



40 Ways to Alibi

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: I either need a new job or a new life...

I'm not a woman who worries about the wrinkles on her face or how she looks in her clothes. I don't care whether or not men find me attractive. I worry about bigger problems like do I still have what it takes to learn something new at my age? My magick is rusty after wasting seven years in prison.

So what if Mulan's parents start whispering every time our paths cross? Should it matter to me if the normally brave Wu Shaman won't translate what her parents are saying about me?

I have a female guardian to reform, a guardian boyfriend trying to make up with me, and a far darrig friend who needs to crash at my house until his stuffy, book-cooking parents get over themselves. See? I have enough drama in my life.

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Chapter One

When I didn't show up for breakfast, Henry must have worried. He tapped on my door and I stopped sorting through my boxes to greet him. "Come on in, Henry. I'm awake."

The ancient demon's energy signature was familiar now, and I no longer confused him with Conn. But then, Conn wouldn't have knocked politely or waited for permission before he entered. Conn's relentless taunting would have pushed me to my breaking point, forcing me to charge toward the door simply to avoid my demon familiar's constant nagging.

Sighing, I returned to the clutter on my bed and wished I'd never begun sorting it. Any clothing Jack hadn't tossed from the house we shared, I'd lost in the fire of the first rental house. I'd kept almost nothing of what I'd worn while in the demon hunter's prison except for the last outfit Fiona had gifted me.

"Good morning, Aran. It worried Gale when you didn't emerge from your metaphorical cave in search of coffee. Conn made us both promise to make sure you never went without it. Did you raid the kitchen before we began cooking this morning?"

I grinned and winced at the same time. "No, I haven't darkened the kitchen door since Gale and ya got here. My system is pretty revved today without coffee. I think I'm coming off the adrenaline of fighting a wicked fairy and his pet snake shifter."

"All quite understandable," Henry said. "Would you like me to bring breakfast to

your room this morning? It's no extra trouble. Gale sent trays to your other guests, except for the far darrig who has not yet returned."

I stopped my sorting to look at Henry. "Dylan probably went home. I'm sorry that I didn't warn ya that might be happening. I was so tired yesterday I couldn't think straight."

Henry chuckled. "No need to apologize, Aran. Your eventful life speaks for itself."

What else could I do but laugh at his dry summary?

I would miss Dylan. He'd left with Hisser to stash the cobra-hooded black snake somewhere he would live out his life without harming anyone. Thanks to the new skills Tony had given Dylan, Hisser's snake DNA now controlled his form.

What I told Henry had been true. Dylan likely went home to tell his parents about his adventures. I wished he'd said goodbye but after Ezra's attack, I'm sure he was done with me and my work. Who could blame him? I couldn't.

Henry's report made me feel bad, though, because I should have called him and Gale this morning instead of worrying them. Answering to someone in my house was a new reality I had yet to adjust to. People controlling my business made me feel rebellious. I barely managed answering to Ben even though he paid me to do so.

"I should have let ya know all that, Henry. I'll try to remember to check in with ya in the future. The truth is I'm used to brooding alone and doing what I please without giving much thought to who I'm inconveniencing."

Henry waved a hand. "Checking on you gives me something to do. It's no bother."

I smiled at Conn's father. "That's a lie. I know it's a bother but it's nice of ya to

pretend it's not. Coffee and breakfast are all I need, Henry. Ya should know my boss is dropping by today to check out our new foyer statue."

Henry smiled back. "Will you be catching up on personal business all day?"

My laughter rang out. "I don't know yet. Unpacking my clothes was more of a chore than I realized it would be. It's got me pondering a nap. I'm grateful to Gale and ya for taking care of me and making sure I don't starve."

A grinning Henry inclined his head at my gratitude. "It is our pleasure, Aran of The Dagda."

Then he disappeared.

The oddness of my life settled like a wet blanket over me. I wondered if I'd ever stop feeling like a stranger in my home. Henry and Gale didn't understand yet, but making my own coffee was the least of what was in my DNA.

Along with the dry bar Henry promised, I should ask him to also install a coffee and tea service in the sitting room where I could brew my own. That would allow me pleasure and keep them from worrying. Would that offend him and Gale? I probably shouldn't worry so much about their feelings but Ma had raised me too well to disrespect them.

For better or worse, this real estate monstrosity was my house. I could fill it with blown-up balloons if I wanted. Or statues of hostile, betraying fairies frozen by wicked angels. Who could stop me?

I'd have to ponder my too-cushy existence some other time. Today, I had more important concerns. I had a female guardian sleeping upstairs and a male one brooding because I'd rejected him. I had Ben coming to see frozen Ezra for himself. I

had a house full of demons and Mulan's parents coming to visit.

And then there was my daughter.

Fiona had texted me from Ma's house early this morning, which told me she was back in Ireland. Texting wasn't the same as talking to my child in person but the phone Jack gave her didn't have an international plan that allowed her to call me for even five minutes now and again. I'd have to see that she got a better phone if it turned out Fiona would spend a lot of time over there.

Despite my utter exhaustion yesterday, sending Rasmus away last night took a toll on me. I'd slept badly and woke at the first quiet pinging of incoming messages from my child.

I had to admit, though, that Fiona's texts hadn't sounded like they were coming from the same frustrated girl who'd flown off screaming in the arms of her wicked angel mentor. Despite his nonchalance with me, I instinctively knew I could trust him with Fiona. The angel's energy radiated his good intentions toward my child, even though his very human male eyes couldn't seem to stop staring at the womanly curves that kept growing. She'd be twenty-one in a few months.

Fiona's answer to me asking how she was doing had been cautiously positive and achingly honest. She admitted straight up that learning to use her magic was much harder than she'd ever dreamed it would be.

She also told me the Shadow Breakers had sent someone to question her about Ezra. It seemed Colonel Benson had wasted no time letting his home office know what had happened. The news shocked all of them. If I hadn't been a trusted magickal, the Shadow Breakers might not have believed the photo Ben had sent along as evidence.

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The fairy's treachery had shocked Ben but no one was more shocked than I was. I'd fought at Ezra's side for years. He had played the roles of trustworthy work partner, lustful lover, and caring friend so perfectly that I never suspected he wasn't what he seemed.

