deadly thing.”

Zephyra, however, hadn’t displayed the usual symptoms from metal exposure. No skin flush. No telltale shimmer to her aura. Grandma had found ways to manage, and Skye had no doubt she’d passed some of those secrets on.

Either that or Zephyra had natural immunity—she’d been quite unaffected inside the limo.

“They were trying to catch *me*,” Zephyra said.

Guilt flickered in her eyes, tangled with something sharper. Anger. Not at Skye—at the implication. At the trap. At herself, maybe.

“And they got me instead,” Skye said.

Zephyra’s nostrils flared, but she nodded once.

“They weren’t mucking around either,” Skye added.

Her hand drifted to her side, where the ache of the wallaby’s cut still lingered.

The circle had been a containment spell, but the rest? Skye shuddered. Those poor animals. She could only hope the magic that transformed them had absorbed most of the damage. Maybe, once it dissipated, they’d be okay. Bruised, shaken, but whole. *Please let them be whole.*

"They meant to kill whoever got trapped," Skye said quietly, but with certainty. The weight of it settled in her chest.

Fred clenched his jaw. "Even if sylphs are rare, they could've caught the wrong one!" His tone sharpened, outrage flaring in his eyes. "That's callous!"

"No," Seb said, *oh so calmly*. "It makes perfect sense."

Fred turned, incredulous. "Excuse me?" His gaze flicked between Skye and Zephyra, dread and confusion drawing lines across his forehead.

"Zephyra is a threat to Boreas," Seb continued. "He knows he can't take her out directly. My guess? He's not strong enough."

Zephyra didn't speak, but she nodded, her mouth set in a grim line.

Bob squawked, wings bristling. "Typical coward."

"He might have succeeded if it *had* been Zephyra," Skye said.

Zephyra's eyes snapped to hers, dark with offence. "Are you saying I can't defend myself?"

"You're powerful," Skye said, lifting her chin to meet the glare. "But I think the trap limited the amount of air inside the circle. If you'd used your full strength, especially early on, you might've run out."

Zephyra stilled.

"I only made it because I'm not a powerful sylph." The irony didn't escape Skye. "I had to resort to tech magic at the end. The first two creatures, I handled with a mix of magic and martial arts. By the time I got to the wallaby, I switched."

Frowning, she ran the memory back through her mind. "I thought I'd drained my wind magic, but it wasn't that. The air itself was restricted. Whoever set the trap counted on that."

She glanced down at her scraped knuckles, the sting a reminder of just how close it had been. "If I *had* relied only on air... I might not be standing here."

Silence fell for a beat.

"They couldn't have known how many animals would be around," Zephyra said. Her tone held a flicker of doubt, as if she didn't want to believe Skye's take on how lethal the magic had been.

"Easy peasy," Bob said, puffing up. "All they had to do was lace the circle with a little lure spell. Think catnip, but for Aussie wildlife. Tempting as a

lamington on a windowsill. Drives them curious and cranky.” Bob hopped to the edge of the bedframe, clearly warming to the topic. “Mix in a touch of binding magic and a smidge of pyrite dagger amplification, and poof—instant beasties, ready to rumble. No RSVP required. And don’t worry, my bird friends checked. The critters you fought were a bit dazed, and bruised, but fine.”

Relief washed over Skye.

“Boreas wouldn’t,” Zephyra muttered.

“Don’t tell me you still think he is a good person?” Skye asked.

Zephyra bit her lip and turned away, silent.

Skye threw up her hands. “Ouch!” she exclaimed, wincing as her injuries and muscles protested the sudden movement.

Seb was beside her in a blink, sitting on the edge of the bed and wrapping an arm around her shoulders. She wasn’t fooled—this wasn’t tenderness. It was anchoring. Keeping her from doing something daft. Again.

“You took a beating,” he said softly. “Let’s go with nice and gentle for now, yes?”

Fred raked a hand through his hair. “It’s hard,” he said. “Letting go of what we believed about someone we once trusted. Especially when they were part of your world. Your story.”

If anyone understood betrayal, it was Fred—cut down by a boss he’d respected and a colleague twisted by jealousy.

Zephyra looked at Fred. Really looked. And something in her expression cracked. Even Seb paid attention.

Fred gave a small shrug. “But we can’t let one betrayal become the reason we stop trusting at all. There are good people in this world. Sometimes hidden. Sometimes unexpected. But they’re there.”

A single tear slid down Zephyra’s cheek. She wiped it away with an angry motion.

“I don’t think Boreas acted alone,” Skye said.

“Duh,” Bob muttered. “Didn’t I already say that?”

Zephyra’s voice was raw. “So he didn’t mean to...?”

Skye gave herself points for not snapping outright. She reined in the sarcasm, barely, but let the truth stand, unvarnished. “Boreas is the lead. No

question.”

Even as the conversation unfolded, her mind had been compiling data like an overclocked processor in the background.

“No one else is going to set a deadly trap specifically for you, Zephyra. You’ve only been here what, seventy-two hours? That’s barely enough time to unpack, let alone earn a vendetta. You’re annoying, sure, but even you’d struggle to make someone hate you that fast.”

“...Hate?” Zephyra repeated, soft as mist. Another tear fell.

Fred stood and crossed the space, offering her a monogrammed handkerchief from his pocket.

*People still carry those?*

Skye’s brain spun off, momentarily distracted. Didn’t he know about microbes? Hasn’t anyone told him handkerchiefs are basically fabric petri dishes? You sneeze, you fold, and bam—you’re politely cultivating a germ colony.

She blinked. *Right. Focus.*

“It’s not hate,” Seb said, drawing a few surprised glances. “It’s survival. He’s a narcissist, used to pulling strings from the shadows and getting others to do the dirty work. I’m only surprised he hasn’t tried to manipulate you again.” He looked at Zephyra.

“Oh, he’s probably waiting for her temper to cool off,” Bob chimed in, beak twitching.

“Never again,” Zephyra said fiercely, snatching the offered hanky.

“That’s the spirit.” Fred grinned. “Next time, make sure you kick his sorry bum.”

That got him a tentative smile from Zephyra.

“Hold onto that anger,” Fred added, his tone more serious. “But don’t let it control you. Aim it. Make it a weapon. He won’t see you coming.”

Zephyra lifted her chin. “Darn right, he won’t.”

“We know he’s trying to kill you,” Skye said, and Fred’s smile faltered, brow furrowing.

*Too bad.* In this case, the truth was the kindest mercy.

“What we don’t know,” she added, “is who’s helping him.”

## CHAPTER 22

Perhaps that was the wrong question.

The better one was: *Which* witch was helping Boreas?

Because Skye had no doubt—one of them was.

“You mean now that Tess is dead?” Seb asked.

“It could be more than one,” Fred pointed out.

Suddenly, the bed felt like a cage, the air too still. The urge to move, to escape the confines of blanket and mattress, flared and refused to be ignored.

Closing her eyes, Skye ran another internal check—muscles, joints.

Huh? That ache in her ribs? Gone. The throb in her shoulder had dulled to a whisper. Her foot barely twinged when she flexed it.

That wasn’t normal. She was healing way too fast.

*Interesting.*

Definitely a puzzle for later.

Skye tapped Seb’s hand. A silent request.

He didn’t move.

“I’m feeling better,” she said, trying not to sound frantic. “But if I stay here another minute, I might actually explode. Like, for real.” So much for hiding her desperation.

That earned her a quiet chuckle. He finally lifted his arm from her shoulders but hovered, watchful, as if expecting her to topple at any second.

She swung her legs over the edge, glanced down, and winced. Her clothes were torn, crusted with dried blood and dirt. No sign of the beautiful rose jumper. She didn’t want to look at the sheets.

“I really liked that jumper,” she muttered.

“I’ll buy you another.” Seb’s lips twitched. “Maybe two. At the rate you go through clothes...”

"I'm not usually this destructive," she said.

He arched a brow. "No?"

She scowled. "Only situationally."

Rising slowly, she tested her balance. Her legs held despite a faint lag in her muscles, like a phone running on a low battery but still functional. Seb's hand hovered near her elbow, not quite touching, ready if she needed him.

She took one step. Then another. The movement felt good, grounding. Energy low, sure, but the rest was okay. Encouraged, she began pacing.

"What we know," she said, her voice steadying with each word, "is that Tess was the original contact. The coven members appear close. Tight-knit."

"But appearances can be deceiving," Seb said.

"Maybe," Skye allowed, "but I still think she'd have told someone about him. Boreas was too big a secret to keep entirely to herself."

Her mind was fully clicking in now, the familiar rhythm of theory-building taking over.

"In fact, based on what we know from the night of the murder, I'd bet at least four of them were aware of his presence. Tess wouldn't have risked inviting the others over if she were trying to keep him hidden."

"They could have shown up uninvited," Fred suggested.

"Possibly," Skye said, turning mid-pace. "But the dinner was set up outdoors, casual and open. Doesn't scream secrecy to me."

Skye halted mid-step and absently twirled a curl around her finger. "Fact one: someone's helping him. According to Bob, Boreas couldn't have set that trap alone."

"What if Tess helped him set it up before she died?" Fred asked.

"Not enough time," Bob said, fluttering down to perch on the arm of a nearby chair. "That trap took planning, layering, and a serious magical payload." He cocked his head, eyes bright. "They set the chessboard, and then they deployed the queen and the knight at once. Bold move. Crude, though."

"Fact two," Skye continued, "the odds that the accomplice is part of the coven are high. Boreas wouldn't have had time to make new supernatural besties."

"Do you think he was already in contact with one of them before arriving?" Zephyra asked. Her fingers drummed a restless tap-tap-tap against her arm.

“Maybe.” Skye resumed her slow pacing. “Could he have travelled here earlier? Met them face to face before his grand return?”

Zephyra shook her head, then hesitated. Her brows drew together, her hand stilling. “Portals like that aren’t simple. They demand both power and stealth. He’d have enough power for one crossing, possibly two, but stealth?” Her expression said, *Not a chance*. “It’s why I caught his trail in the first place.”

“Could’ve been sloppy, though,” Seb offered from the side. “If he was running from you, he might not have covered his tracks well in his haste to get away.”

“And that’s how the enforcers know about you, too,” Bob said with a cheeky chirp. “Messy, messy, Sugarstorm.”

Zephyra gave a reluctant nod. “I’ll admit, I didn’t make it particularly hard.”

The image of an irate Zephyra storming through an explosive portal flashed in Skye’s mind. Her lips twitched. She could see why Boreas had made a run for it. He’d likely thought he had Zephyra under his thumb and panicked the moment she proved otherwise. No, the trap had been set after he fled. That explained the lack of finesse Bob kept griping about. And thank goodness for that. Skye didn’t want to imagine what they might have managed with more time and preparation.

“Even if Boreas has only been here once before, he would have targeted the coven members,” Skye said. “Individually, they’re strong. Working as a team, they would pack a punch. And that trap required a fair bit of magic.”

“In fact,” Seb added, “that’s probably proof enough it was the coven. The trap was laid on their turf. Any outside witches would have been a lot more cautious about working magic here.”

“And as charming as he’s likely to be, he wouldn’t inspire instant loyalty,” Fred chimed in. “Takes time to manipulate someone into murder. Unless he paid them off.”

“He didn’t,” Zephyra said, flashing a crooked smile. “He might have wanted to, though. Took a few precious stones from the vault but dropped the lot when I hit him with a particularly enthusiastic blast of wind before he crossed the portal to Earth.”

Fred nodded. “Then he is probably using classic narcissist tactics. Flattery, promises of power, twisting people’s insecurities until they think it was their

idea all along. He'd play the victim to gain sympathy, paint you as the unstable one, and cast himself as the misunderstood genius. They start small—little favours, casual secrets—until the line between loyalty and complicity disappears.”

“Sounds exhausting,” Skye muttered.

“That’s the brilliance of it,” Fred said matter-of-factly. “They make others do the heavy lifting while they stay clean. By the time you realise you’ve been played, it’s too late.”

That sounded like personal experience. Skye glanced sideways at Fred, filing the observation in the ever-growing mental logbook of *questions I’ll ask later when people aren’t traumatised or bleeding*. For now, she hit save on the thought, closed the file, and got back to the moment.

“Fact number three,” she said, looking at Zephyra. “Boreas wants to kill you, and he involved others. You’re not safe here.”

Zephyra scoffed. “Are you seriously suggesting I run off to Fairyland while he gets away with murder?”

“And attempted murder,” Bob chirped.

“Plus,” Zephyra added, “he’s got the dagger. We still don’t know what he plans to do with it.”

“Nothing good, in any case,” Fred said.

“I can take care of him,” Skye said, and the moment the words left her mouth, she regretted them. Arrogant. Reckless. What had she just said?

“You?” Zephyra’s voice cracked like a whip. “You’re still recovering from nearly being gutted and don’t even know how to counter proper wind magic. I’ve trained for years. And let’s not forget—I’m the one he’s after. *I* should be the one to deal with him.”

Tension crackled between them like static. Skye’s hands curled into fists.

“And yet,” she said, “*I* walked out of that circle.”

Behind her, Seb shifted. A subtle movement, probably meant to warn her off. She ignored it.

“You think you’re the only one strong enough to stop him,” Skye continued, the words building, fast and sharp. “But your pride might get us all killed.”

“Pride?” Zephyra’s eyes flared. “Darn right I’m proud. Of my training. Of my people. Of trying to protect a world you couldn’t wait to walk away from. Since when do *you* care what happens in Fairyland?”

“Oh, I don’t know—maybe ever since I was born there. I only left because I was being bullied,” Skye shot back. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t have a right to fight back. I *can* help. I’m not some liability you have to babysit.”

“You’re barely out of bed—”

“I’m a trained fighter too!”

Okay, that consisted of a few martial arts lessons over the last few months—*tough* ones, though. So that counted. Seb had insisted on them, given the increasingly ridiculous scrapes she kept landing in.

Truth be told, she’d started to enjoy the sparring. Less so when she was flat on her back, courtesy of Seb or Oscar. Which was often, unless she cheated and slipped in a bit of tech magic.

Still, training was training.

Bob made a distressed clicking sound.

“Ladies,” Fred began tentatively.

They whipped their heads towards him in unison.

Fred lifted both hands. “How about we concentrate on finding Boreas?”

“I’m not going back,” Zephyra said, crossing her arms.

“No one’s asking you to,” Fred replied gently.

Zephyra’s hand shot out, pointing straight at Skye. “She just did.”

“No,” Fred said, calm as a monk on a tea break. “Skye said you’re a target. She’s worried. We all are.”

He moved slowly as he spoke, steps quiet, until he stood directly in front of her.

Zephyra’s shoulders slumped as she stared down at her boots. “It’s my fault.”

Fred lifted a hand as if to reach for her, then let it drop. “No, it’s not. Boreas made this mess. He’s the one to blame.”

“I don’t think going back is a good idea,” Bob added, his tone uncharacteristically serious.

Zephyra’s head snapped up. “Obviously not... What do you mean?”

"The fae enforcers don't do nuance," Bob said. "They act, then maybe send a 'whoopsie' card later."

"How's that different from the police here?" Seb asked, too dry to be entirely joking.

"Justice has a different flavour in Fairyland," Bob said, with the casual gravity of someone who knew *way* too much for a magpie.

"Like vampire justice?" Seb asked.

"What *is* vampire justice like?" Skye asked, curiosity overriding her intention to let the conversation run its course, but Bob barrelled on.

"Not quite," he said, answering Seb's question. "But Boreas's father has enough influence to make sure you're locked away indefinitely. Things crawl in Fairyland courts at a glacial pace. You'll sit in a cell for a couple of years while they argue over parchment wording."

Zephyra's eyes narrowed.

"So," Bob said, "best you take Boreas down and drag him back with the evidence. Preferably upright. And definitely without *you* in cuffs. Wouldn't recommend them, by the way. Magical ones are a nightmare to pick."

There was far too much to unpack in that sentence.

Right then and there, Skye made up her mind. She *would* find the evidence. She'd already promised to revisit the footage from Zephyra's clash with Boreas, and it was time to make good on that. With a few swift taps on her phone, she launched a refinement protocol—one of her custom scripts designed to enhance corrupted visuals.

It was a bit like restoring a damaged painting. Only instead of brushes and pigments, she worked with pixels and predictive algorithms. Where a conservator might carefully rebuild a faded corner with tiny, faithful strokes, Skye's code filled in missing frames, corrected distortions, and restructured the light balance with mathematical precision. Not perfect, but often better than human memory.

"Well," Fred said, mouth twitching like he was trying not to smile, "I think we're all in agreement that Zephyra returning to Fairyland is a *terrible* idea."

"For now," Zephyra said, crossing her legs with pointed grace.

"Indeed," Fred replied smoothly.

With a sigh, Skye slumped into the nearest chair. "Fine. We need a plan."

"I thought the plan was to catch Boreas when he shows up at the magic circle?" Seb asked, stepping closer.

"That gets us Boreas. Not the proof," Skye said.

"We just let Seb here rough him up a bit, and he'll confess everything," Bob said, chipper with confidence. "One of his famous glares and Boreas will be a blubbering mess before the first punch."

Seb's eyes gleamed, but his voice was all ice. "While I'd *very much* enjoy doing that, especially after this latest stunt, that kind of confession won't hold. He'll retract it the moment he's back under daddy's roof."

"Exactly right," Fred said, sinking into the chair opposite Skye, "he'll claim coercion."

Zephyra plopped into the seat beside Fred. "So what are you proposing, Skye?"