I'd seen no deceit at all from the fairy until he'd confessed to his plans for Hisser to kill me. Fiona's wicked angel did me a huge favor by freezing Ezra with the energy sword in his hand. It was an undeniable reality check and one that wouldn't let me forget.

After spending a half hour messaging with my daughter, I felt better about her absence, but going back to sleep had been impossible. To keep from obsessing, I'd gotten up and gotten to work unpacking.

Coffee truly hadn't been on my mind until Henry showed up. I couldn't remember that ever happening before.

I turned at another knock on the door to my quarters. "Enter," I yelled.

It wasn't Henry this time but the energy was just as familiar. A freshly showered Rasmus stood beside a food cart containing a large carafe of coffee and all sorts of breakfast treats. A single tray would never have held all they sent.

My stomach growled the moment I smelled it. And the coffee smelled divine.

"Good morn to ya," I said to my delivery person.

It was hard not to stare because Rasmus smelled as good to me as the coffee did. I would have given up my coffee to lie back down with him. If he knew it, he wisely gave no sign. I couldn't indulge my longing for him anyway. Ezra's betrayal had been the last ego hit I could handle. It was time to get my shitty love life straightened out and that time was today.

Rasmus cleared his throat. "I decided not to wake Zara until you and I talked. I'll wake her when you're ready."

"Thanks. I definitely could use a bit more time to prepare for her this morning." I sighed and did my best to smile at him in a friendly way. It was hard to be casual with my heart beating so hard at his presence. "I promised ya we could talk so let's do that now. I can finish my unpacking later."

When he didn't immediately cross the room's threshold, I chuckled and walked to pull the food cart into the sitting room. "Come in and have a seat, Rasmus. The chairs in here are temporary but I think they'll hold ya well enough for our chat. Will ya be joining me for breakfast? It looks like Henry sent enough food for five people."

"Thank you, but I ate earlier. Someone came to the door with a menu request this morning. Gale sent a tray to my room afterward."

"Suit yerself," I said, positioning the cart in front of the chairs.

Early morning light filtered in through the sheers Henry had hung up, but it wasn't bright enough to cast sunshine into the space. I turned on the single floor lamp in the corner. It still wasn't enough to see clearly. Sighing at the coziness I'd unintentionally created, I picked up the remote Henry had provided me and set the fire blazing in the hearth. Since I didn't want Rasmus to get the wrong idea, I held his gaze while I set him straight. "There's no heat to the flame. I'm short on light sources."

With his hands in his pockets, Rasmus nodded as he entered the sitting room. “Did Henry do all this for you?”

I nodded as I poured out coffee for myself. My stomach growled loudly again in anticipation. Rasmus lifted an eyebrow at me.

Rolling my eyes, I gave up trying to play it cool. “Fiona texted me at four-thirty this morning. I’ve been up ever since.”

“Where is Fiona?”

“Her angel mentor returned the two of them to Ireland after they released a local witch coven from Ezra’s spell. Tony wasn’t overly chatty about his plans or hers but did mention he was training Fiona to protect the ring.”

Rasmus blinked at the news. “Are you sure he was an angel? Should I have Orlin check him out?”

I shrugged. “Henry confirmed Tony wasn’t a demon. Ya told me the ring’s guardian was either a demon or an angel. Plus, Tony mentioned training Da to protect the ring and how much faster Da learned compared to Fiona. It was a simple deduction.”

Rasmus nodded. “Yet you still sound concerned. Are you worried about her spending time with him?”

I eyed him over my coffee cup. I would not be baring my soul to anyone this early in the morning but especially not to Rasmus. If it were up to me, I would never expose my true self to him again. Not even Ma used my own words against me as much as the guardian did.

“My daughter seems fine with her situation and I trust her. What troubles me are

Bridget O'Malley's ideas about such creatures. Da never told her what Tony was so Ma has waited all her life to meet an actual angel. But that being is nothing like what she has in mind. Still, I'm inclined not to judge the man since I wouldn't be sitting here sipping coffee this morning without his intervention."

Rasmus swallowed hard. "Because your fairy friend betrayed you."

I nodded as I sipped. "Yes. The only good news is that Ezra's betrayal only hurt half as much as Jack's did."

Rasmus dropped his gaze to his hands. "Did he harm you before he got stopped?"

I picked up a croissant filled with egg, bacon, and cheese and took a bite to avoid answering. The delicate bread tasted like heaven. Whoever was cooking was a truly gifted chef. I devoured the whole thing in a few bites before I realized I'd never answered his question.

My gaze swung back to Rasmus. My reluctance to discuss this with him made me sigh inside. I was still angry at him for being gone and resentful of him wanting to know all the details of what he missed. Just because Rasmus hadn't betrayed me yet didn't mean he wouldn't. He'd already developed the knack of going for long periods feeling no concern for me at all.

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“The fairy didn’t harm me personally and I don’t think he ever intended to. Ezra’s big plan was to get someone else to kill me before he carved the Dagda stone from my chest. He told me he feared losing an honest fight with me but I don’t think he was serious. Mulan said his power was as great as what Conn stores. I’m sure Ezra knew that was the case.”

Rasmus blinked at that announcement. “I think I’ll take some tea after all.”

I waved to the cart. “Help yerself. I’m sure it’s on there for ya because Henry knows I don’t drink tea this early in the day.”

Rasmus turned over a mug, added honey to it, and poured tea from a small ceramic pot.

I refilled my cup while he stirred and quietly fumed. I was going to have to go over all this again with Ben. My irritation with Rasmus was not small.

“Ezra had stolen an artifact from the far darrig family that guarded it and used it to turn Hisser into a full-blown Naga assassin. He was even bigger than that giant snake we fought at the Troll Shaman’s cave. Hisser used his venom to stop Conn and Mulan. When the Dagda stone got involved with helping me, it gave me a special dagger and some snakeskin of my own to protect me.”

Rasmus set down his tea and scrubbed his face.

My grunt was soft and disgusted. “To make a long story as short as possible, I defeated Hisser but then Ezra drew anenergy sword out of thin air to kill me after all.

I know he would have struck me down with it if Fiona hadn't drawn his attention to her. When Ezra went after Fiona, Tony froze him because he's obligated to protect her."

Rasmus frowned deeply. "Why did you not call an energy sword for yourself?"

"Because Conn is the source of my warrior powers."

"Not all of them, though, since it's obvious you survived," Rasmus corrected.

"I learned fairies come to the human realm to collect power, which they take back across the veil to their people. Helping humans—a species they consider inferior to themselves—is the alleged price they pay for it. All fairies do this but most are far more discreet about it than Ezra."

"The veil is a time slip location."

I shrugged a shoulder at his comment. I considered it magick, not science.

"All I know is that Goddess Danu created the veil as a place for the Tuatha de Dananno to live after the Great War's pact of peace was signed. I've never been there and never intend to go. Nor do I consider myself a living battery they can drain for their benefit."

Rasmus kept his gaze on me as he drank tea. "Did Conn and Mulan survive?"

"Oh, yes," I said as I refilled my large mug. Gale was a great believer in substantial cups of coffee and tea—Goddess bless her. "Conn wove a spell to protect them both but the effort took most of his energy. If I'd died, he would have died as well because no one would have saved him. The difference is that he would have eventually returned as himself. Mulan and I would reincarnate as different people. I'm glad it

didn't come to that."

Rasmus leaned forward and once again rubbed his face with both hands. "I didn't mean to be gone so long. Working on Zarain my human form took longer than it would have if I'd been a full guardian."

I shrugged at the news. "Is that why ya had all those light beings helping ya fix her?"

Rasmus straightened in his chair. "How do you know about them?"

"Magick," I said, snorting a bit as I lowered my cup. "But I guess ya got her sorted out in the end, right? Because now I have to deal with her for the next five years."

"You will not bear the burden alone."

My smile was weak. "Before he left yesterday, Orlin said he'd be monitoring Zara's progress. He said he was going to bring her some books she could study that might speed up her learning."

"We reset Zara to who she was at the beginning of her service to this planet."

"It will be interesting to see what Zara was like as a female guardian before the male versions of herself forced her into survival mode. Humans can't be their best when all they can think about is staying alive. They turn primal and want to kill things. That's how she was when we first met."

"My science specialty was entity biological regeneration and transmutation. Zara's specialty was force physics, which is the study of controlling the energy surrounding all objects."

I stared at him over my nearly empty cup. "Witches could call force physics a form of

magick. Maybe Zara will come to think of herself as being a practitioner like me. Practicing magick will be something we have in common.”

Rasmus lowered his head and it stayed bent for a long time. I picked up the coffee carafe and shook it before pouring the rest into my cup. I sipped at it while I waited for the guardian to tell me something else significant. But he didn’t say another word.

Instead, Rasmus rose from his chair and left. That male had an uncanny knack for making my worst nightmares about abandonment come true. He hadn’t been there to help when I fought Hisser and Ezra. Now he wasn’t able to hear my story out before bolting.

What had been so Goddess blessed important that he had to leave in that instant?

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I sipped my coffee and quietly fumed while I pretended not to want to run after him. Goddess only knew what the guardian was thinking because I sure didn't.

Chapter Two

Ben shook his head, stared at the frozen Ezra statue, and cursed with the f-word under his breath.

I stood to the side watching and grinning as he repeated the same reaction over and over. Nothing dampened my hurt, but the powerful reactions to Ezra being frozen lightened my mood enough to see the humor.

“Aren't you afraid the fairy might use that energy sword in his hand to escape his situation? It looks primed for use. You can see it rippling with power. Looking at it makes me want to shoot him. I don't think I could sleep with him in my house.”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “Despite being a professed pagan, I trust the angel who did this to him. Tony said Ezra wouldn't thaw until he was beyond the veil again. I have many reasons to believe him.”

Ben grunted in response. “And what would those be?”

“He saved my life and he's training my daughter to use her magick. Plus, he saved Fiona when she needed saving. The angel has so much power, Ben, that I thought he was a guardian when we met. He glued my feet to the floor with a simple thought. I have a spell to do the same, but he never chanted a word. We were not an equal match in power.”

When one of Ben's eyebrows rose, I shrugged. "Ya also could say the angel and I had a bit of a disagreement about killing Hisser outright. He refused to allow me to do it. I couldn't defy him."

Ben snorted in disgust. "If he's an angel, Tony can't be his real name. Angels have fancy Abrahamic names like Uriel, Gabriel, and Raphael. They're mentioned in the holy books of many religions. Even guardians have fancy names. Tony is Italian. I know the Pope lives in Rome but angels come from all over. I'm not a complete plebeian."

"Do ya honestly think Rasmus is a fancy name? I never thought of it as fancy. My guardian grandfather's name is Orlin. I suppose that's rather unique."

I laughed at the look on Ben's face. His disbelief made me laugh. It was a very different reaction from Henry's "don't-be-stupid-about-angels" remarks.

I thought of my discussions with Tony about his wickedness and smiled at the memory.

Ben grunted. "I'm just saying the Shadow Breakers could research what people wrote about him if we knew his real name."

And I figured that was why being an enigma served Tony so well. People talked about his odd name more than what he did. Ben hadn't even mentioned the massive level of power it would have taken to freeze Ezra and all of his secret energy. The fairy had drawn a sword out of the ether. Ezra's level of power was way more important than some angel's name.

"Conn has asked his friend Murray to help us send Ezra home."

Ben nodded. "I remember him. He's the other fairy—the one who helped us fight the

monsters your ex-husband helped create.”

I nodded back. “Yes. He was the one who protected Fiona. Murray can travel back and forth across the veil. Murray said he’d be in touch once the details are worked out.”

“Will Ezra’s people punish Ezra for what he’s done?”

I wished I could say yes, but I couldn’t lie. Ben might as well learn now that some paranormals never got what they deserved.

“It’s doubtful Ezra will get anything except a smack on the hand for trying too hard. Despite his failed plans to steal the Dagda stone from me, he’s still bringing them a lot of power. After he froze Ezra, Tony transferred some energy back into Dylan’s artifact and gave the far darrig the gift of speaking to it as well.”

“It’s a miracle you survived what happened, isn’t it?” Ben asked.

I laughed at his question. “Aren’t miracles what humans expect from angels?”