Warmth bloomed in Skye's chest. Was it bad that the trust felt so good? Zephyra wasn't asking for advice—she was deferring to her lead. That was new.

"We need more information than we have," Skye said, steadying her voice. "Which means we need to talk to the coven members again. Properly this time."

She drew in a breath, bracing herself. "I'll start with Logan. He already suggested we meet up."

"That's not safe," Seb said instantly—calm, firm, and so restrained Skye could have kissed him for it. He trusted her and wasn't trying to stop her, simply pointing out the risks.

Fred pursed his lips, and for a moment, Skye thought he was about to object. But then he tapped his chin and nodded instead.

"I can talk to Sandra," he said. "She seemed to like me."

"That's not safe either," Zephyra said quickly.

Bob expelled a dramatic sigh. "Do I need to set up a ping-pong scoreboard? One side says, 'That's not safe,' the other says, 'We'll do it anyway.' First to five wins the argument."

Fred gave a wry smile. "If Sandra turns me into a frog, I'll be sure to croak your name."

Skye snorted. Even Zephyra cracked the beginnings of a grin.

“Fine,” Zephyra said. “But neither of you is going alone.”

“Deal,” Fred said. “I’ll bring my most dangerous bodyguard.”

All eyes turned to Seb, who raised an eyebrow. “Dangerous *bodyguard*?”

“Oh, well,” Fred deadpanned. “I was hoping for charming, but I suppose sheer intimidation works too.”

“I’ll do it,” Zephyra blurted.

“Do what?” Skye asked.

“I’ll protect Fred.” Her slightly flushed cheeks suggested she hadn’t entirely thought through the declaration before it left her mouth.

Silence fell, the kind thick enough to spread on toast.

Fred recovered first. “Well, you’re certainly far more charming and better looking than Seb.” He shot the vampire a cheeky smile.

Zephyra’s blush deepened, but she squared her shoulders like a soldier presenting arms. “I’m trained in combat as well.”

*Since when?*

Skye bit her tongue, the question on the tip of it. This was still her sister... but also someone she barely knew anymore.

“How come?” Bob asked Zephyra, eyes glittering with curiosity.

That made Skye pause. If he didn’t already know, that meant her sister had kept this particular detail close to her chest.

“I was thinking of joining the enforcers,” Zephyra said, lifting her chin like she was daring them to question her.

“The same enforcers who are currently gunning for you?” Skye asked, incredulous.

A flicker of memory surfaced: she was seven, hiding under a lavender bush, heart thudding in her ears while booted feet stalked past. A heavy-handed enforcer had come to question her grandmother about a stolen artefact—Skye didn’t even remember what it was. But she remembered the fear. And the yelling. And the crackle of power that tasted like ozone.

When Grandma found her still under the bush, she knelt and spoke in a voice as soft as wind through leaves. “There now, little one. Don’t worry about a thing. The air guardians watch over us.”

Zephyra tapped her foot, and the movement snapped Skye out of her memory.

“It’s a good path to joining the council,” Zephyra said.

Ah, there it was. That strained note, like she was reciting from an internal script. Skye knew defensiveness when she heard it.

“Then that’s perfect!” Fred said brightly. “I feel safer already.”

“No, it’s not perfect,” Skye said.

Zephyra bristled. “Are you calling me a liar?”

## CHAPTER 23

Zephyra's eyes blazed.

A breeze picked up around her, tugging at her hair, stirring the napkins on the coffee table.

"There you go," Skye said. "You don't even realise you're doing it. The minute you walk within thirty metres, Sandra will sniff out exactly what you are."

The wind eased off.

"Not necessarily," Bob said. "All Zephyra needs to do is learn how to mask her signature."

Zephyra blinked at him. "You know how to do that?"

"Of course I do," Bob said, with a little offended huff. "How do you think I've survived this long without being turned into a magical paperweight? People see a magpie, not a highly intelligent, alarmingly magical being with a gift for sarcasm and subterfuge."

He'd actually mentioned that he could teach Zephyra before.

"Is that what I was doing by focusing on my tech magic?" Skye asked slowly, her thoughts racing ahead of the conversation.

The question came out instinctively, but her brain was already deep in analysis mode. Magic signatures were like fingerprints—distinct and layered. A sylph's was light, fluid, carried on currents of air.

When she leaned into her tech magic, it shifted how she resonated with the world. The circuitry of her spells was tighter, more rigid, grounded in logic. It made sense that it might mask the natural ebb of her wind signature.

Maybe not erase it, but enough to blur the edges. Blur them so much that a witch would miss it. Had she been doing that all along without realising? Had that impeded the use of her sylph magic?

“But Zephyra doesn’t have other magic to do that,” Skye said.

She didn’t think Bob was wrong, but she wanted to understand how the logic extended to her sister.

Bob puffed up his feathers. “She doesn’t need another magic type,” he said. “Just another *flavour* of herself. For example, she could borrow Fred’s.”

“What?” Fred said, blinking. “Borrow *me*?”

Seb, who had been massaging Skye’s shoulders as he stood behind her chair, chuckled.

Zephyra looked from Bob to Skye and back again. “How?”

“It’s not foolproof,” Bob said. “Think of it like putting a blanket over a flame. Doesn’t mean it’s not still burning underneath, but it won’t be as obvious. Especially if you’re calm. The calmer you are, the easier it will be.”

Zephyra muttered something that might have been ‘*great*’ or ‘*fantastic*’ or possibly ‘*I hate everything*’.

“It takes practice,” Bob said, a little gentler now. “But you’ve got the discipline. I can teach you.”

“But I am human,” Fred said.

His confusion mirrored Skye’s. How could Zephyra mask a magical signature with a non-magical one?

Bob opened his beak as if to explain, then closed it again with a shake of his head. “We are all more than we realise,” he said at last, a glint of amusement in his eye. “Some of us just take longer to read the fine print.”

Fred blinked. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Bob only cackled and looked away, preening his wing.

“We don’t have a lot of time for Zephyra to learn,” Seb said.

Her body tensed, and Skye got ready for a gust of wind.

Nothing came.

Zephyra inhaled slowly. “I’m a quick learner.”

“True,” Skye said.

Zephyra raised her eyebrows a fraction before she quickly smoothed her expression. But the slight curl at the edge of her mouth betrayed her. She lifted her chin with a spark that hadn’t been there a moment ago.

“We don’t have a choice anyway,” Fred said. “They’re targeting a sylph, and if Zephyra’s leaking air magic, it’s only a matter of time before it triggers

another trap.”

“Would they know this one failed?” Seb asked.

“Good question,” Skye said. “It depends on how disciplined they are. I set alerts on all of my magic defences. The whole idea is to catch an intruder, after all.” She didn’t remember feeling an alert being set off. Although her attention had been wholly focused on trying to survive. “No one came around to check.”

“Not during the fight. But that was over in minutes.” Tension drew tight lines at the corners of Seb’s eyes. Then they softened, a quiet pride warming his expression. “You were impressive.”

Her heart tripped. He meant it. And that unfamiliar glow of being seen for more than her brains or spells unfurled in her chest like the first rays of sunlight after rain.

“They might have come back after the circle was broken, too late for them to see what happened,” she muttered, inwardly cursing herself for not setting up surveillance.

As if reading her mind, Seb added, “You were out for the count and hurt. I didn’t waste any time.”

A strange pause preceded his last words.

Skye glanced down and, almost without thinking, touched her middle. A second later, she lifted her shirt to reveal a faint pink scar. *Fascinating.*

“Let’s assume they did come back. That means they know they failed. They would’ve seen the blood, the animals... known a fight took place.” Skye’s breath caught. “My blood...”

Any witch worth their salt could track with blood. There were more than enough horror stories about black witches using it for binding spells, curses, or worse.

Seb’s arms tightened around her shoulders. He leaned in, voice low against her ear. “None. I made sure of it.”

Relief swept through her like a system purge, fast and complete. She didn’t even think to ask how. If Seb said there were no traces, then there weren’t. She was safe. He’d seen to that.

“Okay. We still need to conduct those interviews, but we’ve got to be more cautious,” Skye said.

Seb gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze before sitting beside her.

“Public places only—and not at night,” she added, reaching for his hand. “I know that’s when you’re at your strongest, but so are the witches. Especially the ones dabbling in black magic.”

“I told you, you don’t need to worry about me, Firefly.” Seb lifted her hand and pressed a kiss to it.

Skye tapped his arm. “I’ll always worry about an old man with a hero complex and no sense of self-preservation.”

Not all vampires were made equal—or at least, they didn’t evolve that way. The older the vampire, the stronger they became, and the better they handled sunlight, though even then, it drained their strength like a slow leak in a power cell.

Seb placed a hand over his heart, feigning injury. “Are you saying I’m too old?”

Skye gave him a measured look. “I’m saying you’re statistically more experienced, strategically useful, and distracting for me when under pressure.” She paused, then added, “Which, for the record, is not a complaint.”

A smile blossomed on Seb’s lips. He leaned in, brushing his fingers along her jaw as if committing the lines of her face to memory. One thumb lingered beneath her lip. Then, without a word, he kissed her temple—gentle, and a little smug.

“Oh, Firefly,” he murmured, voice low with amusement.

A flicker of static danced under Skye’s skin at the warmth of his touch. Her eyes half-closed before she could stop them. The world narrowed to the brush of his thumb, the press of his lips against her temple, and the way her pulse stuttered in response.

Then she blinked, gave a soft huff—part exhale, part disbelief at herself—and straightened. Right. They were in the middle of something.

“I can meet Logan for afternoon tea,” she said, voice a touch steadier than she felt.

“Not at the Cauldron and Kettle, I hope,” Fred said.

“Of course not.” Skye pulled out her phone and began scrolling. “Got it! A teapot museum that’s also a tearoom.”

Fred looked intrigued, but before he could comment, Zephyra tilted her head. “What about Fred?”

“Antiques,” Fred said abruptly.

“That’s a good idea.” Skye tapped away again. “There are several antique shops along the main street.”

Zephyra narrowed her eyes. “Why antiques?”

Fred adjusted his collar. “The perfect excuse to leave behind my beautiful but tragically modern girlfriend for someone who truly appreciates the value of old things.”

Skye met Seb’s eyes, deadpan. “Oh, but I do.”

Bob burst into a gale of laughter so forceful he toppled off his chair with a squawk and a thud.

Skye rushed over. “You all right?”

Bob’s voice floated up from the floor between gasps. “Fine! But your sense of humour’s definitely improving. I’m clearly a good influence.”

Once Bob had recovered and fluttered back up with the air of someone who was pretending nothing undignified had occurred—and would deny all evidence to the contrary—Skye resumed.

“I also don’t think we should split up. Let’s try to organise things so we can all act as backup for each other.” She lifted a hand before anyone, mostly Zephyra, could jump in. “It’s not that I doubt any of you could hold your own. For that matter, I’m capable of defending myself too.”

Fred put on an exaggerated pout. “Hey, what about me? I’m hearing a lot of ‘magic this’ and ‘supernatural that’—feeling the humans-are-fragile prejudice loud and clear.”

Skye sighed. Compared to the rest of them, Fred *was* fragile. Sure, his parkour training made him nimble and fit, but that didn’t help much when someone was hurling hexes or calling shadow beasts.

To her surprise, it was Zephyra who spoke. She patted his arm. “I’m sure you could get yourself out of trouble faster than any of us using that charisma of yours. And without having to resort to violence or threats.”

Fred glanced down at her hand, which she hadn’t yet removed. “But...?”

“But these witches would flick you into next week without even mussing their robes,” Bob said cheerfully. “You’re charming, Fred, but they eat charming for breakfast—served on gluten-free toast with a side of ritual sacrifice.”

\* \* \*

The next morning, they gathered in Seb and Fred’s suite for a late brunch, sunlight spilling across a spread so decadent it looked like it had been summoned by magic, though, judging by Fred’s triumphant grin, it was more likely the result of a special order.

Fluffy croissants sat in neat spirals beside a platter of golden pancakes, glistening with honey. Bowls of fresh fruit—mango, berries, and kiwi—added a splash of colour, while a small mountain of scrambled eggs steamed next to grilled tomatoes and a tray of crisp hash browns. A carafe of freshly squeezed orange juice glowed like liquid sunshine, and next to it, a teapot in the shape of a disgruntled cat.

The night before, Skye had left Bob training Zephyra in the sitting area while she’d crashed on the bed and fallen asleep before her head even hit the pillow. The attack had drained her—magically, physically, and maybe emotionally. Her quick healing might have had something to do with it, too. A healing that Seb had obviously helped push along.

This morning, though, she felt stronger. Sleep had done wonders, and the fog had lifted.

Time to tackle the problems at hand. Find Boreas. Expose his treachery. Clear Zephyra of any wrongdoing, despite her questionable decision to believe the duplicitous sylph... and, by the sounds of it, still carry a torch for him.

No, she wasn’t going to tell her that. Zephyra would already be doing a thorough job of beating herself up without any help.

Bob hadn’t said a word on the subject, but she had a strong suspicion he’d either warned Zephyra or made his opinion of Boreas unmistakably clear at some point in the past in that not-subtle way of his.

Was she being too harsh? Maybe.

But Skye was cautious by nature. Trust didn't come easily—not even now, when she was standing on something real with Seb. She found herself holding back, waiting for the moment it might all fall apart.

She shook the errant thought away. This situation demanded her full concentration, and she had an additional puzzle as well.

Tess's murder—because Skye was certain that's what it had been.

It would be easy to pin that on Boreas, too, but she needed to keep an open mind. Tess had been useful to him and given him shelter and food. Probably more. Killing her would've been like smashing a golden goose out of boredom.

Still...

They were dealing with a narcissist and a skilled manipulator. Maybe Tess had uncovered his true nature, and he'd silenced her before she could warn the others.

Skye had texted Logan first. She wasn't a fan of phone calls—too much room for awkward small talk and false cheer. Texting let her get straight to the point, all business, safely buffered behind a screen.

Logan replied within five minutes. Skye suspected he had an alert for any potential client or business lead the moment it came in.

Seb, naturally, had a different theory. "You made quite the impression, Firefly. I wouldn't be surprised if he set up an alert just for you."

Skye scoffed, but Fred chimed in with zero hesitation. "I would have, if I were him."

She ignored them both with a wave of her fingers and finalised the details with Logan, who accepted the invitation rather quickly. They scheduled the meeting at three that afternoon. The downside was that it didn't leave much time to coordinate with Sandra.

Fred, of course, went for the phone call approach. Sandra answered on the third ring.

Skye raised an eyebrow. If the theory about Logan setting an alert held any weight, then clearly Sandra had one too, set for Fred.

Fred stood by the window, phone pressed to his ear, pacing slowly as he spoke.

"Hey, Sandra! It's Fred."

A pause, and his voice immediately brightened. “Yes, yesterday was nice. The tea was great, but I think the company might’ve tipped the scales.”

He chuckled warmly while Zephyra made a face behind his back.

On the couch, Skye sipped her tea and waited. Beside her, Seb was fighting back a smirk. He tilted his head, clearly eavesdropping on both sides of the conversation.

“Oh, absolutely,” Fred said. “I mean, what’s not to like? Great tea, great company, and you even let me win the flirting round. Generous of you.”

Fred continued, tone casual. “You mentioned liking things with history... I’ve got a bit of time this afternoon, so I thought I’d wander through those antique shops down the street. Skye’s not really into that sort of thing—she’s more modern, sleek design, no frills. But I figured it might be more your style.”

A beat passed. “Sure. If that’s when you’re free, I’d be happy to wait for you. See you after five.”

He ended the call, turned back to the room, and blinked at the expressions aimed his way.

Skye looked at him over the rim of her cup. “Modern and no frills, huh?”

Fred offered a winning smile. “It was meant as a compliment.”

Seb shook his head, a crooked smile playing at his lips. “You do realise you’re going to have to pretend you like antiques—and know what you’re talking about?”

Fred gave a nonchalant shrug. “What makes you think I don’t?”

Seb arched an eyebrow. “You don’t strike me as the type.”

Fred held his gaze, the faintest glimmer of amusement in his eyes. “I have very discerning taste, actually.”

Seb’s smile deepened. “Oh, I’d agree.”

They let the silence stretch, not breaking eye contact.

Bob squawked loudly. “Should I leave you two alone or bring popcorn?”

This had to be one of those silent exchanges, full of unspoken subtext. Skye didn’t even bother trying to decode it. At least it wasn’t as passive-aggressive as some of their previous, and frequent, standoffs.

“Five’s getting close to dark,” she said instead, redirecting.

“She’s working at the café until then,” Fred replied. “Apparently, tonight’s late-night shopping, so I’ll have ample time to peruse antiques to my heart’s

content, or so Sandra assured me.”

Zephyra’s scoff was loud. “Don’t be fooled by a pretty face.” The bitterness in her voice was unmistakable. “I’m sure she’s interested in one thing only.”

Fred blinked, all wide-eyed innocence. “And what would that be?” He batted his lashes dramatically.

Zephyra faltered, cheeks colouring. “Well, I—”

“Clearly your money,” Bob piped up from his perch.

Fred didn’t look away from Zephyra. “Is that what you think?”

She shifted. “Yes. No. I mean... she doesn’t *know* you yet.”

“So she couldn’t be drawn in by my sophisticated charm and devastating good looks?” Fred asked, deadpan.

Skye rolled her eyes. Seb leaned back, watching the exchange unfold with a sparkle in his eye, as if the room had become his new favourite form of entertainment.

Zephyra threw her hands up, finally realising she’d walked straight into a trap. “Of course you’re good-looking, and you moon-blessed well know it! Who wouldn’t notice that?”

“I see,” Fred said, adjusting his cuffs like he’d won a particularly satisfying game.

Realising her outburst had only dug the hole deeper, Zephyra clamped her mouth shut as her cheeks flared a brighter, traitorous pink.

Skye narrowed her eyes. Fred was toying with a tornado, and he knew it. She sighed. He was a grown adult and could deal with the fallout.

Unless Zephyra decided to blast him into the stratosphere.

Skye was fairly confident she could rescue him if it came to that. Probably. Hopefully. Well... she’d *try*.

## CHAPTER 24

When Skye arrived at the teapot museum that afternoon, Logan was waiting.

Given she was on time, it meant Logan had got there early. Keen to talk to someone outside of the coven?

Fortunately, Seb and Zephyra had been inside for the past twenty minutes. They'd all agreed it was best if the two of them kept a low profile, tucked away in a quiet corner.

Seb could almost pass for an average supernatural. That's assuming no one looked too closely at his eyes, and he dampened his obvious power. Apparently, he could do that, but Skye wasn't willing to take that gamble.

Zephyra was the bigger risk, especially if Logan was on the lookout for a sylph signature. Bob, however, after studying her with the intensity of a jeweller inspecting a flawed gem, had nodded and declared no one would be able to tell.

Housed in a charming Federation-style home, the museum's yellow exterior gleamed in the sunlight. A red tile roof added a cheerful splash, and timber posts, carved with ornamental scrollwork on the wraparound verandah, gave the place a quaint charm.

Logan leaned against a post, arms crossed loosely, his stance easy. As she approached, he straightened and stepped forward with a warm smile.

"Hi, Skye," he said.

"Hi, Logan," she replied, not missing the way his eyes flicked past her shoulder, scanning for someone else.

When he saw she was alone, he moved closer and kissed her cheek. The gesture felt natural—genuine, even—but Skye had to make a conscious effort not to flinch, keeping her expression neutral.

Still easing into the whole affection-with-friends thing—Skye measured progress in cautiously granted hugs and precisely timed high-fives.

Logan might be nice, but he was a stranger. And strangers kissing her cheek? That ranked somewhere between *unscheduled software updates* and *someone touching her keyboard without asking* on her internal discomfort scale.

For this meeting, Fred had reluctantly agreed to hang back. He'd refused to stay at the hotel, though. Instead, he had holed up at the local library a few buildings down, equipped with a discreet listening device. He might've been sulking, but he remained sharp and fully tuned in.

Bob, of course, had taken up his usual position in a nearby tree, claiming his vantage point gave him a perfect view through the window. He insisted he could lip-read—a skill Skye hadn't known he had and one she knew to be notoriously unreliable. How did she know? She'd designed a program for it once. The number of variables—lighting, angle, speech speed, accent—made the success rate hover around sixty per cent.

Other tech mages had been impressed. Skye had just found it frustrating. One day, she'd go back to that program, strip it down to the bones, and rebuild it properly.

"Shall we go in and have a look at the museum first?" Logan asked, gesturing towards the wide verandah. "The collection is fabulous."

Skye, a tea devotee herself, couldn't help the flicker of curiosity that stirred. She nodded. "That sounds good."

They stepped inside and were immediately met with the soft gleam of polished wood. The interior was an eclectic blend of elegance and nostalgia, with plush carpets underfoot and ceiling roses above—more grand sitting room than museum. Rows of glass cabinets lined the walls and filled the centre of the space like a maze, each housing a dazzling array of teapots.

There were dainty porcelain sets from 18th-century England with hand-painted floral designs, robust cast iron tetsubins from Japan, whimsical novelty teapots shaped like cats, castles, and vegetables, and sleek, modern Scandinavian styles made of glass and steel. Some were no bigger than a plum; others could have brewed tea for an army.

Antique sideboards and Victorian display tables bore silver teapots polished to a high shine, their curves catching the light as if showing off.

Gold labels gave dates and origins—Tang dynasty, Art Deco, post-war kitsch—all organised with the care of someone deeply in love with tea history.

There was even a tall cabinet devoted to Australian teapots, featuring everything from bush-themed ceramic sets to commemorative pieces for royal visits.

The air smelled of bergamot and old books, and soft classical music played in the background.

As they walked through the museum, Skye found herself falling into step beside Logan without thinking—no awkward silences to navigate, no need to rehearse her responses. When he pointed out a particularly odd teapot shaped like a fish riding a bicycle, she snorted, a laugh slipping out before she could catch it. Her shoulders, tight out of habit, loosened.

For once, she wasn't mentally drafting escape routes or trying to come up with conversation contingencies.

Logan didn't press or pry. He matched her pace, occasionally tossing out quiet observations or light-hearted jokes that made it easier to breathe. It wasn't until she caught herself leaning in to hear him better—actually leaning in—that she realised how unguarded she'd become.

*Careful! He's still a suspect and possibly aiding and abetting Boreas.*

Logan glanced at Skye with a grin, perhaps picking up on the subtle change in her mood. "Bet even you haven't debugged *this* many tea protocols."

She gave him a sidelong look. "Maybe not yet, but I might start cataloguing by region and thermal efficiency."

He chuckled. "You're a tech mage through and through, but with your own touch."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" Skye asked, her tone even. She wasn't offended in the slightest, especially not when Logan's eyes sparkled with genuine amusement.

"A good thing," he said, raking a hand through his hair, looking sheepish. "And here I am, showing my own biases after all that complaining about people doing the same to me." He shook his head, a rueful smile tugging at his lips. "Come on, let's go sample some of the goods in the tearoom."

The tearoom was as charming as the museum, with vintage mismatched china, crisp white tablecloths, and floral centrepieces arranged in—should

have guessed it—teapots. Gilded mirrors and heavy velvet curtains lent the space a warm, old-world atmosphere, and the gentle clink of cutlery and hum of conversation gave it a comforting, lived-in feel. The smell of scones and freshly brewed tea welcomed them.

They chose a table by the window, sunlight spilling across it in soft, golden streaks. Skye avoided glancing towards the far corner where Seb and Zephyra sat.

She bit her lip as her gaze drifted to the tree outside, where Bob, perched like a smug garden ornament, pretended not to watch them through the glass.

Logan followed her line of sight and misread the gesture. “The gardens are quite pretty, aren’t they?” he said, smiling. “Perfect for a wander after tea.”

A waiter approached their table, dressed in full top hat and tails, looking as though he’d stepped straight out of a period drama. He carried himself with impeccable posture and spoke in a crisp, formal tone. “Good afternoon. May I tempt you with our traditional high tea service today?”

Logan turned to Skye, a playful glint in his eye. “Shall we go traditional?”

Skye nodded. A small, involuntary smile tugged at her lips as she took in the sheer ceremony of it all. “Let’s.”

Logan gave their order, and the waiter bowed before gliding away, coat tails swishing as if choreographed.

As soon as he’d disappeared into the back room, Logan turned back to her. “So, how long ago did you graduate from the academy?”

Barely resisting a groan, Skye replied, “A few years ago.” She gave him a wry look. “I look younger than I am.”

If she had a dollar for every time she’d had to say that, she could have built her own lab and staffed it with people who didn’t ask.

Looking young was either a blessing or a curse, depending entirely on the day and the prejudice of her clients. Like most fae, sylphs aged imperceptibly, their lives stretching across centuries with little regard for the ticking of human clocks.

But, of course, Skye couldn’t explain any of that to Logan.

“Good genes, then,” he said with a smile.

Time to steer the conversation where needed.

“What about you?” she asked. “How long have you had the workshop?”

"I've had it for about six years now. Still paying off the mortgage, though. Slowly but steadily."

Skye nodded.

"The income's picking up," he added. "Bit of enchantment repair, some custom charms. I get the odd boost when the coven sends work my way, though that's more occasional than I'd like. Wilma handles all of that."

"Wilma is the coven leader, right? What's she like?"

Logan gave a quiet huff of laughter. "Traditional is the polite word. Structured, very intense. Everything has to be just so."

He sighed, not with bitterness, but the resigned acceptance that comes from living under someone else's rules for too long. "We pay a pretty significant fee to the coven. It's part of the charter. Without it, I'd probably have knocked the mortgage off by now."

"No chance of negotiating?" Skye asked.

Logan shrugged. "It's not really done. You pay your dues, follow the hierarchy, and get the occasional favour in return. That's how it's always been."

So, he'd learnt to live within the structure, even if he didn't always agree with it.

The waiter returned, carrying a three-tiered stand with the reverence of someone presenting a crown jewel. Skye breathed in the comforting aroma of freshly brewed tea, warm scones, and delicate spices.

"Your traditional high tea, madam, sir," he announced with stately grace, setting the stand between them. "On the bottom tier, a selection of savouries—cucumber and cream cheese, smoked salmon with dill, and egg with a touch of watercress, all served on crustless bread, of course."

The edges of the layered sandwiches were so clean they looked trimmed with a ruler.

"The middle tier," he continued, "offers our house-baked scones—plain and fruit—served with double cream and our signature rose-petal jam."

Logan murmured something appreciative as the scones gave off a buttery warmth that wafted around the table.

"And on top," the man said with a soft smile, "a selection of sweets. Lemon tartlets, lavender shortbread, and Earl Grey-infused macarons."

Skye's eyes flicked up at the mention of Earl Grey. She was not a fan of bergamot.

The waiter then presented a small silver tray with two teapots. "And here we have your tea selections. For the lady, our classic Darjeeling, and for the gentleman, a robust Assam blend. Should either of you wish to sample another, simply ring the bell."

With a smooth bow, he retreated.

Skye glanced at the spread, then at Logan. "Not bad for a museum tea shop."

He grinned. "I told you it was worth coming for the food."

Logan poured the tea, offering her a cup first before settling his own. "So," he said, "what do you do to earn a living?"

A fair enough question, but one Skye needed to navigate carefully. Revealing too much about her business could lead to the coven digging into her background. While not many were aware she was a sylph, it wasn't a secret either. Avoiding any link to Fairyland was crucial. If Boreas caught wind of a nearby sylph—Zephyra or otherwise—he'd bolt.

"I do consulting work," she replied, keeping her tone light.

Logan raised an eyebrow, curious but not intrusive. "And that pays well?"

At least he hadn't assumed she lived off Fred's generosity. Skye wondered, not for the first time, if that was part of Sandra's interest—an escape route from a coven that claimed a hefty slice of your income and handed you orders like ration slips.

"It does," Skye said, absently twirling a curl around her finger. Talking numbers usually made people uncomfortable, especially when they didn't expect her to be financially independent. Not that she was sitting on a fortune, but she did okay with her consulting and her inventions.

"I also work on side projects," she added, taking a sip of tea. The Darjeeling had a light, floral taste, almost fruity. "Mostly small magical enhancements—consumer-grade stuff."

Logan rested his elbows on the table and threaded his fingers. "Can you give me some examples?"

There it was—the gentle nudge towards talking shop.

Skye offered him a smile, keeping it vague but not evasive. “Little things that make life easier. Smart charms. Household enchantments. I prefer solving everyday problems—there’s a certain satisfaction in that.”

Which, conveniently, was also true. It just left out the part about warding, surveillance, and the occasional magically rigged containment unit.

“What about you? What sort of artefacts do you build?” Skye asked, reaching for a cucumber sandwich and taking a neat bite. The bread was soft, the filling crisp and delicately seasoned.

Logan leaned back, considering. “Bit of a mixed bag, really. I started with standard charms—lightweight stuff like self-flickering candles and noise-dampening wards for shared flats. Those were big sellers for a while.”

Skye nodded, mildly impressed. Enchanted silence was a luxury in magical households.

“But what I’m best at,” he continued, “is reinforcement work. Structuring enchantments so they hold longer, hit harder, or resist environmental bleed. Strengthening wards, shoring up containment fields, that kind of thing. It’s not flashy, but it’s solid. Reliable. Wilma says they are good but asked me to refine them further, gave me a list of suggestions.”

“That explains your role in the circle,” Skye said. “You stabilise the boundary lines.”

He smiled modestly. “Yes. It’s one of those things no one notices until it fails. But keep the tension balanced, and the whole system runs smoothly.”

She appreciated that. Quiet, precise magic—less about spectacle, more about strength under pressure. A good circle mage didn’t need a spotlight. They just needed to hold the line.

“You know,” she said, glancing at Logan over the rim of her teacup, “that kind of reinforcement could be incredibly useful in security systems. Particularly for external barriers or responsive enchantments—things that need to flex under pressure but still hold.”

It was a risk talking about security, but his enthusiasm seemed genuine, and it might get her additional information about his magic.

Logan’s eyes lit up. “Yes! Like adaptive tension wards. I’ve been playing with layering runes so the strength of the barrier shifts depending on the level

of threat. It's tricky, though. The calibration goes haywire if you try to link it with anything volatile, especially fae enchantments."

"You'd need a dynamic anchor point." Skye tapped a thoughtful rhythm on the table with her fingers. "Something passive but stable, maybe linked to atmospheric charge or temperature thresholds."

He practically bounced in his seat. "That's it. I've been thinking about using pressure-responsive glyphs—oh, wait—" he rummaged in his coat pocket and pulled out a crumpled scrap of parchment with an inked design. "Like this. It's crude, but the layering concept is sound."

Skye took it, eyes scanning the sketch. It wasn't bad.

"You ever considered collaborating?" Logan asked, hopeful, bright-eyed. He looked like a golden retriever who'd discovered someone else who also liked chasing sticks. "I mean, we could prototype something. A little side project."

Skye handed the parchment back, one brow raised, her tone measured. "I'll think about it."

They returned to the last of the tea. Logan polished off his remaining scone in two bites. Skye eyed her lemon tartlet, its golden surface gleaming with innocent sweetness, much like the bright-eyed witch now watching her across the table, eager to talk magic.

She reached for the tart and took a bite. If she was going to regret something today, better it be the pastry.

## CHAPTER 25

Skye and Logan said their goodbyes at the museum entrance.

The last traces of sunlight faded into a soft amber glow that clung to the edges of the verandah like a memory about to slip away.

This time, when he leaned in for a parting kiss on the cheek, she didn't tense. It still wasn't entirely comfortable, but it didn't set her nerves jangling either—progress, perhaps.

"Please think about it?" Logan asked, his voice hopeful but soft.

*He doesn't want to push.*

"I will," Skye said with a small nod. "It sounds like a fun idea."

And it did. But whether it went anywhere depended entirely on what her investigation turned up.

Logan's grin widened, and he gave her a quick wave before heading off, his stride light, almost buoyant.

Skye watched him go, arms folded loosely. He'd definitely given her something to think about.

She didn't believe he had killed Tess. At least not based on the evidence so far. His motive was weak, and the method didn't fit. But she couldn't ignore the fact that his magic, while practical and grounded, could be weaponised under the right conditions.

The idea of steering the conversation towards Fairyland had crossed her mind, but she'd dismissed it almost immediately—far too risky.

What bothered her, though, was what he'd said about the covenant. From what Logan had let slip, Wilma ran a strict, tightly controlled operation. If Boreas was hiding within their ranks, she either didn't know, which seemed unlikely, or she did and was actively protecting him.

And Logan? He didn't strike her as someone who lied easily. But loyalty... that was trickier. Loyalty could make people do all sorts of things—stay quiet, don't pry, rationalise.

Besides, he'd given himself away without even realising it. The moment he mentioned fae magic, warning flags lit up on her internal dashboard.

Sure, it was *possible* he'd encountered fae while testing enchantments—random magical crossover wasn't unheard of. But the odds weren't in his favour.

For one, the fae population was small. For another, fae and witches didn't typically mix. Centuries of suspicion and ingrained prejudice didn't vanish because someone needed a ward reinforced. And the fae were more than capable of building their own.

Arms wrapped around her from behind, warm and sure, and the scent of musk and cardamom enveloped her. A soft kiss brushed the curve of her neck, and Skye's breath hitched before she could stop it. Her pulse stuttered—traitorous and far too loud—and the world around her dropped to idle, every thought backgrounded to minimised tabs.

Unfortunately, not for long.

"Oh, stars, get a room," Zephyra groaned somewhere behind them, her voice edged with mock disgust.

Bob fluttered into view. "You're just jealous, Sugarstorm," he said. "Though I suppose envy's a reasonable reaction to not having your own personal cinnamon-scented shadow."

Zephyra narrowed her eyes. "Don't make me trap you in a glow jar."

"Empty threat," Bob sniffed, fluffing his feathers. "I'm a limited-edition collectable. Very rare. Besides, I'd like to see you try."

"Guys!" Skye said, letting out a long-suffering sigh. It would've been nice to stay in Seb's arms for a few more seconds, but her phone had pinged with the shrill tone of an alert. "Fred is meeting with Sandra, and we are *here*."

Zephyra straightened like someone flicked a switch. The air around her shifted, sharp and restless, a faint charge prickling against Skye's skin.

"Take it down a notch," Bob said, eyeing her with one beady glance. "You're bleeding through your magic dampener."

Zephyra inhaled deeply, fists briefly clenching before she exhaled and nodded. Without a word, she turned on her heel and strode off in the direction of the antique shops, posture stiff.

Seb and Skye walked hand in hand through the streets. The sun had set ten minutes ago, leaving the sky a dusky blue-grey, and the painted brick buildings—soft greens, deep maroons, weathered creams—seemed to absorb the cold.