Ben’s sigh was loud, but he finally turned away from my statue of Ezra. “Are you planning to keep him here until you arrange his return?”

I blew out a breath. “Yes, I think that’s best for now. Henry and his crew are keeping a watchful eye on him for me.”

Ben grunted as he looked around. “Don’t take this the wrong way, Aran, but I never saw you as the mansion type. I saw you as more of a cottage woman.”

I pointed beyond the foyer. “My personal space consists of two rooms down that hallway. The rest of this place is Henry and Gale’s to manage. We have a business

arrangement that meets both our needs. This place is a real estate investment.”

Ben frowned as he stared at me. “I remember you admiring my backyard. After all you’ve suffered, you deserve a true home. But it does look great in here.”

Laughing again, I grinned at him. “Ya don’t have to kiss up to me just because I almost died. I know this room looks like the lobby of a hotel. We’re currently using it like one.”

His chuckle rolled over me. “Are you miserable in this place?”

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“No. I’m happy enough. Conn and Mulan get to cohabit in their own little house. My daughter has a home on the property as well. The two rooms of my quarters suit me fine. Henry and Gale feed me daily. What more could I want, Ben? If anything, I’m getting spoiled by all these people taking care of me.”

A grinning Ben shook his head. “Well, don’t worry. Being a lady of the manor doesn’t show on you.”

I sighed softly to play along. “I thank ya greatly for saying that. I was starting to get a little worried.”

Ben looked around. “So, where’s your shadow today?”

“Conn and Mulan are off shopping for office furniture. We’re turning the third cottage on the grounds into a meeting place to discuss work. I want to keep it out of my house if I can.”

Ben glanced back at frozen Ezra. “That’s going to be quite the challenge if you keep bringing work home with you and turning it into art.”

My smirk and headshake made him laugh. “Ya were gone, Ben. Was I supposed to dump him off at yer office with no one to watch over him? Ya had to cut yer leave short as it was.”

“I was fine coming back early. But I was talking about Rasmus, not Conn. Did you even hear anything from the guardian?”

I pointed at the stairs. “Yes. He and Zara are upstairs in their rooms. They’re siblings now.”

Ben’s eyes widened as he turned to glance in the direction I pointed. “It was wise of you to take a hiatus from work until your life settles down.”

I nodded. “Plus, Mulan’s parents are coming late next week. I can’t be getting all bloody while they’re here. My hope is I get Ezra out of the foyer before they arrive.”

“What are you going to do if you don’t?”

“I guess I’ll get Henry to cover him with a sheet like they do in museums.”

Ben’s chuckles echoed around the giant space. And he kept them up as I walked him out to his car. I waited until he got in and rolled the window down.

“Can I ask ya something personal, Ben?”

“Of course.”

I stood close to his window. “Were ya on vacation or were ya working when ya left? Ezra was vague about it. Ya have no reason to report yer business to me, but I was worried because ya never said anything about leaving. After Ezra showed his real colors to me, I was concerned that he might have prompted yer departure.”

Ben’s mouth twisted as he looked out the front window. “Ezra was present when I had an emergency come up. He recommended a solution that I thought had some merit so I left to investigate it for a couple of days. That turned into a week the deeper I got into it. One day soon I’ll tell you about it. We might need to break out your emergency booze to get through the story. Coffee won’t cut it.”

I nodded and chose not to tease him. “Are ya okay now?”

“I’m as okay as I can be. I’m sorry I worried you, Aran. Ezra said he would explain and I let him.”

“He deflected attention away from yer absence. Ya might consider that the same thing.”

Ben’s smile was relaxed. “I normally would. I’m still not used to being so deeply involved with my co-workers. Meeting you has changed a lot for me and I’m still processing it.”

“Ya’re fine, Ben. I’m the only one obsessing and ya don’t have to give me details. I just wanted to know Ezra did nothing to ya.”

“No, the fairy didn’t cause me any fresh problems. Go enjoy your time off. I’ll talk to you in a month.”

I nodded and waved as he drove away. As much as I would have liked to satisfy my curiosity, I also dreaded how complicated it would make working for Ben if I knew his secrets. Learning Ezra’s had made me question all the memories I had of my Shadow Breakers work in Ireland.

How much of what we did together did he orchestrate? Given the magnitude of his betrayal, it was hard not to wonder about such things. I’d broken up with him personally but we had remained excellent business partners. Nothing in our relationship could have caused his determination to kill me and carve the stone from my chest. He must have considered me expendable all along.

Everything I learned about Rasmus only made things harder with him as well. The new things I learned about Jack made me hate him more than I already did.

The only exception I could think of was that everything I learned about Conn made me love and respect him more. The same was true of Mulan.

There was a good reason people said ignorance was bliss because it truly was.

Henry caught me just as I was heading back to my room. I had wanted to switch shoes before checking out the greenhouse Gale was overseeing. The ground was still a muddy mess the last time I looked.

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“The guardians wish to talk to you when you have some time for them,” he said.

I sighed loudly and nodded. “Fine. I know I can’t avoid them forever. My early session with Rasmus didn’t end well so I’m not looking forward to justifying myself to his counterpart.”

“Were you actively trying to avoid them?” Henry asked with a frown.

“Yes, but ya didn’t know it. I promised to deal with them both and I will. I was just stalling as long as I could.”

Henry smiled at me. “If you want alibis for a few days of avoiding them, I could help you create them. Can you reschedule your meeting for a week from now?”

I was so moved by Henry’s offer to provide me with alibis that I put a hand on his arm and gazed at him adoringly. He looked down at my fingers resting on his pressed shirt sleeve in shock. I withdrew my touch to keep from getting emotional. Only Conn had ever offered to ease my mental burdens.

“I need courage not alibis, but thanks for asking. Will ya see if the guardians want to meet me on Fiona’s back porch?”

“Certainly. Should I have someone move some outdoor furniture there?”

“Fiona’s house came with outdoor seating made for tall people. Rasmus and Zara are both tall enough for the chairs. I’ll sit on the storage bench. We’ll be taking a walk after introductions so there’s no need for too much comfort.”

“I see. Is physical discomfort part of your intended punishment for them?” Henry asked with a snort.

I lifted my gaze to study the foyer ceiling. Someone had painted a pastoral scene on it. The scenery wasn't my style but I could appreciate all the work it had taken. Even if I wanted to replace it, what would I put up there?

“I'm not intending to punish anyone. What I plan to do is worse than punishment. I'm going to incorporate the guardians into our strange family group and normalize their presence here. I would appreciate it if ya put the word out to keep a close eye on Zara. I have no idea what behavior to expect from her.”

“The young demons love spying on people. I think taking precautions with her is wise. The rouge ancient ones weren't known for being helpful, no matter what they claimed. Guardians were feared for their sweeping actions and questionable judgments. I have always believed their neutrality was a myth.”

I chuckled without humor. “As soon as I figure out what normal is for her or Rasmus, I promise to let ya know. The male guardian is truly here on vacation. However, Zara is here for rehabilitation. Their vacations all seem to be working ones. Rasmus will be helping me manage her training program.”

Henry grunted. “So you're her warden and this house will be her prison.”

I made a face. “Yes, but I don't enjoy thinking of it like that. Let's say Zara's a brand new computer I've purchased and I plan to program her to be useful to me.”

His snickering over my computer analogy threatened to get out of control when I glared at him. I bet Dylan would have understood it. Mulan would have as well. I'd have to remember to tell her later. She told me to come over for tea after dinner and we'd chat.

Henry sighed loudly. “I guess I’ll tell Gale to hold off serving you your pride for dinner. You’ll be eating it soon enough about the guardian sharing your bed, but for now, we have to wait.”

I pointed a finger at him. “Rasmus is no longer sharing my bed, as ya well know. And I wasn’t lying about him being here on vacation. Every few hundred years the guardians are required to vacation here as humans. They feel it keeps their information updated about the inferior species they serve.”

“Ah...” Henry said. “He didn’t return for you and you’re offended about him having multiple reasons for being here.”

“Oh, I’m much more than offended. I’m coldly livid after talking to him this morning,” I answered.

Henry gave a mock shudder but kept grinning.

“Give me ten minutes to switch my shoes and get over there before ya tell them.”

This time he gave me a mock salute before wandering away.

I rolled my eyes over how entertained he was before jogging to my room.

Chapter Three

I didn’t get to see Zara’s new appearance yesterday. Her face had been turned toward his chest as Rasmus carried her.

Not having seen her helped me today because my expression held nothing but surprise when they rounded Fiona’s house side by side. Rasmus had gone a bit overboard and the two of them looked enough alike for people to think they were

twins.

At least studying them gave me a legitimate excuse to look at Rasmus. His new uniform seemed to be snug jeans and even snugger t-shirts. If a woman ignored the constant judgment residing in his gaze, the rest of him would do nothing but delight her.

Even Mulan—the most fiercely independent woman I knew—thought I was being stupid about keeping Rasmus out of my bed. “A woman has needs, Aran. Use him to meet them. He will not steal your anger. Trust me.”

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She'd constantly urged me to be wicked while an eavesdropping Conn snickered like an eighth-grade boy behind her.

"Use him for what, Mulan?" I'd demanded. "A booty call on those rare occasions when he spends over ten minutes with me?"

No, I wouldn't be doing anything like that. A woman had to draw a line somewhere. Since I needed his help with Zara, drawing the line at my bedroom door was the best I could do. Rasmus could stay but he would sleep in his own room, which even he had to see was a massive upgrade from his days spent sleeping in a garage.

And no, despite what Henry and Gale thought, I would not be swallowing my pride and eating my words soon. I could last as long as it took for the guardian to learn my warm welcome was not to be taken for granted.

Rasmus had taken cues from Conn in turning Zara into his fake sibling. Conn had created what we both called his "brother" form so people wouldn't think we were a couple. He'd done it to make it easier for him to pick up women for a night.

Sans my height, of course, because Conn preferred to be taller. No man-creature of any species would choose to be five feet tall when he could be six or seven. Truth be told, I'd have been six feet tall myself if I had possessed the power to change my body that much.

Dylan, who was even shorter than me, morphed into a six-foot human male to hide among humans. For Dylan, size was about controlling how people—especially human females—looked at him. How could I hate him for that? Goddess, to look

most men in the eyes, I had to stand on a chair or make them sit in it.

Sure, I'd learned over the years not to care too much about my short stature or to let it worry me. After meeting Mulan, who was also height-challenged, I'd at last found someone who understood. That didn't mean I didn't still have moments.

Seeing Rasmus standing at nearly seven feet and Zara at over six made me feel child-sized. Maybe there was a height requirement for packing that much arrogance around. I'd have to ask him that once we were on better terms again.

"Hello," I said, nodding to them both. "I saved the big chairs for the two of ya. They belong to my tall daughter."

Rasmus motioned to Zara to sit in one, then lowered himself into the other. Zara looked uncertain when her body slid back and down in the large Adirondack seat. A cautious female, who looked at me fearfully, had replaced the bitter female I originally met.

What on earth had Rasmus told her? He said he'd reset her to the being she'd been at the beginning of her service to our planet. Had she been fearful of the other species who'd lived here?

What kind of power made it possible for him to change her personality? By now, I knew the guardians excelled in crafting lies that made people believe what the guardians wanted them to believe. I was currently taking part in the one about Zara because I had a moment of sympathy for her controlled situation.

Maybe it wasn't as bad as it seemed to me. I mean, Demons did the same with their compulsions. The difference was that the guardians could redefine a person permanently.

Like Rasmus, Zara had been some sort of scientist among her people. When I met her, she'd felt nothing but disgust for Earth's residents and what she saw as their human flaws. Was this cautious woman the real Zara? Or was she still the one I met—the one who'd stolen the life essences of young women without a shred of remorse just so she could survive?

It hurt my brain to think about it. What had I seen in her that made me bargain to save her? It should have been enough punishment for her that Rasmus could create this timid version out of the strongest female I'd ever met. If he set her loose on Earth again, she would be fine for a while. Right?

I needed to stop churning on this because philosophizing was counterproductive to keeping my promise to Orlin. I had five years to convince Zara humans did not need to be ruled over by beings like her. If the Dagda were here right now, I'm sure he would have laughed and laughed at the trouble my runaway mouth had once again gotten me into.