Streetlamps blinked on, casting golden halos onto the footpath. Skye tucked her free hand deeper into her coat pocket, the air sharp with the scent of damp stone and distant wood smoke.

Shopfronts spilled out with curious displays—antique clocks, faded books, crystal baubles that sparkled with enchantment under subtle warding charms.

Locals meandered about, a mix of tourists and supernatural residents blending with the ease of a place used to tempered strangeness.

Seb leaned in close, his lips brushing the shell of her ear. “You like Logan,” he murmured. The words were light, almost teasing, but there was a thread of something else under them, something more careful.

Skye kept her gaze ahead. “He’s a nice kid. Caught in an environment he’s not happy with.”

“He’s a bit old to be called a kid,” Seb said drily, then reached out and pressed two fingers gently to her lips before she could retort. “But it’s good you see him that way.”

He stopped, tugging her hand to pause their stride. “Please remember that he’s still a potential danger to you.”

“I’m aware,” Skye replied, meeting his gaze.

Her phone vibrated with a sharp buzz, and the display read *No Caller ID*. She swiped the green button, and the sound transferred to her discreet earbud.

“Is this Skye Sanders?” a woman asked.

Pulling Seb forward to resume their walk, Skye replied, “Yes.”

A familiar flutter of wings signalled Bob’s landing on her shoulder. He didn’t even pretend he wasn’t eavesdropping.

“This is Detective Sergeant Patel,” the woman said, her voice dropping to a more confidential tone. “I thought you’d like to know—unofficially—that the doctors believe Teresa Lindell consumed death cap mushrooms. That’s the

working theory for the cause of death, but it won't be confirmed until the pathologist releases her findings."

Was Patel going behind her partner's back to tell her this?

"Thank you," Skye said, meaning it. "That's very helpful."

"Please don't share the information," Patel added. "But let me know if you think of anything that might help the case."

"Of course," Skye replied, and she told herself that was true. The second part, at least.

"Good. I'm glad you understand. There are... tensions around supernatural involvement. Talk soon."

The line went dead.

Skye gave a soft exhale. *Ha!* Patel had definitely gone behind Detective Inspector O'Connor's back.

Patel's situation sparked a flicker of empathy. Being a supernatural in a force that still hesitated around the word *magic* had to be isolating.

Maybe setting up a dedicated supernatural police unit would help. Or maybe it would paint a bigger target.

Up ahead, Zephyra had already disappeared around a corner.

Skye picked up her pace, Seb keeping up without effort. She didn't need to tell him what had been said—he would've heard every word.

Bob cleared his throat. "*Amanita phalloides*—commonly known as the death cap. One of the deadliest mushrooms in existence. A mere mouthful is enough to shut down a human liver in under a day. Nasty way to go."

"Are they found in the Blue Mountains?" Skye asked.

Bob nodded. "Unfortunately, yes. They came over with those ornamental oak trees the colonials were so fond of. Pretty to look at and lethal in the undergrowth."

By now, the cafés had all closed for the day, their chairs stacked and lights dimmed behind fogged windows. It was too early for the dinner crowd in most places, but Skye had already done her research. A small Thai restaurant sat conveniently next to the antique shop where Fred was meeting Sandra, and the open sign flashed in steady pulses.

Zephyra stood out front, pacing with tight, controlled strides, her arms crossed and brows drawn. "He's gone in," she said, her voice clipped and eyes

scanning every movement on the street.

“Put these on,” Skye said, handing discreet earpieces to both Seb and Zephyra.

While Seb had exceptional hearing, this would allow him to focus better.

She tapped the side to sync the connection. “Fred’s camera is up and running, but we can’t watch it out here. Everyone set?”

Without waiting for a reply, she added, “Let’s go to the restaurant.”

They entered a warmly lit space with polished wooden floors. The rich scent of lemongrass, chilli, and fresh coriander drifted from the kitchen and weaved through the room.

Colourful silk lanterns hung from the ceiling, and golden carvings of mythical creatures lined the walls in intricate detail.

A small heater in the corner hummed quietly, filling the space with a cosy warmth that chased off the winter chill.

No other customers sat within—only a young waiter who glanced up from behind the counter, eyebrows lifting in polite surprise as the three of them walked in.

“Table for three?” he asked, reaching for menus.

Skye nodded. “By the window, please.”

If Fred needed backup, they’d be close.

But really, how much trouble could Fred possibly get into in an antique shop?

“Shall we order?” Seb asked, casting a glance towards the waiter, who lingered nearby with the restlessness of someone pretending not to hover.

Zephyra didn’t look up.

“I’ll have the pad see ew, mild chilli,” Skye said.

“Green curry, extra tofu,” Seb added, before glancing at Zephyra’s untouched menu. “And one tom yum. She won’t thank us for the assumption, but she’ll eat it.”

Bob chirped.

“Ah, yes,” Seb said. “Some seeds for the bird, please?”

If the request struck the waiter as strange, he didn’t show it. Most restaurants made allowances for animals. It should be more so the case in a

town where witches and mages often dined with familiars who were every bit as opinionated as their human counterparts.

The waiter gave a small nod and padded away, his soft footsteps swallowed by the low hum of the heater and clatter from the kitchen.

Sandra's voice came through Skye's earpiece, cheerful and breathless.

"So sorry I'm late," she said. "Got caught up with some inventory."

"Not a problem," Fred replied. "I appreciate your coming."

Setting up a hologram of the live footage on the table had been her first instinct, but that would attract attention.

She'd taken the table by the window for surveillance range, not discretion, and now it felt like a rookie mistake. Without a word, she showed her phone to Zephyra, the footage already playing. Maybe seeing what was happening with Fred would help her settle.

Zephyra's eyes widened, her focus sharpening at once. A small spark of satisfaction stirred in Skye's chest. This was Zephyra's first real glimpse at what tech magic could do.

*That's right, little sister has got a few tricks.*

Pushing her chair closer to Seb, Skye tilted the phone so he could see the video as well.

Sandra filled the frame in a voluminous patchwork skirt and a thick, oversized jumper, the kind that could double as armour against the mountain cold. Hoop earrings glinted beneath the shop's warm light, and her hair sat piled in a messy bun that had likely taken effort to look casual.

She threaded her arm through Fred's. "So, what are your interests in terms of antiques?" she asked, her voice light.

Was she testing him?

Fred didn't miss a beat. "I've got a soft spot for late Victorian glassware and mid-century mechanical timepieces. Anything with history and good bones, really."

A slow smile curved Sandra's lips. "That's very specific."

"I find those pieces calming," Fred said. "There's something about restoration that's honest. Either it works or it doesn't—no ego involved."

Sandra laughed. "Have you seen the display at Marlowe's shop down the road? The broken mantle clock in the window?"

“French, late 1800s, missing the minute hand,” Fred confirmed. “It shouldn’t have been exposed to that much sunlight.”

Beside Skye, Seb gave a low whistle. “He’s good.”

Bob piped up, “Glad to see you’re capable of recognising talent, even when you’re feeling mildly territorial.”

Seb tilted his head. “Subtle, Bob.”

“Always,” he replied primly.

The waiter returned, balancing a silver tray, and placed each dish on the table.

Skye’s pad see ew came first—wide rice noodles glistening with soy sauce, tossed with Chinese broccoli and seared slices of tofu, the aroma rich and smoky. Seb’s green curry followed, fragrant with coconut milk and basil, dotted with chunks of tofu, baby eggplant, and red capsicum, steam curling invitingly from the bowl.

Zephyra’s tom yum was last, its broth a deep orange-red, studded with mushrooms and coriander leaves floating on the surface. A wedge of lime sat perched on the rim, bright and sharp.

The waiter gave a polite nod and left.

Back in Skye’s earpiece, Sandra’s tone shifted. “Why don’t you tell me about your job?”

“You first,” Fred said with a wave. “Tell me about your magic. I find all of this stuff fascinating.”

Skye absently wound a nest of noodles around her fork and lifted it to her mouth, barely registering the savoury tang of soy and garlic as her thoughts stayed anchored to her phone.

Sandra gave a small shrug. “I’m more into the healing side of things. Energy balance, emotional setting, cleansing work. Eventually, I’d like to move to Sydney and open my practice—a kind of therapy shop. Potions and charms, sure, but also real transformation.” She sighed. “It’s boring around here. Not much to do, unless you’re into hiking or gossip.” Sandra leaned in a little, dropping her voice. “Now and then, something exciting happens, though.”

“Oh?” Fred prompted, full of innocent curiosity. “Like what? A wild kangaroo on the rampage?”

Sandra threw her head back and laughed, the sound rich and unguarded. “Spoken like a city boy. Kangaroos *can* be deadly, you know.”

“You’re joking,” Fred said.

A spoon appeared in front of Skye’s face, hovering within reach. Seb held it out with an almost innocent expression.

“Try it,” he said, voice low and coaxing.

Leaning in, Skye took the bite. Warmth bloomed across her tongue—rich coconut, the subtle sweetness of palm sugar, followed by a green chilli kick that hit just the right side of sharp. *Delicious*.

Seb watched her with quiet amusement; one brow raised in silent triumph.

A smile tugged at Skye’s mouth despite herself, then she refocused on her phone, the warmth of the curry lingering.

Sandra tilted her head, eyes gleaming. “Am I?”

Skye exchanged a look with Seb, her gut tightening. Sandra might be all floaty skirts and incense talk, but she wasn’t naïve.

And that comment about a deadly kangaroo—was it a joke, or a carefully veiled reference? A metaphor slipped in with a smile?

Skye’s mind caught on it like a thread pulled too tight.

Had Sandra been involved in setting the trap that nearly killed her? Was she toying with Fred... and unknowingly revealing more than she meant to?

“Well, I think it’s wonderful you’ve got ambition,” Fred said.

“You sound surprised,” Sandra replied.

A pause. “I guess I assumed most witches preferred staying close to nature—crystals, incense, and all things esoteric.”

Sandra chuckled. “Can’t really blame you. Tess and Lilith are exactly like that. Tess *was*, anyway.” She paused, then gave a small shake of her head as if dispelling a memory before it settled too deeply. “But I’ve never believed life’s a fairytale. And I’d rather date someone flesh-and-blood than hold out for a fae prince.”

“That’s a very sound policy,” Fred said.

A clock’s chime rang out, followed by the gentle hum of background conversation—snatches of small talk, punctuated by the rhythmic click of shoes on polished floors.

Adjusting her earpiece, Skye muted the ambient noise.

“So, anything tickle your fancy?” Sandra asked, gesturing towards a nearby display of music boxes. The collection sat arranged in a glass-fronted cabinet—carved wooden ones, lacquered pieces with floral inlays, and a few shaped like cottages or carousel horses.

“Not really,” Fred said, then offered a crooked smile. “But I’ve got a confession to make.”

“Oh?” Sandra replied, brushing an invisible speck of fluff from his jacket.

Zephyra let out a noise that sat somewhere between a grunt and a growl.

“I’m more interested in getting to know you than doing any actual shopping,” Fred said. “Not that antiques don’t have their charm.”

Sandra didn’t pull her hand away. “And your girlfriend?”

Fred waved a hand vaguely. “She’s back at the hotel, knee-deep in devices and data streams. But of course, I meant as friends.”

“Of course,” Sandra echoed, her tone utterly unconvinced and completely unbothered.

She stepped a little closer. “How about we go somewhere we can talk properly? There’s a lovely lookout just a five-minute walk from here.”

“Sure,” Fred said.

On the other end of the feed, both Zephyra and Skye groaned in unison.

Seb didn’t say anything, but the sparkle in his eyes suggested he was enjoying this far too much.

Zephyra hadn’t even touched her soup before she was on her feet, tension radiating off her like a charged wire.

Skye caught her arm. “Wait. We don’t want to bump into them as they leave the shop. I can track him easily.”

“He’s an idiot,” Zephyra snapped.

“No, he’s not,” Skye countered, her tone firm but calm as Seb rose to settle the bill. “He’s using his wits. He’s probably read the situation and feels safe enough to follow her. Give him some credit.”

Zephyra didn’t bolt, but she didn’t sit either, her jaw tight and eyes fixed on the door.

Refusing to waste a perfectly good meal, Skye took another bite of noodles, swallowed, and stood. “All right. Let’s go.”

Seb set a few notes on the table, then stood without a word.

Once Skye confirmed through her phone that Fred and Sandra had passed beyond the antique shop, they slipped out of the restaurant and followed, keeping enough distance to remain unseen.

## CHAPTER 26

The crowd thinned as they followed the winding path to the lookout. The last shops gave way to dense bushland, and the air grew quieter, colder, edged with the scent of eucalyptus and damp earth. Gnarled trees arched over the trail, their silhouettes stretching long and spindly in the fading light. Somewhere nearby, a currawong called, its cry hollow and far too lonely.

Skye checked her phone. The video feed showed Sandra leading Fred to the railing, right to the edge.

The lookout loomed ahead, a sheer drop cloaked in shadows and mist.

A cold twist unfurled in Skye's stomach.

It wasn't nerves. It was that quiet, creeping wrongness that whispered of danger.

She didn't usually trust gut feelings—they were messy, unpredictable things—but after yesterday's ambush, she'd learnt to pay attention.

Ahead of her, the air flickered. Zephyra's magic stirred, rising like heat off bitumen.

Bob fluttered above her head. "Ease up, Sugarstorm. You're leaking again."

Zephyra muttered something sharp under her breath but visibly reeled herself in, the shimmer of magic subsiding as she exhaled slowly.

"Better," Bob said, landing lightly on a branch.

Indecision churned in Skye's chest—the tug-of-war between gathering more intel on the coven and making sure Fred didn't end up at the bottom of a ravine. She almost laughed. As if it were even a choice.

Overreaction wasn't her style, but when the stakes were this high, even a sliver of risk wasn't worth it. And besides, she could see the tension building in Zephyra, her fingers twitching. She was moments away from charging down the path herself.

If Skye didn't act fast, Zephyra would make the decision for all of them.

"Hide," Skye said, moving ahead. "I'll go get him."

Sandra would come back this way, and while she shouldn't recognise Seb or Zephyra, Skye wasn't taking any chances. Better paranoid than exposed.

Without waiting for them to agree, she strode down the path with purpose, boots crunching on the gravel as the lookout came into view—a small clearing framed by low stone walls and ghost gums, the valley below cloaked in shadow.

"There you are," she called as soon as she stepped into the open.

Fred turned at the sound of her voice and smiled, though there was something else behind it—a flicker of relief, maybe? If so, he hid it well.

Didn't matter. He was her responsibility. He wouldn't be in this position if it weren't for her.

Well, her, and more accurately, Zephyra.

"Darling," Fred said, disentangling himself from Sandra's grasp. "What are you doing here?"

Skye held up her phone. "Tracked you," she said simply. The truth was always better than lies. "I was getting worried."

*Get away from the edge. And Sandra.*

Fred, as if catching the thought mid-air, took a few casual steps towards her, widening the distance from the railing. "I told you I'd be at the shops for a while," he said, voice light, but his eyes searched hers.

Skye fought the instinct to physically place herself between him and the cliff.

Instead, she turned her attention to Sandra. "Hi, Sandra."

A deep frown marred Sandra's face, but it vanished as she sauntered forward. "It's a lovely night," she said, slipping her hands into her pockets. "I convinced Fred to come enjoy the view. You might like it too."

"I'm sure we will," Skye replied.

Sandra leaned in and kissed Fred on the cheek. "So lovely to spend time together," she said sweetly. "Let's do this again sometime."

With a flutter of fingers and a tight little smile, she turned on her heel and disappeared down the path.

"Were you worried about me?" Fred asked, a grin spreading across his face.

"Yes," Skye said without hesitation.

"That's sweet of you. But I'm pretty sure I was safe. Or at least safe from physical harm."

He *was* safe. He was right in front of her, whole and unharmed. And yet, the unease in her gut twisted tighter, not looser. It churned low, like a pressure system building beneath her skin, subtle, but insistent.

Crunching footsteps echoed down the path, and seconds later, Zephyra stormed into the clearing with Seb and Bob close behind.

"What in the star-cursed winds were you thinking?" Zephyra snapped, marching straight up to Fred and getting nose-to-nose with him. Her hair crackled faintly with static. "You could've been hexed, glamoured, or thrown off the moonlit cliff!"

Fred raised his hands and took a small step back. "I was thinking she was ready to talk. We need information, right?"

"That wasn't talking," Zephyra snapped. "That was you being baited like a —"

"All right, all right," Fred said, with a calming gesture. "I'm fine. She's gone. It's done."

But Skye had stopped listening. A faint prickle crawled up the back of her neck, setting every nerve on edge. The air shifted, carrying that metallic tang that warned of magic thickening.

A change. Sudden, quiet, out of sync. Like the split-second before a server crashes and everything vanishes, taking the unsaved with it.

Seb stiffened beside her. His eyes darkened, then flared crimson.

Bob squawked from above. "Incoming!"

Four enforcer sylphs dropped from the sky, their landings thudding against the ground and cutting off the only exit. They moved with uncanny grace, and the air around them pulsed with a crackling tension, as if the wind itself bent to their will.

Their uniforms shimmered in shifting shades of deep grey and silver, giving them a spectral quality. Each wore a crest over their heart: the mark of the High Council—a stylised whirlwind encircling a single eye.

Their eyes, in contrast, were utterly still, icy blue, and devoid of expression. Magic danced at their fingertips, lightning held on a leash.

The tallest stepped forward, a woman with silver-streaked braids and a voice as sharp as breaking glass.