I guess I'd been staring too hard at her because Zara cleared her throat and spoke first.

“My brother says I owe you my life.”

I moved my gaze to Rasmus as I answered her. “Yer brother exaggerates, Zara. I kept someone from killing ya because saving people is part of my job.”

Zara barely looked at me. “I hear I wasn't the sort of person anyone would choose to save, and he said that I tried to kill you. I don't have a lot of recall from that time, Aran. All I remember is being furious at everyone and everything. I couldn't feel happiness in any form. A terrible rage had taken me over.”

I don't know how Rasmus seeded that scenario into Zara's memories and somehow

twisted it to our benefit. The guardians seemed to have powers that rivaled the gods. But I'd met her when she'd been in full survival mode. Five years from now, when Zara came out of this fugue state Rasmus put her in, the female guardian was going to be pissed at both of us for manipulating her as we had.

Once again I reminded myself that I'd voluntarily signed up for this shit show. No one had twisted my arm. I had only my conscience to blame.

I blew out a breath and nodded to her. "If ya try killing me again, I won't show ya the same mercy. Something ya need to understand about me is that I kill bad guys for a living. If ya travel down that path, that's how I'm going to see ya."

Zara nodded before dropping her gaze. "Rasmus and I have talked about this at great length. We both agree that some dark force possessed me. I feel nothing toward you but gratitude now. I hope you can believe that. You're very important to my brother and I don't want him to have to choose between us."

I studied her while trying to figure out if she was being sincere, but I couldn't tell. "Good. I don't want him to do that either. Despite the many, many things yer brother and I don't agree about in this world, whether or not to keep ya alive was never one of them. I'd be happy to make peace with ya, Zara. Also, yer brother and ya are welcome to stay with me for as long as ya wish. And there's work to be done if ya're interested in joining my team."

Zara seemed surprised by the offer.

"What kind of work?" she asked.

My shrug was large and as unconcerned as I could make it. "Depends... what skills do ya possess? Rasmus said ya were a magick practitioner like me."

“I don’t know what he meant by that, but I’m good with animals. Not domestic ones, but those with wild natures. They respond to me.”

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I didn't roll my eyes because I was an adult. This ruse wouldn't work if I couldn't play my part. "That's interesting. I have a couple of wolves with a unique problem. They're in the stables. We'll walk over there soon. What else can ya do?"

Zara's head dropped and she sighed.

Rasmus turned to face me fully. "My sister has forgotten her skills. She lost them during her healing. We're hopeful the knowledge of her powers will return in time."

"I see," and I did. More than Zara realized. "Does she have wings? Can she fly like you?"

"Fly?" Zara's head came up to stare at Rasmus. "Do you seriously have wings?"

I laughed. "He does but he's still learning how to use them. That's how we met. He dove at a Troll like a hawk going after a mouse. They both went rolling across the pavement."

Rasmus shrugged at my story. "Being Irish, Aran loves to tell a descriptive version of every story. I have wings, and yes, I've been able to use them. I accepted a job with a paranormal organization called Shadow Breakers. Aran is my mentor."

I held up my hand. "But not in the flying part. I'm calling in an expert to help Rasmus with his flying. I'm mentoring him in policing paranormals."

Zara turned away from Rasmus to look at me again. "You're speaking of humans with advanced skill sets, like witches and fairies."

“And guardians. All three of us classify as magickals. Each paranormal type is a different species. Many magickals consider humans to be little more than prey. My job is to protect humans from those magickals that believe that.”

I watched as Zara nodded solemnly at my statements but I could see some churning in her expression. “Do ya think non-magickal humans are worth less than paranormal beings?”

Biting her bottom lip, Zara stared at me as if afraid to answer truthfully. “As a guardian, we seek to keep the balance on your planet. We become human to take a break from the tedium of our jobs. Regardless of what we think about a species, our purpose is to see that they evolve as naturally as possible. Intervention is only allowed in extreme circumstances. Humans have been the slowest species on this planet to evolve into a higher form and no one quite knows why. Most of them don’t realize or accept that their essence recycles into a new body repeatedly. This is my brother’s primary focus of study. He looks at why so many are resistant to change.”

“Yes. I am well aware of yer brother’s work among my people.” I turned to glare at Rasmus. “We’ve had many discussions about him seeing humans as an inferior species.”

“But he wasn’t talking about you. You have advanced skills,” Zara protested.

I stared hard as I spoke to her. “If ya talk about one of us, ya’re talking about all of us, guardian. My family comprises a mix of magickals and non-magickals. Whether or not one receives magic is up to our gods. Regardless of our power levels, we share the planet and work in harmony to exist.

“That has not been my observation,” Zara said.

“Because we’re a work in progress. We have to work at not devaluing anyone.

Overcoming our flaws is what makes us strong, flexible, and resilient. When ya start evaluating people by what skills they don't have or the magick they can't do, there can be no end to the judging. Admittedly, some have to work than others do in remembering it. The struggle defines our natures."

Zara huffed a little. "But that constant struggle seems so inefficient, don't you think?"

I lifted both my hands in the air. "Who says evolution should be efficient? Maybe it works like that on other planets, but humans don't follow evolutionary rules well. It's an innate aspect of our species to rebel."

Zara frowned at that. "So you identify with all of them even though you possess the power to conquer them."

"What would conquering bring me? I'd exhaust my power trying to keep those I've conquered from conquering me back. I feel no desire to conquer, and yes, I identify with all the creatures of this planet. In the best of cases, our species elects fair overseers, not tyrannical rulers."

"Not all rulers are tyrants," she said.

"Not all rulers are needed. Seeing everyone as having the same value creates mutual respect and benefits the survival of our species. It's like someone judging you for not flying just because yer brother can do it. Maybe ya inherited something different or even better. But ya would work with him to combine yer skills for the greater good. Right?"

Goddess, she was still the female guardian I met. All they did was stifle her nature a bit. This would be a long five years if she stayed in the "humans-should-bow-before-us" frame of mind. I'd heard that lecture from her once before and had hoped never to hear it again.

“Let’s take a walk and visit the demon wolves. We can debate our moral philosophies some other time. I’m still recovering from nearly being killed this week. My energy is not yet back to normal.”

Zara’s eyes widened. “I’m sorry if I stressed you with my observations.”

My laugh was from the gut. “Ya didn’t stress me any more than I already was. I’m sure we’ll get back to debating yer low opinion of humanity some other time. I’m not up to arguing about it with yer brother either, which is why he’s currently sleeping next to ya instead of in my room. I decided while Rasmus was gone that I would not keep justifying my wants and needs to any guardian, even the ones I like.”

“I can see that I’ve offended you. That was not my intention,” Zara said.

“Yes, ya have offended me, but don’t let it worry ya. Yer brother does it all the time,” I said before shrugging it off. “I’m not kicking either of ya out of the house for now. I promised yer guardian overseer that ya could stay five human years with me. Who knows, Zara? Maybe during that time, ya might change yer mind about my species.”

Zara took in my words but I could see in her face that was never going to happen. She had closed up inside her arrogance the way Rasmus so often did.

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To be fair to Orlin, he had the decency to look and act contrite when I got upset with him. Rasmus and Zara handled my hurt by offering a polite apology followed by an intellectual argument. They didn't get that saying the words of an apology was not the same thing as truly feeling regret. Both of them needed to learn that.

I walked a few steps in front of them as we made our way to the stables. A young demon caretaker was playing with the demon wolves. He looked like a typical teenager, even down to the irritated scowl he barely hid about our interruption.

"Hello," I said, smiling at the boy. "This is Rasmus and Zara. They're going to be regular visitors."

The boy's gaze zeroed in on Zara. I could tell Henry had gotten the word out fast to watch her.

"Should I leave and come back later?" he asked.

"That's unnecessary," I said, smiling at him again. "But ya could run and tell Gale that we'll be having dinner in the dining room tonight. I promised to let her know. I won't be feeding the wolves tonight so I'll save that job for ya."

"Sure. I can deliver your message. I can do that while you visit the wolves," he said, nodding before he ran off.

I whistled and the wolves jogged over to us. I knelt and gave them both a good scratch. I also kept my voice low as I spoke to the humans inside them. "Don't be getting too used to yer wolf forms. I may have found someone to help ya become

yerselves again.”

Zara stepped around me to get a better look. She held out a hand over them. “You called them wolves, but these are not wolves.”

Since the wolves weren’t running away from her in terror, I stood up. “You’re right. They’re not wolves. They’re two young human females. I lack the skills needed to turn them back into humans. The person who did this to them planned to do this to all humans. She shared yer view about human evolution not happening fast enough.”

Zara drew her hand back and frowned. “It is not our place to decide something like this. Only the Creators can make this sort of decision. There are good reasons we don’t intervene.”

Up to now, I’d been trying not to lie to Zara. Now I could kiss that intention goodbye. “I’m not sure what kind of being she was. I only know what she thought. My discussions with her were enlightening, but I also felt very sorry for her. She was grieving the love of her immortal life and created these wolves for reasons I couldn’t adequately explain to anyone. Unfortunately, she never finished her work so they’re stuck in their wolf form with no hope of changing back. She did intend to give them the ability.”

Zara shook her head and took another step backward. Then she crossed her arms—or hugged herself—I couldn’t tell which. “I did this when I was possessed, didn’t I?”

I straightened to my full height. I didn’t weave the lie Zara was being forced to live. Rasmus would have to handle this one.

“Ya’ll have to talk to yer brother about who’s responsible for letting her do this. All I know is that these young, non-magickal women didn’t deserve to have their lives disrupted for the sake of some guardian scientist’s blind ambition. My ex-husband

was part of a military group of human scientists doing this same thing to unwilling people, except they weren't as good at it. I stopped him and if I could fix the wolves myself, I would."

Zara didn't respond. Instead, she turned and walked away. That was what guardians did when someone held them accountable.

"I should go after her," Rasmus said.

"Ya should," I agreed.

"Can we talk later?"

"Are ya planning to stay and hear me out? Or run off again?"

Rasmus sighed. "I had an important thought and needed to make a note of it."

"And I had feelings of rejection and abandonment about why ya left like that. I'm not eager to keep experiencing yer rudeness over and over just because ya don't understand what hurt feelings are."

"That wasn't why I left..."

I held up my hand. "I don't care why ya left. I care only that ya disrespected me. Actions speak louder than words, Rasmus. A superior-thinking guardian ought to understand how that works for us lowly humans."

"I thought you were above petty emotions."

"And I thought ya cared enough about my feelings not to be thoughtless. I guess we were both wrong." I waved a hand toward the house. "Go. Take care of yer

experiment. I appreciate yer attention to detail with her. She's the same Zara but far less ambitious. Nice work, Mr. Scientist."

"I can tell you're being sarcastic. I will see you later to discuss this."

"Yeah—yeah... I'll see ya at dinner. But I'm having tea with Mulan afterward and ya're not invited."

Rasmus strode away muttering to himself. It was a good thing I couldn't hear what he was saying or we might have had one of those magickal smack-downs they were always putting in paranormal movies. He had his memories back but I'd seen nothing to show all his powers had returned. Maybe I might win one for once. It would be fun to put a frozen statue of Rasmus in the foyer next to the one of Ezra.

Maybe I'd have Henry put them on each side of the staircase. Wouldn't that jazz up the cover of some decorating magazine?

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After Rasmus was gone, the demon wolves whined as they stared up at me. I turned and smiled down at them. “Look, I don’t know if ya recognized her or not, but Zara’s not the person she used to be. Unfortunately, she’s also not willing to help yayet. We may have to give her a bit of time to adjust to her new reality. I promise I’ll keep working on her.”

Two sets of demon wolf eyes suddenly glowed red as they went on alert. It meant their adoptive alpha was close. I had the opposite reaction to Conn’s presence and relaxed when I felt him near to me. I smiled in welcome when I turned to see Conn casually walking toward us. “Go greet him. I know ya want to.” Then I laughed as the demon wolves bolted to him.

Conn dealt with their jumping for joy and their need for him to pet them. Part of me wanted to leave things exactly as they were. The other part knew that was not the right thing to be wanting for those women. They deserved to have their humanity returned. If I could make it happen, I had to do so. I could adopt some dogs that would be as welcoming and accepting as the demon wolves were.