“Zephyra, daughter of Helion and Mussira,” she declared, “you stand accused of grave offences. You will come with us.”

Skye’s breath caught, her lungs tightening as if the air had turned too thick to pull in. She’d known the enforcers wouldn’t bother with questions or nuance. Still, hearing it spoken aloud slammed into her like a dropped ward stone. Her fingers curled into fists at her side.

But they weren’t taking Zephyra without a fight. She readied her magic.

“Your concern is with me, not them. Leave them out of this,” Zephyra said, as she pointed towards Skye.

Shifting her weight, every line of Zephyra’s body tensed for impact.

The lead enforcer’s frown deepened, a flicker of annoyance passing across her otherwise impassive face. “Not our problem if they step into the crossfire,” she said coolly.

The woman’s magic ignited, electric and immediate, as currents of wind twirled around her hands like invisible blades, ready to strike.

Air, compressed with terrifying precision, snapped around Zephyra like invisible cuffs.

But Zephyra moved fast. She dropped low, arms sweeping in an arc, and the pressure shattered with a thunder crack.

Wind surged in a tight spiral, lifting her hair in a wild halo as she launched forward, sending a gust sharp as glass slicing towards the leader.

Another charged, but Seb blurred. One second, he stood beside Skye, the next, he collided with the enforcer mid-air, sending them both crashing to the ground with a sound like a collapsed tree.

His fists moved faster than sight, each blow hammering with supernatural strength as he forced the attacker back.

With Zephyra and Seb occupied, Skye turned her attention to the third sylph.

With a sharp flick of her wrist, Skye’s tech bracelet flared to life. Runes spiralled in rapid succession across her palm, each one pulsing with electric blue light. A whip of current snapped forward, striking the enforcer’s leg with a crack.

The female bent over, but only for a breath, and she rose, hovering above the ground. Her eyes narrowed as wind snaked tightly around her like a living thing, tugging at her clothes and pulling her blonde hair into a twisting mane. Her magic gathered with growing force—tendrils of air forming an invisible cage primed to lash out.

Skye crouched, fingers flying across her rune display. Threads of energy laced together, knitting a shield in layers of glowing circuitry. It shimmered like a heat haze, and when the first whip cracked against it, the barrier flared bright, absorbing the impact with a fizz of light and a faint electric hum.

Bob shot through the fray like a feathery missile, talons out. He dive-bombed the sylph, scratching at her face with an alarming amount of glee.

Turning, Skye saw Fred mid-dodge, trying to stay out of the way, when one of the enforcers caught him with a blast of compressed air.

*Uh oh!*

He hit the railing hard, ribs slamming into metal with a grunt of pain, but even winded, he kicked out low, hooking a foot around the enforcer's ankle and yanking hard. The man toppled sideways but lifted himself in the air and turned to Fred.

The enforcer's eyes flared silver-white as he extended both hands, wind screaming around him. With a broad sweep of his arms, he conjured a miniature tornado, tight and fierce, and threw it at Fred. The force tore him from the ground, flinging him over the railing.

"No!" Skye bolted for the edge, boots skidding on the gravel.

Bob shot past her, wings slicing the air as he dove straight down the cliff.

But Zephyra moved faster. Wind snapped like a propeller as she launched herself skyward, a blur of limbs and magic. Her silhouette lit by the moon as she twisted mid-air, angling her descent with impossible control.

Skye reached the railing, heart pounding, in time to see Zephyra catch Fred, her arms locking around him as wind slowed their fall. Relief came so sharp and sudden it nearly knocked the air from Skye's lungs.

Then came the heat.

Not physical heat, but the storm of fury.

She turned, eyes locking on the enforcer who'd sent Fred flying. Magic rose like a gust inside her—not the careful precision of her tech, but raw,

elemental air, pulled from somewhere deep in her blood.

With a snap of her hand, a shockwave of air slammed into the enforcer. He didn't even have time to shout. The force hurtled him backwards, crashing through branches and slamming into the dirt hard enough to leave a dent. His eyes went wide with stunned disbelief.

Skye didn't wait. She raised both hands, runes blazing to life, and built a containment field—hard-light circuitry lacing into a cage that snapped around him before he could move.

Turning slowly, her breathing ragged, she scanned the clearing.

The remaining three enforcers lay sprawled across the ground—one ominously still, the other two twitching and groaning.

Wind shifted again, and Zephyra touched down beside her, Fred cradled in her arms. His hair windblown, his jacket askew, but very much alive.

Skye exhaled. Just once. A long, shuddering breath. Then she looked at the caged enforcer.

"How dare you hurt a human? What will the council say when they find out?" Skye snapped.

She stalked forward, anger rolling off her in waves. The air shifted with it, crackling, charged, as if even the atmosphere was retreating.

The enforcer flinched, a subtle recoil, and Skye didn't miss the fear crossing his expression behind the steely veneer.

Beside her, Zephyra appeared like a gust breaking through a thunderhead. Her hair flew in tangled strands across her face, and her feet didn't quite settle, air still coiling around her ankles in miniature whirlwinds.

"He would've been collateral damage," Zephyra said, voice low and brittle. "Isn't that right?"

"And who would've known," Seb added, stepping in on Skye's other side, "once you slinked back home with your story polished and your hands wiped clean?"

The enforcer straightened, some pride returning to his shoulders. "Zephyra is a criminal. She stole a sacred artefact. You have no right to interfere."

Fred stepped forward. "I think I get a say here," he said lightly, "considering I was the one flung off a mountain. Your methods are a disgrace. And unless I

missed something, there's no evidence she took the dagger."

"The Council has the evidence," the enforcer shot back.

But the words rang hollow.

Fred tilted his head. "You've seen it yourself?"

Silence. The enforcer's jaw clamped shut with a sharp click.

"Didn't think so." Fred's tone was mild, but he fixed him with a piercing gaze. "Boreas vanished, didn't he? And now there's a dagger-shaped hole in the story."

"So you say." The mask of certainty slipped, letting doubt seep into his voice.

Proof? Skye would give them proof.

She pulled out her phone and projected a holographic recording above her palm. It flickered, then stabilised—her recent adjustments having cleaned the footage to near perfection. In the scene, Boreas darted through town mid-fight. At his hip, the dagger bounced with every step. Its distinctive pommel, shaped like a crescent moon and studded with amber gems, caught the light as he moved.

"Embed it into a crystal," Bob said, landing on Skye's shoulder. He then locked eyes with the sylph. "Let the diviners examine it. They'll see the truth soon enough."

The sylph turned, gaze flicking over Bob with something between curiosity and respect. "Who are you, bird, that you know of our diviners?" His nostrils flared. "Air clings to you."

"A good question," Skye muttered under her breath.

Bob fluffed his feathers. "I could tell you," he said with a wink, "but then I'd have to toss you off a cliff, and we've already done that bit today."

Bob had said to embed the data into a crystal. But where on earth was Skye meant to find one?

As if reading her thoughts, Bob fluttered into the air and dropped a clear crystal into her palm, its many facets catching the moonlight in glittering angles.

"Part of my emergency stash," he grumbled. "I expect full compensation. Preferably in pastries."

Skye didn't bother to answer and tapped her phone against the crystal. A ripple of runes shimmered along its surface, spiralling inward like a whirlpool. Threads of code-laced magic leapt from device to crystal, embedding the footage with a quiet hum. It pulsed once, softly, as if acknowledging the footage now stored inside.

"My comrades are injured," the male sylph said, motioning stiffly to the scattered forms on the ground.

Their leader had sat up, face pale, her wide eyes on the space where the projection had played. Clearly, she'd seen enough.

But Skye didn't lower her guard. Her tech magic thrummed again, ready to pulse from her smartwatch at the first sign of aggression.

"Time for you to head home," Bob announced, wings flaring as an oval of light unfurled within the lookout. It glowed, edged in silver currents of wind. "Your healers can mop up the mess."

Bob nudged Skye's shoulder with his beak.

*Right. The cage.*

With a small click of her fingers and a reluctant exhale, Skye unravelled the barrier. Magic dispersed like smoke in the wind. The captured sylph stepped out slowly, palms up, gaze darting between them. No sudden movements.

The leader got to her feet, jaw tight, and snapped out a series of sharp orders. With a grunt of effort, they dragged their fallen comrades towards the portal.

As the last foot crossed the threshold, the portal contracted, folding like silk, and vanished with a snap, leaving only silence and the scent of crushed eucalyptus.

Seb wrapped his arms around Skye's shoulders, pulling her in until the top of her head nestled under his chin. The gesture grounded her. She let out a long breath, trying to shake off the tremor that had crept into her limbs.

"Are you okay?" she asked Fred.

He'd taken a hard hit, and unlike the rest of them, he didn't have magic to speed up healing. And that had been before being hurled off a cliff and caught mid-air like a sack of potatoes. Even Zephyra's rescue might have left bruises.

Fred gave her a lopsided smile. "Well, I had been toying with the idea of bungee jumping for a bit of a thrill, but I think I'll cross it off the list."

“Not what it’s cracked up to be, eh?” Bob chuckled.

A thought struck Skye mid-breath, and she shot Bob a sidelong look.  
“Since when can you open portals?”

## CHAPTER 27

Bob had the grace to look sheepish at Skye's question.

Opening a portal took serious power—structured, focused, and deliberate. And Bob had done it like he was flicking lint off his feathers.

"Well," he chirped, "it sort of goes with the territory."

Skye crossed her arms. "And what territory would *that* be?"

Seb pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I admit to a deep and abiding curiosity as well, but perhaps we should remove ourselves from the scene first."

He had a point. Crushed underbrush, scorched air, and a lingering buzz of power made the area look like it had been hit by a cyclone. Which, to be fair, wasn't far from the truth.

"Ah, yes," Bob said, launching himself aloft again. "This kind of magical footprint will light up the local grid like a fireworks display. Anyone tracking bursts of power is going to come sniffing."

The witches would be monitoring the area. This was their patch, and given they were sheltering Boreas, they'd be watching for anything even mildly suspicious.

And this was flashing-neon-sign, sirens-blaring, 'please take a look,' suspicious.

Using her magic, Skye sent a scrambled signature across the lingering traces of power, masking their trail. A moment later, she felt Zephyra's magic thread into hers, lending strength to the weave.

The sensation of their magics intermingling was unfamiliar, two different coding languages syncing mid-script, but less jarring now that Skye had tapped into her air magic a few times.

She had to admit, if only to herself, it was surprisingly nice to weave magic in tandem like this. The quiet, unspoken rhythm to their teamwork felt right.

Beneath all the tension and old wounds, their magic knew they were sisters.

“Can you walk?” Seb asked Fred.

For once, faced with a Seb question, Fred didn’t reach for sarcasm. He nodded, but Skye caught the wince when he shifted his weight.

So did Zephyra.

The feeling of energy gathering settled on Skye before she saw it—a gentle ripple in the air, subtle as breath. Zephyra’s magic wove itself around Fred’s body, feathering under his steps with enough lift to ease the burden.

If Fred noticed, he didn’t let on, but Skye doubted he would have. The air enchantment flowed with such subtle precision it might as well have been a breeze on his back.

His gait smoothed out.

*Colour me impressed.*

The spell was delicate and intricate. A whisper too much and Fred would float like an idiot. Too little, and it would be no use. Calibrating it so perfectly would have required significant effort. That meant Zephyra had done it to preserve Fred’s dignity, which was... interesting.

Not only because it was a caring and thoughtful gesture, but because, after the energy expended during the fight, weaving such a fine spell would have taken more control and finesse than brute strength. Brute strength would have been faster as well.

Skye was grateful.

A couple kissing at the end of the path paid them no mind as they emerged from the lookout trail. The road curved ahead, quiet and empty, save for the black limo waiting like an obedient shadow. When they piled inside, Fred couldn’t hold back a groan, and Skye made a mental note to thank Grandma again for her foresight in giving them healing potions.

Back at the hotel, she rummaged through the collection of small vials, reading the embossed labels until she found the one most suited for cracked ribs and deep bruises.

She mixed a single drop into a glass of water and handed it to Fred, who sat gingerly on the edge of a chair, one arm wrapped protectively around his middle.

“Drink this,” Skye said.

Fred squinted at the glass like it might sprout legs and dance. “Does it come in bubble tea?” he asked, but accepted it anyway, taking a cautious sip.

A soft ping interrupted the moment. Fred groaned again—this time at the effort of pulling his phone from his back pocket. “Minor miracle it didn’t fall out,” he muttered. “Had it been in the jacket, we’d be picking pieces of it out of the rocks by now.”

He read the message, then looked up. “Lilith. The magic circle’s on for tomorrow night.”

“Interesting timing,” Seb said, his voice dry.

“Maybe they’re suspicious,” Zephyra offered from the armchair, where she’d curled up, eyes closed but still tuned in.

Bob hopped onto the coffee table. “Right, because nothing screams ‘coincidence’ like a trap being sprung, half the lookout exploding, and Fred suddenly deciding he’s magic-curious.”

Fred gave a weary smile. “I didn’t get that feeling from Sandra.”

Without opening her eyes, Zephyra scoffed, the sound laced with equal parts disdain and exhaustion.

“That was before tonight,” Skye countered, sinking into the sofa.

“Still,” Fred said, “the place looked like a tornado hit it. They will associate that with air magic and not tech magic.”

“True,” Skye agreed.

Bob cocked his head. “And you scrubbed any identifying markers. A pretty thorough job, by the way. Well done, both of you.”

Skye nodded. “Not even a forensics team could trace it back to me.”

Seb slid onto the seat beside her, leaning in to murmur against her ear. “I love it when you sound so delightfully devious.”

Heat crept up Skye’s neck, blooming across her cheeks.

Zephyra opened one eye, her voice softer now. “They’ll suspect me.”

Colour had returned to Fred’s face, and he sat a little straighter. Proof, if any was needed, that Grandma’s potions were the stuff of legend.

“Even if they were suspicious,” Fred said, “they wouldn’t know for sure. Greed’s a powerful motivator. And Wilma would’ve decided the risk was worth it.”

“Does it say where they are holding the circle?” Seb asked, tone casual, though Skye could practically hear the gears turning. He was probably drafting perimeter security strategies.

Fred shook his head. “No, I’ll ask.” He tapped quickly into his phone.

“On to more important matters,” Bob muttered. “Could we get some food delivered? I missed out on my seeds at the restaurant, and I’m wasting away. Look, you can nearly see bone.”

True. Skye hadn’t finished her noodles, and Zephyra hadn’t touched her food at all. Total waste of good food. Not to mention, Fred needed sustenance to aid his recovery.

Without any further prompting, Seb called reception.

“Lilith said they’re still scouting for the perfect location,” Fred said, looking up from his phone. “So she won’t be able to tell me until much later.”

“I call balderdash,” Bob declared. “If that isn’t suspicious with a capital S, I’ll trade in my feathers for a broomstick.”

Fred stared at the ceiling for a moment, fingers poised mid-air as if weighing his next move. Then, with a few decisive taps, he sent off a message.

A ping followed. He grinned, replied, waited—another ping. Two more exchanges, rapid-fire. Then he looked up, eyes gleaming, the very picture of smug triumph.

“Sandra says they’re likely to meet at Empress Falls. Apparently, that’s where the ley lines converge, and the water helps amplify the ritual.”

“How did you get that out of her?” Zephyra asked. “Did you offer her your firstborn?”

“Nothing so gauche, I assure you,” Fred replied with a grin. “I simply expressed my regret over the earlier interruption of our little tête-à-tête and said I looked forward to seeing her tomorrow.”

“And that got her to tell you the location?” Skye asked, one brow raised.

Seb chuckled. “Let me guess. You told her you hoped the two of you could go somewhere... private after the ritual?”

“Exactly,” Fred said, looking far too pleased with himself. “And asked if there were any discreet options nearby she could recommend.”

“Oh, my stars,” Bob squawked. “Our very own honeypot. Someone fetch him a sash and a tiara—Fred, Queen of Subtle Seduction.”

“What is a honeypot?” Zephyra asked, frowning, clearly unimpressed with the direction of the conversation.

Fred coughed delicately, smoothing an invisible crease on his trousers. “It’s a term used when someone uses attraction or charm to draw out information or lure a target into a trap. Strictly professional, of course.”

Zephyra’s frown deepened. “And you’re doing that with *her*?”

“I promise,” Fred said, flashing a disarming smile, “that my own seduction techniques—when I’m genuinely interested—are far more elegant, artful, and involve significantly fewer antique clocks.”

The knock at the door came as Zephyra blinked rapidly.

A hotel staff wheeled in a trolley laden with fragrant dishes—steaming rice, garlic naan bread, and a curry that made Bob audibly sigh.

They gathered around the coffee table, Fred now fully animated. Zephyra sat on the edge of her chair, foot tapping in an uneven rhythm.

As they ate, they went over the plan. Again.

“The meeting’s set for midnight,” Fred said, stabbing a tofu square with what might’ve been unnecessary vigour. “Because of course it is.”

“Well,” Skye allowed, tearing a piece of hot naan, “that is when the moon hits its highest point and there’s less chance of tourists wandering into a magical circle.”

“Empress Falls isn’t far from the Conservation Hut car park,” Seb added. “Forty-five minutes’ walk depending on pace. It’s steep in parts, and there’s only one access point. Good for privacy... terrible for tactical retreats.”

“And what if it’s a trap?” Skye asked, setting the bread on her plate. “What if they’ve fed you a fake location?”

“They’ll have to give us enough notice to get there,” Fred said. “So worst case, we call it off.”

Zephyra crossed her arms, and her foot tapped faster.

Seb’s expression darkened like a gathering storm. “I’m not risking Skye’s safety.”

“Should we ask if the fifth member’s going to be there?” Zephyra asked.

Shaking his head, Fred typed into his phone. “No. That would make them more suspicious. We play it light. Casual curiosity, not interrogation.”

Zephyra looked unconvinced. She didn’t speak again, but her clenched jaw said enough. Nervous. Impatient. Maybe even afraid.

“They want my money,” Fred reminded her gently. “And money’s a powerful motivator.”

“There’s another tiny matter,” Bob said, hopping from the armchair to the table, where he eyed the rice bowl with longing.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“Tonight’s nearly the full moon,” he said, fluffing his feathers. “It could be that Boreas takes his chances and attempts to activate a magical artefact. Like, oh... a realm-destruction dagger.”

Skye’s stomach flipped. “Surely they wouldn’t try something with us there?” she asked.

“Well,” Bob said, with a pointed blink, “not unless one of you is a sacrifice.”

Fred, mid-sip, choked and sprayed tea onto the edge of the table. “*Sacrifice?*”

Seb wiped his mouth with a napkin and said drily, “Oh, you know, ancient style rituals where someone usually ends up slightly dead.” He looked at Fred. “You would hate the robes.”

Fred grimaced. “Is that... actually a thing?”

“Yep,” Bob said cheerfully. “Frowned upon, of course—bit old-fashioned—but a very effective way to work around a not-quite-full moon.”

“Why not wait?” Fred asked, his voice climbing a little.

“The pressure,” Seb said, lacing his fingers behind his head. “Zephyra’s closing in, and Boreas knows it’s only a matter of time before she finds him.”

“And he knows he can’t beat me in a magic duel,” Zephyra added.

“Except he’s got the dagger,” Bob said. “Which is like turning up to a toy wand fight with a storm-forged blade and no manners.”

Zephyra lifted her chin, the picture of someone who’d done the maths and come out ahead. “Only if he can get close enough.”

“Well, for the record, my money’s on you,” Fred said, sounding far too casual as he resumed eating, his appetite apparently restored.

Zephyra tossed her hair back with a spark of amusement. “Thank you. However, once I start fighting, how exactly do you plan to protect yourself?”

Fred placed a hand over his heart. “Are you saying you’ll be protecting me until then? I’m touched. Although you’ve already saved my life once. Any more, and my ego might never recover.”

Bob let out a sharp chirp. “When it comes down to ego or intact skin, go with skin. Every time.”

*Very true.* Skye savoured the duck and lychee curry, the burst of sweetness and heat stimulating her senses. “I can activate a magical barrier around myself and Fred in under a second.”

“Like the cage you built to contain the sylph?” Seb asked, tugging a stray curl behind Skye’s ear. “That was impressive work.”

“Thank you,” Skye replied, lowering her gaze. “I’ve been refining that barrier for a while now.”

The design had proven effective against a certain female vampire a few months back—though Skye worried it might not withstand a sustained magical assault. Those were becoming annoyingly frequent.

Excitement, Skye decided, was highly overrated.

Then again, it had brought Seb into her life... or maybe she’d crashed into his?

Okay, if she was being honest with herself, she had to admit she liked the chase. The puzzle, the risk and even the danger that shadowed every clue.

More than liked it—she thrived on it. The challenges pushed her, sharpened her edges. Her inventions flourished under pressure. Her magic, including the air magic she rarely acknowledged, grew stronger with each test.

She picked at a lychee. “Funnily enough, I got the reinforcement ideas from that magic trap I tripped, and from talking with Wilma and Logan.”

A quiet ping echoed at the back of her mind—an alert from her internal system. Something anomalous. It would need decrypting before she shared it with the others.

Part of the problem was that she kept resisting the working hypothesis. But she couldn’t afford to let instinct override logic. Besides, there could be a number of other equally suitable explanations. For example—

A kiss landed softly on her lips, derailing the thought mid-process. Seb leaned back with a grin that could short-circuit processors.

"I did it again, didn't I?" Skye muttered, blinking back into focus.

"If by *it*," Fred said, reaching for more rice, "you mean zoning out into your own personal code cave, then yes."

"She used to do that as a kid," Zephyra said. "It took a firm shaking to bring her back."

"Singing loudly and off-key sometimes works, too," Bob added.

Seb smirked. "My method is a significantly more pleasant approach. Rather reliable as well."

And his method didn't bother her. Not one bit.

Kissing her again for good measure, Seb whispered, "Feel free to retreat into that brilliant mind of yours anytime. We'll just have to test which kisses bring you back the quickest."

The spark in his eyes was a vortex Skye could happily fall into.

Fred's exaggerated yawn tugged her reluctantly out of the moment. He'd taken quite the beating tonight, and while Grandma's potions worked miracles, nothing beat actual rest.

Skye pressed one last kiss to Seb's lips—because really, fair was fair—and felt a thrill at the grin he gave in return.

"We can do more planning in the morning," she said, rising. "Right now, sleep sounds like the best kind of magic."

"Agreed," Seb said, standing as well. "I'll use the quiet to scout the area tonight."

Skye blinked. "But it's dark, wet, and freezing out." She stopped, realisation dawning.

*Right. Vampire.*

He probably saw like an owl, moved like a shadow, and felt temperature like a theory.

She made a mental note to add that to her ever-growing list of Seb-related mysteries. It was already long enough to crash a poorly indexed database.

Seb cupped her cheek, his touch warm. "It's sweet that you worry about me," he said with a crooked smile. "But I'm practically indestructible."

Well, except for decapitation and staking... but now didn't seem the time to bring up classic vampire vulnerabilities. He'd be fine. He'd been around for long enough.

"Great idea," Bob said, fluffing his feathers. "I'll tag along. An aerial sweep might catch something your ground-level inspection misses."

"I could always send a drone," Skye offered, narrowing her eyes. She'd fully intended to drill Bob about his expanding repertoire of powers tonight, but the sneaky magpie was conveniently making himself scarce.

"Pfft," Bob scoffed. "Drones don't have the finely tuned grey cells housed in this magnificent avian head. Highly developed, they are." He fluttered up and landed on Seb's shoulder with the self-importance of a general reporting for duty.

Skye opened her mouth to argue, but exhaustion tugged at her limbs, and Zephyra, whose clenched jaw and sagging shoulders said more than words ever could, looked as drained.

Rest would have to come first.

She wasn't letting go of the mystery. Bob was stalling, and he knew it. The real question was: what secret was he so desperate to keep hidden from *her*? Because she was almost certain Zephyra knew what it was.

## CHAPTER 28

Seb and Bob disappeared into the lift with quiet murmurs. Leaving Fred comfortably settled, Zephyra and Skye headed to their suite.

The moment the door closed behind them, Skye drew breath to press her sister about Bob, but Zephyra got in ahead of her.

“What’s the story with Fred?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

Tiredness weighed on Skye’s shoulders, and the question had landed like a misfired spell, derailing her thoughts. She needed a second to re-calibrate.

Zephyra tilted her head back to study the ceiling, as though the right phrasing might descend from above. Then, her unwavering gaze returned.

“When did you two meet?”

That wasn’t the real question. Skye recognised the pattern instantly—Zephyra’s tone, the phrasing, the casual delivery. It was a behavioural feint. The kind someone used when they already had a working theory and were looking to see if the answer confirmed it.

She trudged deeper into the room and dropped cross-legged onto the couch, rubbing at her temple. Zephyra might have changed over the years, but the core traits remained. The sister Skye remembered never let go of a question once she’d sunk her claws into it.

*And isn’t that disturbingly familiar?*

Skye grimaced. Maybe Bob had a point, and she and her sister did share more than blood.

“We met two years ago,” she said finally, the words shaped around fatigue and resignation. “We have a fun group.”

It had actually been Jimmy who’d broken the ice. He, Luna, and Fred had been doing parkour in a tucked-away park—vaults, flips, mid-air twists—and

Skye had lingered longer than she should have to observe them.

The movement had fascinated her—unpredictable yet fluid, all timing and instinct. Like watching a living algorithm adapt in real time. There was something beautiful in the way the body calculated force and trajectory mid-leap, how Fred and Jimmy became a blur of motion and grace.

No spells. No gear. Physics and momentum, bending the world by daring to trust their own calculations.

And Skye had always loved problem-solving in motion.

“He cares about you,” Zephyra said softly.

“I care about him too,” Skye replied. “He’s my best friend.”

Was that true? When had she decided that? Dina, Jimmy, and Luna were close friends, no doubt—but Fred had persistently nudged his way through her defences. He’d dragged her out shopping for clothes she didn’t know she had to have, offered earnest love advice, and made her laugh when she needed it most. Wasn’t that the very definition of a best friend?

Zephyra let out a loud sigh, but a fond smile tugged at her lips. “Still clueless, I see.”

But Skye wasn’t. Not really.

She might have to reason her way through people’s behaviour—especially when their words and actions danced in opposite directions—but she’d spent years training her observation skills.

The way someone held their shoulders when lying, the brief flicker of tension around the mouth, the micro-hesitation before a half-truth. She’d become fluent in reading subtext the same way she read code—line by line, pattern by pattern.

And Fred? She liked him. A lot. Maybe loved him, in the way one might love a brother. But romantically? Not once. Not even before Seb. And Seb... well, he had somehow taken up permanent residence in both her heart and mind.

Still, she understood why Zephyra was asking. What puzzled her was the context and probabilities of success.

Zephyra would be returning to Fairyland once they sorted out this mess. *If* they sorted it.

*When*, she told herself firmly.

Skye didn't allow for failure, not on this. But if her sister was thinking of forming attachments...

She needed clarity, so she went for blunt.

"Fred and I have always been just friends," Skye said. "He'll make a great boyfriend for some lucky woman one day. The real question is—why are you asking?"

Zephyra tilted her head, coyness sliding into place like a mask—shoulders loose, a little smile playing at her lips. "Curious, that's all."

Skye clicked her fingers. "As Bob so eloquently put it, balderdash!"

That drew a laugh. "Okay, fine. He's... different from the other males I've met. Kind. Smart. Funny without being smug or cruel. He's *interesting*, and he doesn't look at me like I'm dangerous or something wild that needs taming."

"But you're going back," Skye said.

Zephyra's smile faltered. She turned away and crossed to the window, drawing the curtains shut with a sharp *whoosh*.

"I know," she said quietly. "Let's go to bed. We've got more important things to deal with."

On that, Skye could agree.

\* \* \*

The text message revealing the meeting point didn't arrive until nine that evening.

Skye frowned at the screen. Did that confirm the coven suspected them? Possibly.

But as Seb had drily pointed out, if they truly expected a trap, they'd have waited until closer to eleven—keep everyone on edge, leave no time for preparation.

Fred had agreed, adding that the late message was likely just theatre. After all, when charging a client a small fortune, you had to deliver drama along with the magic.

The remnants of dinner cluttered the coffee table—empty takeaway containers stacked haphazardly, crumpled napkins shoved aside, and a half-

eaten bowl of peanut sauce listing dangerously as its spoon slid to one edge. Bob pecked at a rogue cashew with great indignation, as if it had personally offended his standards.

Earlier, Skye had prepped her drone and launched it.

Zephyra had eyed the contraption with scepticism, pointing out it could be spotted easily. But Skye had countered with two points. First, drones were so common now they barely raised eyebrows. Second, she'd been testing a visibility-bending upgrade—a tech-magic hybrid using refractive enchantments and mirror-thread wiring to scatter light and blur the drone into its surroundings. Not true invisibility, but close enough to fool a casual glance.

A projection of the terrain shimmered across one of the suite's walls, images captured by Skye's drone. Under her long-distance guidance, it had swept through the area around Empress Falls, capturing high-resolution visuals now stitched together in a three-dimensional overlay.

Seb stood beside the projection, pointing out approach angles and fallback points while highlighting where he and Zephyra would conceal themselves.

They'd both already changed into camouflage gear: muted greys and forest greens blended into shadow. The tactical harness strapped across Seb's chest didn't do anything to hide how absurdly good he looked in it.

Skye tried not to gawp at him... and mostly failed.

Lounging on an armchair he'd repositioned for optimal viewing, Fred stretched out his legs. He cast a brief appraising glance in Zephyra's direction. If she noticed, she gave no sign. Her posture remained regal, her focus sharp. But Skye didn't miss the faint uptick at the corner of her sister's mouth.

"These are quite comfortable," Zephyra said, smoothing her palm over the fabric.

Bob coughed loudly and flew to perch at the back of Fred's chair. "If you're all done ogling each other, some of us would like to get on with saving the world."

Seb nodded. "Time for Zephyra and me to get into position." In two long strides, he closed the distance between him and Skye, slid an arm around her waist, and pulled her into a long, searing kiss.

He'd been doing that more often lately—in front of others, without hesitation—and Skye couldn't help but wonder if there was an unspoken message tucked into each kiss.

Not that she was complaining. Especially not when his lips met hers with such hunger that the world narrowed to the warmth of his touch and the wild flutter of her pulse. When he finally stepped back, Skye drew a sharp breath—more habit than necessity, but the rush of air felt earned after that kiss.

“Please look after yourself,” he murmured. “If anything goes wrong—even if you only suspect—”

Skye pressed a finger to his lips. “We all have earpieces. Fred and I have camera coverage as well. You'll hear and see everything. It'll be fine.”

The plan wasn't elaborate—wait for Boreas to join the circle, let the coven become distracted by the ritual, and move in.

Zephyra and Seb would flank and incapacitate him. Zephyra hadn't elaborated on the how.

Skye's job was containment: shield them against magical interference from the coven.

Once Boreas was in custody and the dagger secured, Seb's presence should intimidate the rest into submission.

*A sound plan, right?*

So why did she feel that creeping static of dread skimming her skin like a storm about to short-circuit the grid? Maybe it was the unpredictability of people's behaviour.

Or maybe because plans rarely survived contact with reality.

Skye hadn't forgotten one of the witches was a murderer. Her wards would guard against both spell and blade—long enough, she hoped, for Seb to step in and back her up. And as for the identity of that murderer... Skye had a theory now. Sandra, with her disingenuous remark, had given her the second clue... if she'd interpreted it correctly.

Tonight would confirm it.

Seb cupped Skye's cheek one last time before turning and disappearing through the door. Zephyra, with Bob on her shoulder, was right behind him.

Fred and Skye had also changed. In their case, into hiking gear, with layers chosen for warmth and movement. Fred wore a charcoal fleece over a merino

base layer.

Skye had tugged on a navy jumper—no way was she risking her rose one again. And yes, Seb had already sourced her an identical replacement.

Jackets, gloves and beanies lay stacked on the console table by the door.

Saying nothing, Skye rose and checked the brooch pinned at the collar of both their jackets. A last-minute addition, it pulsed with a steady glow when activated—enough illumination to make navigating the rocky path down to the falls safer.

The hike wouldn't be easy. The night promised wintry winds and treacherous footing.

But they were ready—or as ready as anyone could be when attending a midnight ritual that featured a murderer on the guest list and a power-hungry sylph with delusions of grandeur.

Half an hour later, Fred and Skye were dropped off at the start of the trail to Empress Falls.

The moon peeked out from behind a bank of low, brooding clouds—heavy with the promise of rain, or possibly hail—and Skye tugged her jacket's zipper up higher.

They set off, boots crunching against gravel and the occasional slosh of pooled water disturbing the quiet.

"You know who murdered Tess, don't you?" Fred asked, his voice casual.

Skye shot him a sidelong glance.

"No," she said, not breaking stride.

Up here, the path was still wide, and the walking relatively easy.

"But you have a suspect," he persisted, matching her pace with ease.

"Yes."

A puff of breath turned to mist as she spoke, the cold biting at her lips. Even voicing that much seemed to freeze her tongue.

Fred chuckled.

Ahead, the terrain changed. Rocks poked up unevenly from the trail, mud-filled potholes dotted their way, and the path narrowed.

They moved closer together, shoulder to shoulder now.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" Fred said, half amused, half resigned.

Skye lifted one shoulder. She never liked sharing her analysis before it was properly tested, and in this case, she still needed one more thread to tie everything together.

“Tess was killed by death cap mushrooms,” she said.

And that was the main clue.

Around them, the bush whispered with the soft rustle of possums in the trees and the occasional distant hoot of a boobook owl. Crickets chirped in a steady rhythm, a night-time metronome, and something small skittered through the undergrowth just off the path. The damp leaves underfoot squelched with each step, mingling with the rustle of wind through the tree branches and the odd snap of a twig.

“Fine,” Fred said with mock drama. “I’ll wait for the grand unveiling like everyone else.” But the humour drained from his face as he glanced over his shoulder. “Do you think they’re waiting for us down there... or herding us?”

“It’s all right,” Skye said. “For starters, reception down there is practically non-existent. That message you got with the location would’ve been sent before they made the descent.”

She hopped over a wide puddle, landing cleanly. Fred followed, equally graceful. Who’d have guessed parkour skills would double as bushwalking credentials?

“I also have a drone tracking us and our back trail.”

She tilted her head upwards. Fred mirrored the gesture but saw nothing. The cloud cover veiled the night sky, a fact that conveniently also helped shield her surveillance.

“No one’s following us.”

The drone had been a precaution, but in Skye’s book, the scouts had it right: hope for the best, prepare for the worst.

They finally reached the base of the trail, where slick rocks jutted from the moss-laced ground like the broken teeth of a long-dead beast. The air grew thick with humidity, wrapping around them like wet wool. Mist clung to their jackets, and the roar of the falls pounded a steady rhythm into the air, a low, relentless thunder that echoed off the rock walls.

Along the ledges to their left, four figures stood cloaked in deep black. The fabric shimmered in the unnatural light, as if warded or enchanted. Some of

their hoods hung back, revealing shadowed faces lit by the flickering blaze of a magical fire. It sat on the stone, untethered, its flames a pale blue-white that gave off no smoke, only light, and it made Skye's skin prickle.

All four witches turned in eerie unison to watch Skye and Fred approach.

## CHAPTER 29

Only four witches?

Disappointment flickered through Skye, sharp and unwelcome. This had better not be a bust.

Fred, unbothered as always, lifted a hand in cheerful greeting. “Love the atmospheric tone,” he said. “Extra points for intimidation, too.”

A soft giggle broke the silence, and Sandra lowered her hood. Her long hair tumbled over her shoulders, and a delicate silver diadem glinted on her forehead.

“Hi, Fred,” she said, beaming.

Skye noted, and deliberately ignored, the absence of a greeting in her direction.

“Hello, darling Sandra,” Fred replied smoothly.

“Hi, Skye.” The deep baritone came from one of the hooded figures who didn’t bother revealing himself. He didn’t have to. The voice, the broad shoulders, the amused tilt of his head—it could only be Logan.

“Hi, Logan,” Skye returned.

“So,” Fred said, clasping his hands. “Are we ready?” His gaze swept the ledges, pausing at the deeper shadows.

He wasn’t asking outright, but it was clear he’d clocked what Skye had—the missing fifth. And if Boreas didn’t show, this entire evening could unravel.

Not that it would be a waste. Skye still intended to unmask a murderer. But Boreas was part of that picture, and without him, the next move became murky. The trail could vanish.

As if picking up on the unspoken tension, Wilma tilted her chin and spoke. “Our fifth member is running late,” she said coolly.

Her eyes slid left towards Lilith, who gave the barest, sharpest nod.

Aha!

A sudden draught surged, whipping around Skye and Fred's ankles and fluttering their jackets. Skye narrowed her eyes. That wasn't natural.

Drawing on Bob's recent air magic lessons, she pushed her tech magic to a finer level—less brute force, more nuance. Her bracelet pulsed with a soft glow as she activated a layered weave of encoded wind signatures and motion-triggered deflection spells. It was like reprogramming the air itself, wrapping it in a sheath of digital camouflage and static filters.

Because that breeze? It carried power.

Boreas was nearby. Watching. Judging. Deciding whether to make an entrance.

If he even sensed her air magic...

Skye held her breath.

A few wayward curls lifted from her face, tangling in the wind's play. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Oh, perfect. Boreas was showing off.

Having set the stage, he descended from a tall blue mountain ash tree in a controlled drop.

No black coven robes for him.

Of course not. Boreas had opted for full fae regalia: a flowing cloak of winter-white silk that shimmered under the moonlight, embroidered with icy blue threads in the shape of windswept runes and twirling gusts. The high collar framed his angular jaw, and the hood hung back to reveal his artfully tousled dark hair. His piercing blue eyes swept the area like he was expecting applause.

Typical.

He stepped forward with all the gravitas of a self-proclaimed prince. His gaze drifted lazily over Skye—and then lingered. A smirk curved his mouth, equal parts leery and smug.

Ugh. That smirk. That posture. Skye knew exactly what it meant. Boreas still thought himself irresistible to women. She fought the urge to snort.

What had Zephyra *ever* seen in him?

Skye allowed herself a small smile. Boreas straightened, puffing up like a rooster.

Excellent. Because the joke was on him. Not only had he failed to recognise her—*Skye*—he'd completely missed her air magical signature. To be fair, she wasn't the same pigtailed girl he'd last seen. The one with too-wide eyes and a tendency to trip over her words.

No, this was a new grown-up Skye. And she had tech-boosted air magic and backup in the shadows.

His attention slid to Fred next, and the disdain was almost tangible. His jaw twitched, nostrils flared. Skye didn't need to read minds to know what he thought of the "human client."

Boreas offered a curt nod, his face shifting into polite neutrality.

Yeah, right. Skye smirked. Whatever had convinced Boreas to show up, it was only to serve his own agenda. And that might mean using one of them as a sacrifice for the ritual. Skye winced.

Surely, the coven wouldn't stand for that?

Her gaze dropped, drawn to the hilt glinting at Boreas's side. The dagger. Nestled in an ornate sheath clipped to his belt, its presence sent a pulse of tension through her fingertips. Her hands twitched, aching to lunge for it. But no, too risky. She was close, yes, but not close enough. If she moved now, he'd stop her.

She had to trust Seb and Zephyra. When the moment came, they'd strike.

Lilith stepped forward. Her hair had been woven into an intricate crown braid, every strand in place. She reached for Boreas's hand, and the gesture was unmistakably intimate.

Boreas accepted it with a courtly bow, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. But even as his lips brushed her skin, his eyes flicked sideways, straight to Skye.

Wilma cleared her throat, the sound cutting clean through the murmur of the falls.

"Fred, please step into the centre of the circle."

A queasy tension settled low in her belly. Her mouth opened, then shut again. What could she say? That she had a bad feeling? That the setup reeked of theatre and sacrifice?

Fred arched a brow and glanced at Skye. "What is it with witches and circles? Not enough corners for drama?"

Then, without waiting for permission or protest, he strode forward, hands in his pockets, his walk all careless ease.

Skye's eyes swept over the coven as Wilma raised her arms and began to chant. The words were old and rhythmic, like wind hissing through cracks in ancient stone. As she spoke, Skye's senses sharpened.

Magic thickened in the air.

A fog gathered at ankle height and spiralled upward. It coiled like mist-soaked ribbon, drawn into the sigils etched on the circle, pulsing with a soft blue light.

Each syllable of Wilma's incantation tugged at the threads of power, weaving them tighter around Fred like a net she couldn't yet see, but could definitely feel.

Skye shifted her weight, fingers brushing the smooth surface of her smartwatch.

The witches didn't join hands, but they moved closer, their black robes brushing as they tightened the circle. Enough to obscure Skye's view of Fred.

A knot twisted in her stomach. Her pulse drummed fast and loud. Clammy hands defied the cool mountain air, and the fine hairs along her arms rose with unease.

Their chanting deepened, layered voices weaving through the humid air like the hum of an oncoming storm.

Magic rose in tendrils of pale blue and silver, pulsing in time with the rhythm. The ground itself seemed to breathe.

Fred gasped and cried out, the sound ripped from his lungs like air from a punctured balloon. His body arched, caught in a field of force Skye couldn't see, but felt like static across her skin.

Skye's hand shot up, smartwatch lighting in warning as her spell sequence primed. She was half a second from launching an intervention when a sudden gust of wind exploded behind the coven.

Zephyra landed with the force of a cyclone, arm flung forward. A shockwave of air blasted across the clearing, slamming into Boreas. He was thrown off his feet and landed hard, knees cracking against the rocky ground—his fall clipping Fred and knocking him.

Skye moved, boots crunching over wet stone as she darted forward, throwing out her arm. Glyphs bloomed on her smartwatch in rapid succession, and a protective circle snapped into place around her and Fred. Lines of golden energy scribed themselves into the rock like a 3D printer working at light speed, forming interlocking runes and arcs that pulsed with power.

When she glanced over at Fred to check on him, he gave her a wobbly thumbs-up and a tight grimace, then pushed himself to his feet.

Relief was momentary as Skye took in the witches.

Sandra stood frozen, wide-eyed and unmoving. Logan had an arm around Wilma, holding her back with a tense grip. But Lilith had stepped forward, eyes gleaming.

Seb vaulted into the clearing, hitting the ground in a crouch near where Boreas had landed. Lilith let out a snarl and sprang forward, fingers twitching as she hurled a flurry of small glass vials. They exploded, releasing plumes of acrid smoke and splashes of glowing green liquid. One struck Seb across the chest, hissing on contact and burning through the fabric with an angry sizzle.

Seb winced but held firm. In a blur, he caught Lilith's wrist mid-swing and turned, using her own momentum to wrench her off balance and drive her to the ground in a swift, controlled takedown.

Skye's fingers twitched. If she let go of the circle to help him or Zephyra, she'd leave Fred and herself unprotected.

Boreas surged to his feet, wind swirling violently around him. With a sharp click of his fingers, he sent a spear of compressed air hurtling towards Zephyra. She struck back hard, her magic lashing out like a whip. It carved through his spell, knocking it wide, and hurled leaves and grit into the air in a stinging whirlwind.

They faced off, wind cracking in sharp, invisible lashes between them. Zephyra launched another whip of air towards his ankles. He leapt, light on his feet, retaliating with a concussive blast that she barely dodged.

Half-propped on one elbow in the dirt, Lilith hurled another potion—glass glinting like a comet. An arc of fire burst, licking the air in front of Seb with a roar. He shielded his face, the flames throwing shadows across his grim expression.

Shaking off Logan, Wilma stepped forward, purpose etched in every line of her face, her eyes sharp with gathering resolve—only for Bob to dive at her in a flurry of wings and indignant squawking, forcing her to stumble back with a startled gasp.

Skye made a snap decision.

Her fingers flew along her smartwatch interface, magic rising off it like tensioned wire.

As Skye redirected her spell, the protective barrier that had encased her and Fred peeled away like molten glass and surged outward. It curved sharply, reshaping itself mid-air before snapping into place around Wilma, Sandra, and Logan, forming a containment dome. The spell snapped with a metallic clang, trapping them in place.

Skye's breath came hard. "You're not joining the party," she said, meeting Wilma's furious stare head-on.

Boreas and Zephyra circled each other, both panting, eyes locked.

Zephyra's foot slipped on the wet rock.

It was only a fraction of a second, but it was enough.

Boreas' blast struck Zephyra square in the chest, sending her flying back into a jagged outcrop. She crumpled to the ground, stunned, her breaths shallow and fast.

From above, a streak of black and silver cut through the air. Bob dive-bombed Boreas with a war cry that would have impressed a cockatoo on espresso. But Boreas made a flipping gesture without even looking. A burst of compressed wind magic hit Bob mid-flight, flinging him into a bush.

As Zephyra pushed herself onto her elbows, dazed, Boreas strode forward, unsheathing the dagger. Its crescent-moon pommel gleamed coldly in the moonlight, the air around it vibrating with unnatural pressure like the moment before a lightning strike.

Skye split her focus, channelling water from the nearby pool to douse the flames threatening Seb while simultaneously sprinting towards her sister.

Fred beat her to it, hefting a sizeable rock and bringing it down—unceremoniously and with impressive force—onto Boreas. The sylph crumpled in a heap, the dagger slipping from his hand with a dull thud.

With her sister now safe, Skye skidded to a halt, breath catching. She spun to help Seb—only to pause again as she spotted him returning to the circle, one arm firmly around an unresisting Lilith.

Lilith's body moved with jerky, stuttering steps, like a puppet caught between strings. Her eyes, though, blazed with crimson rage.

Skye's stomach flipped. Seb was overriding her body but letting her remain aware through it.

She'd read about vampire mind control, which their PR firms insisted was more rumour than truth. But this? This was sophisticated, potent. And disturbing.

She shivered, understanding his reasoning, but nonetheless troubled by it. Yet for what came next, they needed every coven member present.

She turned back towards the circle.

Logan stood with arms crossed, shoulders tight, eyes narrowed with barely contained tension. Sandra's brow furrowed, her lips parted in silent disbelief, as if the scene refused to make sense. But Wilma... Wilma's stare burned like a brand. Her jaw was clenched so tight Skye half-expected to hear bone creak.

Skye checked the magical barrier—still holding. She let out a long breath.

"I'm fine," Bob squawked as he fluttered down to land on her shoulder. "No need to worry about me. Just a minor detour into a shrub."

Fred appeared, steadying a wobbly Zephyra. Skye was relieved to see her upright, if a little pale.

"This is your show, Firefly," Seb said, pushing a scowling Lilith forward. Skye saw the movement in time and parted the shield with a wave of her hand, sealing it again the moment Lilith crossed the threshold.

Skye's gaze swept across the coven. "You've aided and abetted a thief who intended to tear holes in the barriers between worlds."

She pointed straight at Boreas. He hadn't stirred, and Skye lowered the drone to watch over him, ready to zap at the slightest bit of movement.

"That's a lie!" Lilith snapped.

Her raw voice carried the bite of someone who'd been waiting to unleash it. Seb must have loosened his hold.

Wilma's chin rose sharply. "Boreas is our ally, not our enemy. I don't believe you."

“Then perhaps you might believe our word,” said a cool, authoritative voice from the shadows to their left.

Six enforcers emerged from the underbrush, their uniforms decorated with silver glyphs.

Skye’s heart skipped a beat. *Six*. They weren’t taking any chances this time, and Zephyra was too weak to put up much of a fight.

The air stirred with eddies, reacting to the sylphs’ latent power. At the front stood the same female leader from before—tall, unsmiling, and watchful, her silver pauldrons catching the moonlight like a warning.

“Well, well,” Bob muttered. “The cavalry arrives. A bit late for dramatic effect, but hey, fashionably late is still a thing.”

“Guardian,” the leader said, offering a small bow in his direction.

Skye blinked. *Wait—what?*

“They killed him!” Lilith shrieked, pointing at Boreas sprawled on the rocks.

One of the sylphs stepped forward, knelt beside him, and pressed two fingers to his neck. A breeze swirled on her palm, blue sparkles through it. She nodded. “He yet lives. With the care of a healer, he shall recover. The injury is no more than a concussion.”

“Bind him,” the leader ordered.

Tendrils of wind wove themselves into cords in the sylph’s hands and wrapped around Boreas’ wrists with a hiss.

“Those will cancel his magic if he wakes up,” Bob whispered. “Not that he’s likely to. Fred really walloped him. Honestly, I’ve seen piñatas go out with more dignity.”

The same sylph shut her eyes, and a current of air gathered Boreas up like a weighted blanket. He drifted behind her, bobbing as she rejoined the others.

“Zephyra,” the leader said.

Skye tensed, magic coiling beneath her skin as she nudged her drone closer.

Seb looked relaxed, but she knew he was ready. If they tried anything, he’d be faster than a thought.

“You are requested to accompany us,” the leader continued, “that you may bear witness to the treason committed by Boreas and provide testimony

regarding your involvement.”

Zephyra lifted her chin. “Of course.”

“You don’t have to go,” Skye blurted.

Crossing the rocky ground with care, Zephyra reached for Skye but then let her hand drop. She offered her a crooked smile. “It’ll be fine.”

The leader cleared her throat. “The diviner has spoken. This is a cooperation request, not a charge.”

Bob gave one of Skye’s curls a yank. “Yep, all good. Might cop a slap on the wrist. But you know—stupidity is the domain of the young.”

Skye shot him a look. “You don’t say, *Guardian*.”

“Oops,” Bob said.

Zephyra turned to Fred, eyes soft.

“Thank you for saving me,” she said.

Fred gave a modest bow. “My pleasure, Sugarstorm.”

Behind the enforcers, the air shimmered, twisting before forming a pale-blue vortex.

Leaves fluttered at the sudden pull of air as the portal stabilised. Wide enough for a procession, it hummed with restrained energy.

Without another word, the sylphs stepped through, Boreas between them. Zephyra glanced back once, then followed.

The portal snapped shut with a crisp *crack*, like a book closing on a chapter not quite finished.

Bob chirped into the ensuing heavy silence. “Honestly. Portals are not slap-and-dash magic. Bit of finesse wouldn’t go astray. What *do* they teach them these days?”

## CHAPTER 30

After one last glance at where the portal had closed, Skye turned towards the witches.

Sandra stood frozen, mouth ajar, eyes wide. Logan hadn't moved; his hood still shadowed his face, and he held so still he could have passed for a forgotten effigy in a haunted garden.

A pity—Skye was dying to see his reaction. Wilma's fury had dimmed to a simmer, but Lilith radiated pure, unfiltered loathing.

"Right," Skye said crisply. "Shall we talk about who set the trap that nearly killed me?"

A gasp followed. Skye wasn't sure if it came from Sandra or Logan.

"That trap was for the sylph," Wilma said, her voice tight.

"Shame it didn't do its job," Lilith muttered, venom dripping from every word.

"We thought she was a murderer tracking Boreas," Wilma added, rolling her shoulders back. Tension bristled at the edges of her posture, and something darker flickered behind her eyes. "You can't blame us for acting in self-defence. The triggers were carefully calibrated." She threw a sharp look at Sandra, who flinched as if struck.

"I would have thought," Fred said mildly, "that at minimum you'd verify the truth of Boreas' claims before nearly committing murder."

"Indeed," Seb added coolly. "I rather doubt the High Witch will find your reasoning compelling."

Wilma blanched. "There's no need to involve the High Witch." Desperation threaded through her voice like a curse woven into silk.

"No need?" Skye's brows lifted. "You mean aside from the part where you sealed me in a barrier laced with lethal intent?"

Logan shifted, stepping back.

*Noted and logged.*

"We didn't try to kill you," Wilma said, too quickly. "Just the sylph."

"You mean *my sister*?" Skye asked.

Wilma's hands flew to her throat.

Then Logan's voice rang out, sharp and clear. "You used *my* containment magic for that?"

Wilma turned to him, chin high, imperious once more. "I told you we needed to trap an intruder."

"Trap, not kill," he ground out.

"The coven comes first," she shot back.

"What did he offer you?" Logan's hands clenched at the edges of his hood, knuckles white as he yanked it back. His jaw was rigid, lips pressed tight, and his eyes burned with a stunned intensity. "Gold? Power? What was it?"

Wilma stayed silent.

Lilith exploded. "He was going to make me his, you idiot!" she screeched. "I would have been a fairy princess!"

*Ah. There it is.*

"Which is why you murdered Tess," Skye said.

This time, all three witches turned to stare at Lilith.

She tossed her hair back, chin lifting. "You're fishing," she said, though a calculating look passed behind her eyes.

"Tess was poisoned," Skye went on. "With death cap mushrooms."

Lilith's jaw tightened. Her teeth caught her lower lip, and for a beat, she said nothing.

"You didn't think the police would figure it out?" Fred asked, his tone dry.

Bob let out a theatrical sigh. "Amateurs. If you're going to murder someone, at least pick a fungus that doesn't have a PR team."

"You poisoned Tess?" Wilma asked, stepping forward.

Her voice dropped to a hiss, thick with menace. Magic crackled along her fingertips—tiny starbursts of green light that pulsed like warning beacons.

Lilith took a step back, her hand slipping into her robes. Magic shimmered around her fingers, and smoky tendrils escaped from her belt.

“Are you threatening me, Wilma?” she said. “Will you kill me, like you tried to kill that sylph?”

“You helped me set that trap.” Wilma’s eyes narrowed. “And you think I didn’t notice your little addition? That transmutation spell was all *you*.”

Lilith smirked as she pulled a small glass vial from her belt. Liquid sloshed inside, glowing violet. “Don’t come any closer.”

Wilma didn’t flinch. “So now you’re ready to kill your own coven leader as well?”

“Will the barrier contain the spells?” Seb whispered to Skye.

Skye nodded, although in truth, she wasn’t certain.

“Tess was stupid,” Lilith said. “She didn’t even question the mushrooms I brought. Watched me cook dinner and didn’t realise I’d made separate portions!”

“She trusted you,” Skye said, but Lilith ignored her.

“Boreas deserved better than her,” Lilith shouted, fingers tightening around the vial.

“But both you and Boreas got sick too,” Sandra said.

Lilith’s head snapped in her direction, her eyes wild. “I gave him a *taste*. Just enough to look convincing. He’s a fae; he was never going to die from it. And me? Easy to fake the symptoms.”

The circle pulsed with magic and tension, and the air spiked with the tang of ozone and betrayal.

Logan raised a hand, as if to intervene, but a gravelly male voice cut through the hush of falling water.

“Thank you for the confession.”

Inspector O’Connor emerged from the shadows, Patel on his heels and a line of officers fanning out behind them. “Should make things a great deal easier for the prosecution.”

Before Lilith could so much as twitch, Wilma’s hand shot forward. Magic flared from her palm in a cascade of silvery sparks, striking Lilith square in the chest. She dropped like a marionette with its strings sliced.

With a flick of her fingers, Skye unravelled the warding circle, letting the police through. By their power signature, the officers were supernaturals. Smart move. Not exactly fair to get a bunch of humans to wrestle down a

furious witch. That was how you ended up with singed eyebrows and a very awkward HR report.

One knelt to check Lilith's pulse while another snapped enchanted cuffs on Wilma's wrists.

"She's fine," Wilma said coolly as the officer helped her to her feet. "I merely prevented her from unleashing deadly magic."

Sandra backed away as a policeman approached her, eyes wide. "You can't arrest us," she protested. "We're witches!"

"Incorrect," Seb said. "You should keep up with the politics. The supernatural unit has full jurisdiction now."

He must've dug deeper into the unit's charter. That explained why he'd suggested having them hide nearby. He'd made the calls, too.

Skye's gaze darted to him. Though his clothes were singed and scorched in patches, the skin beneath was only a little pink. No blisters, no burns. He stood calm and composed as if fireballs were part of his usual Tuesday.

A rush of relief and affection surged through her.

This man read footnotes, legal clauses, and cross-referenced case law *for fun*. And for some utterly ridiculous reason, that made something warm and fluttery unfurl in her chest, like her heart had brewed itself a cup of tea and decided to get comfortable.

In a blur too fast for human reflexes, the officer had cuffs locked around Sandra's wrists. He had to be a shifter.

"I only did what Wilma asked me to," Sandra cried as the officer led her towards the path's stairs, tears streaking down her cheeks.

"But you knew it was a trap, and you likely provided the enhanced aggression spell," Skye said, not willing to accept her excuses.

The ability to manipulate emotions was dangerous, even at the level of suggestion.

Sandra's gaze dropped to the mossy stone at her feet.

It's not like Wilma had held a wand to her chest. Sandra had made a choice. Power shouldn't be unquestioned, and loyalty shouldn't come at the cost of conscience.

A small voice in her mind whispered that maybe she was being too harsh, that her personal dislike might be clouding her judgement. What did she even

know about Sandra's background?

Skye exhaled slowly, the breath misting in the cool night air. In the end, it wasn't her call. The legal system would have to weigh the facts and decide Sandra's guilt.

"I didn't know," Logan said, stepping forward. A policewoman moved to cuff him, and he raised his hands without protest. His eyes found Skye's, silently pleading.

"I believe you," she said after a beat.

Fred bristled, his voice edged with disbelief. "Why? He could've been bluffing when he confronted Wilma." His arms were crossed, his stance tight.

Skye held Logan's gaze but answered Fred's question. "Wilma didn't contradict him," she said, lifting her hand to pause the officer. "And more telling—he didn't dismantle the circle. If he'd been in on it, that would've been his move."

"You're brilliant, Firefly," Seb murmured, admiration softening his tone. "Maybe he knew he didn't stand a chance against you."

Logan's mouth curled into a small smile. "She is. That circle was something else."

"Oh, I don't know," Skye said with a shrug. "But he could have tried. And didn't."

Logan tilted his head. "So, what tipped you off about Lilith? I didn't even know she was interested in Boreas that way."

"Men rarely do notice those kinds of things," Skye said drily.

Fred snorted.

"Most men," she amended, shooting him a sideways glance.

Not that she had any business pointing fingers. Emotional signals were often baffling to her, by design or by habit. She glanced at Seb. Or maybe, sometimes, they were terrifying for entirely different reasons.

"It was Sandra who mentioned Lilith wanted a fairy prince to whisk her away," Skye said. "Which struck me as odd at the time—why not a knight in shining armour?"

"I arrived and left before dinner that night," Logan said slowly, brows knitting. "And so did Sandra. How did you know Lilith was the one who cooked the meal?"

"I didn't," Skye admitted. "But it was the theory that fit best."

Logan barked a laugh.

Skye twirled a loose curl around her finger. "There was an extra fork on the ground and a third plate in the sink. That told me three people ate dinner—but only one died, and another got sick." She paused. "And the kookaburra saw someone helping the sick one away from the house. The clincher? All the plates were different. Possible, sure, but it also gave Lilith the perfect setup. She could dose Tess's plate with the fatal amount, give Boreas a smaller dose, and keep her own clean."

Bob gave a mock gasp. "Murder by mismatched crockery—who knew interior design could be so lethal?"

"To Logan's point, any of them could have done that, though," Fred said.

"True." The underlying question did not offend Skye. Fred was just trying to follow the logic. "But it was Sandra who said she foraged."

Foraging was common among witches, especially green witches who worked with natural magic. Wild herbs, flowers, and yes—mushrooms—were often seen as more potent than cultivated ones. But that potency came with risk. Mushrooms were notoriously tricky; one wrong cap could mean the difference between a healing broth and a deadly brew. And Death Caps? Nearly identical to edible varieties, unless you knew what to look for. Or, in this case, what you were looking to *do*.

The officer darted a glance at her disappearing group and tugged gently at Logan's cuffs. He resisted for a beat, casting one last look at Skye.

"I went to see Tess that night, but left before dinner," Logan said.

*Ah, so he had been the third visitor.* "Will you stay in touch after this mess is sorted?" he asked, almost shyly. "You know... to talk spells and stuff."

Skye nodded, a smile tugging at her lips. "I'd like that."

The policewoman again urged Logan along, and they vanished up the path with the others.

"Well done, Firefly," Seb murmured, pressing a kiss to her temple.

"Thank you." Skye turned to him. "Could you and Fred head off without Bob and me for a bit?"

"Uh oh," Fred said in a singsong voice. "You're in trouble."

"Shut up," Bob muttered. "Think I could bribe you to stay?"

Fred grinned. "Not a chance. You're on your own, mate."

Seb's hand squeezed Skye's once before letting go. "We'll give you space," he said.

Fred gave a jaunty wave, and the two of them headed off down the trail, their voices drifting back for a moment before fading into the hush that followed.

The silence settled like mist between the trees. Skye sat heavily on a mossy rock, the weariness of the night finally catching up to her.

Her voice was almost fragile. "Why did you lie to me about who you are?"

Bob fluttered down beside her, talons clicking against the stone.

"I didn't," he said evenly.

Skye turned a slow, pointed glare on him.

"I *am* a magpie. Have been for a very long time."

"Your favourite form?" she guessed.

"Yes," Bob said simply. "They're clever. Fierce. Loud. A bit shiny-addicted."

"Like you, you mean."

Bob's feathers fluffed, then settled. His voice, when he spoke, had lost its usual quip. "I know you're hurt. And I *was* going to tell you. But then I thought... why ruin our beautiful partnership with honesty?" He glanced at her sideways. "That was a joke. Sort of."

Skye didn't smile.

"Why?" she asked again, softer now. "Why hide that you're a guardian? Why hide... all of it?"

Bob shuffled. "Give the silly bird a moment, would you? Why didn't I tell you? Let's see—fear, pride, poor decision-making, and possibly a touch of ancient trauma. You wanted nothing to do with fairyland, after all."

*True.*

He paused, then added, "Also, dramatic timing. Apparently, I'm a sucker for it."

"Why are you here with *me*, Bob?" Her voice cracked. "How do you know Zephyra?"

Bob studied her face, his own unusually solemn. "Do you know what guardians are?"

The first thing that sprang to mind—*mythical creatures invented by grandmothers to soothe frightened sylph children.*

She shook her head.

Bob looked towards the moon peeking between the clouds. “Guardians are old. Not immortal, but old. We protect the balance between realms—air, earth, magic, all that poetic rubbish. No one tells us what to do, which is great, by the way. We choose.”

He hopped a little closer. “We also choose a companion. Someone to help us fulfil our duties. It was between Zephyra and you.”

“Why me?” Skye asked. “I’m not even a proper sylph.”

“Propriety has nothing to do with it,” Bob said. “You’re special. You command more than one magic, and your honesty and sense of justice override any self-interest.”

He tilted his head. “Also, I really like the shiny things in this world.”

That drew a laugh from Skye, soft but genuine.

“I see,” she said, eyes crinkling at the corners.

Bob hopped closer and nudged her hand with his beak. “Partners?”

Before she could answer, the clouds above thickened, and a delicate snowflake landed on her cheek. She blinked. Snow? Here? Even in the mountains in winter, it wasn’t common.

She tilted her face to the sky, and more flakes followed—cold kisses from the clouds, light as breath.

Skye stood slowly and held out her hand. Bob hopped onto it with alacrity.

“Partners,” she agreed.

# Epilogue

The court case had been held behind closed doors by the Supernatural Council—standard practice when no humans had been harmed.

Technically, anyway. If she didn't count Fred's multitude of bruises and his near-death experience. He'd insisted on skipping the fuss, claiming he'd had his fill of courts, juries, and glacial legal processes to last several lifetimes.

The witches had claimed Fred was never meant to be a sacrifice, merely an anchor for the spell's structure. But that didn't absolve them of all the other charges.

To Skye's relief, Logan had been found not guilty.

Sandra, however, hadn't been so lucky. She had been charged with obstruction of justice and reckless endangerment through magical entrapment—an offence that applied when a spell carried a significant risk of harm, even if the original intent (as she alleged) hadn't been fatal.

Wilma and Lilith had both been found guilty. Wilma of attempted murder, and Lilith of both attempted and actual murder.

The Council sentenced them to long-term magical containment. Worse still, they had been stripped of their powers; a punishment many in the supernatural world considered a fate worse than death.

Magic wasn't something someone simply wielded. For most, it was identity, breath, belonging. Without it, they were shadows of themselves.

Logan had yet to find another coven, so Skye had formed a partnership of sorts with him, bringing him in on a few of her security consulting gigs. He often made the trip into town for their magic workshops and long chats over tea. He had confessed he was thinking about moving closer, but rents in Sydney had a way of crushing dreams, so for now, that plan was on pause.

Better still, Logan and her apprentice Josh had hit it off. Big time.

Sometimes Skye had to pry them apart when they got lost building overly complex magical video games instead of sticking to the lesson plan. And sure, she loved the games, especially the one with the sarcastic elemental fox, but the tech fundamentals had to come first.

Mages didn't have covens, so Bob had dubbed theirs the "Odd Bits Circle."

The trial in Fairyland had moved more slowly, but in the end, Boreas had been found guilty. His father, once a powerful figure in the council, had resigned in disgrace when it came to light he'd helped cover up his son's crimes.

As for Zephyra, she'd received what the fae charmingly called a "featherlight sanction"—a symbolic punishment meant more for appearances than impact.

The actual sentencing had been conducted in utter secrecy. Skye supposed the uncertainty was part of the deterrent—a lingering fear of consequences unknown.

She hadn't heard a word from Zephyra. Not a single message, not even a sarcastic breeze through the window. All her updates came second-hand from Bob or Grandma. And though she told herself it didn't matter, the silence settled like ash in her chest.

\* \* \*

A few weeks later, Seb and Skye sat at her kitchen table, teacups in hand. The atmosphere was easy, warm, and companionable.

They'd just finished discussing the latest update from the High Witch's lab. The experiments to reduce vampire dependence on blood had hit a frustrating snag.

Skye had started working on a solution. So far, nothing had clicked, and the lack of progress gnawed at her. Her foot bounced under the table, thoughts spiralling, mind halfway across three magical schematics.

After patiently watching her for a little while, Seb leaned across and kissed her—a gentle interruption to the chaos behind her eyes. Then he lifted her with an amused grunt and set her firmly on his lap.

In his arms, her thoughts stilled. The tension melted away, replaced by the grounding sensation of his hands at her back, his lips moving slowly over hers. She surrendered to the warmth.

Bob chose that moment to barrel into the kitchen, wings flapping noisily. He'd been twitchy all afternoon, hopping from perch to perch, rearranging the spoons for the third time, and shooting dark looks at the window as if it had personally offended him.

Then the doorbell rang, and Bob startled so hard he nearly toppled backwards off the curtain rod.

"I'll get that," he squawked, recovering with what he clearly thought was dignity and launching himself into the hallway.

"Don't be ridiculous," Skye called, rising from her chair and following.

When she reached the foyer, the front door swung open with a soft *click* of magic, revealing Zephyra.

Dressed in jeans, a snug black T-shirt, a weathered leather jacket, and boots, she looked ready to kick down doors. Her hair might have been tamed into a braid, but her expression still held all the defiance of a thunderstorm.

Tilting her head, Zephyra's gaze dropped to her feet, where a large suitcase rested with dramatic finality.

"Hello, sis," she said casually. "Mind if I stay for a while?"

Before Skye could summon a response, Bob landed on Zephyra's shoulder. "I'll show you to the guest room," he said, a concierge with wings.

Zephyra raised an eyebrow at Skye, but with her mouth still hanging open in shock, all Skye could do was step aside and gesture vaguely toward the stairs.

"Hello, Zephyra," Seb said, leaning in the kitchen doorway, arms folded like a man who expected surprises and was rarely disappointed.

"Hello, Seb," she returned.

"Need a hand?" he asked as she began rolling her suitcase, the wheels thumping against each stair with protest.

"No need," she replied.

She waved her hand, and the suitcase rose and glided up ahead of her.

As she vanished from view, Seb's phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID and his expression shifted. "What's up, Raphael?"

The name alone made Skye tense. Raphael Bellmont—head of Seb’s vampire House. Nothing good ever started with a call from him.

“I thought you were going to try to postpone it until next year?” Seb raked a hand through his hair.

“I see,” Seb said after a pause. “Yes, of course. Talk later, then.”

He ended the call and turned to Skye.

“What’s up?” she asked, somehow knowing she wouldn’t like the answer. His expression confirmed it—distant eyes, crimson dots appearing.

Not good.

“The vampire games have been called,” he said.

“The what?” Skye searched her memory and found a couple of vague references, things mentioned in passing.

“Vampires compete for their Houses. Winning is an honour. Not entering... a disgrace.”

“And you’ll be competing for House Bellmont?” she asked, heart picking up speed.

“Yes. I must.”

“Well, that’s okay, right?” Skye tried for levity. “As long as it’s not to the death.”

Seb didn’t answer.

“Seb?”

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With gratitude and a virtual high-five,

P L

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## About the Author

In Sydney's urban jungle, this wife, mum, and hopeless romantic once herded corporate cats as a project director— a job that sharpened her skills in intrigue and (non-lethal) murder. Now she's busy plotting the demise of fictional characters in her enchanting urban fantasies and murder mysteries.

When not infusing her stories with humour, light and a touch of romance, you'll find her attempting to ride waves, jamming tunes with her husband, or valiantly trying to restore order to the delightful chaos that is family life.

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