My sigh of disappointment was loud as I vowed internally to be a better person.

“Good Goddess, Aran. I heard your thoughts over the screeching Mulan calls singing. What did the guardian do now?”

I glared at Conn. “That reminds me. I need to check with Henry to see if he got in touch with that teacher yet. I’m tired of broadcasting to every paranormal within hearing distance. And I’ve heard Mulan sing, Conn. She has a pleasant voice.”

Conn snickered and pointed to his head. “Not to demon ears.”

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t tell me ya don’t adore her because I’ll call ya a liar.”

“Oh, I adore her, just not her singing. By the way, we’re coming to dinner later. Henry insists we attend. He’s worried the stress of having the guardians here might make you snap.”

I moaned and covered my face. “Good Goddess, Henry heard my thoughts as well.”

“Yes. He and Gale both did. The older a demon gets, the more skill they have in reading minds, even when they’re trying not to do so. Lilith finds your thoughts refreshing and entertaining. I find them the same. Henry and Gale don’t share our views. They find them worrisome. But I wouldn’t let that bother you.”

“Gah... I hate my life. I’m an open book for everyone to read.”

“You do not hate your life,” Conn said, laughing softly. “You’re just irritated at the guardians and mad at Rasmus for not working harder to make up. Rasmus is not a human male, no matter how much he looks like one. He will not tell you what you want to hear just to get laid. Guardians think too much of themselves to do that. You’re going to have to deal with him as he is and what he thinks. You received a more pleasant, less intelligent version of him and weren’t satisfied. So suck it up and deal with the intelligent one you wanted and finally got back.”

“I am dealing with him, Conn. I’m just not sleeping with him.”

“Yes, we know. Your frustration is being shouted to the world. Rasmus undoubtedly knows ya’re holding out as well. They use human feelings like one uses a map. Reading you shows him what to do.”

“Ya’re not being helpful today, Conn.”

His laughter rang out. “I’m sorry. Would it be helpful to tell you how much I admire your bravery concerning the wicked guardian female? I think you’d challenge the gods if you felt the need.”

I finally removed my hands from my fiery face. “Does challenging The Dagda count? He was manipulating me and I knew it. But I don’t think he holds my ability to read him against me.”

I laughed at the long sigh Conn released.

“It’s not like I’m intentionally trying to be a problem for the guardians. I admit their arrogant outlook grates on my nerves and it upsets me that they do nothing to tone it down. What am I supposed to say in response to their idiocy? Why, yes, I am an inferior being. Don’t lower yerselves to see things from my point of view. Well, that’s not happening, Conn. They don’t live here. They’re guests. And not even good ones.”

I wanted to punch him when a laughing Conn pulled me close for a hug. The demon wolves yipped and ran in circles around us. They didn’t want either of us to be mad.

“Go on and play,” I told them softly. “Everything is going to be fine. I’m just tired of all the crap I’m going through. I’ll get over myself later. I always do.”

They looked at Conn. When he smiled and nodded, they raced off for the rope they used to play tug of war.

I groaned as I pushed him away. “All I want is a peaceful life. I’d even settle for a few peaceful days.”

Conn sighed. “I wish I could give that to you, but I can’t. I came to find you to give

you some news. Mulan's parents are coming this weekend. I left her singing angry songs in the kitchen to come tell you."

I laughed but this time for real. "Of course, they are. The entire world is conspiring against me getting any rest this week."

"If you'd set aside your pride, Rasmus could help you get some rest."

"No," I said, crossing my arms as Conn laughed. "I'll not be doing that until we've reached an understanding."

Realizing how much I sounded like Fiona, I let my arms fall.

"Tell Mulan it's fine for them to arrive early. We'll make it work. The sooner their time here starts—the sooner it will end and we can go back to normal."

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“Would that be the normal where we’re using a frozen statue of a fairy for decoration?”

I lifted my middle finger to him. “Yes, I mean that normal. It beats letting snooty guardians and selfish parents control our every move. I’m going to have to throw a sheet over him while they’re here.”

“If you say so,” Conn said with a smirk.

“Kiss my ass,” I said, stomping away from him. “I’ll see Mulan and ya at dinner. The two of ya can help me navigate the guardians and I’ll drop the news about Mulan’s parents coming. It’s called a win-win.”

“Or a lose-lose in our case, eh?”

Letting Conn have the last word, I headed back to finish my unpacking.

Chapter Four

Dinner was a tense affair. Zara refused to hold my gaze for more than a few seconds. Rasmus glowering at me across the table made nothing better. I was tired of the guardian’s snippy attitude and pleaded a headache as I excused myself. I’d had all I could handle of his snide comments and haughty glares.

I had nearly escaped the foyer when a throat clearing caught my attention and made me pause mid-flight. Since all my guests were still at the dinner I’d just run away from, I nervously turned only to sigh in relief when I saw Dylan sitting on one of the

foyer couches.

The far darrig was in his tall, blond, and muscular human form, which always made me want to ask where his surfboard was.

“Well, hello, Dylan. Why didn’t ya join us for dinner?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t want to interrupt so I asked Henry to let me wait for you. I’m sorry I left the other day without saying goodbye. It was rude of me to leave the way I did.”

So much had been going on for me that day and every moment since that I had lost no sleep over Dylan’s departure.

I waved the apology away. “Let’s take this discussion to the library. Are ya hungry? I’m sure there’s food left. Rasmus and I were too busy fussing at each other to eat much.”

Dylan smiled at me. “I sort of heard your fussing through the doors.”

I blew out a breath. “The guardian is acting like a bear because he didn’t get the warm welcome he was expecting from me. Lately, all my headaches have been caused by him. I’m truly not feeling my best.”

“You’re probably still hurting from the fight and still grieving the fairy’s betrayal. ”

I nodded and smiled. “Yer sympathy far outshines the token concern I got from most people in my life.”

“I believe I’m showing empathy rather than offering sympathy. But I’m not feeling my best, either.”

I looked at him as we entered the library. Soft lamp lights came on automatically. Leave it to Henry to make the room even cozier. The library was a room a person couldn't help but love.

“Ya’re making empathy sound ominous. I want to hear all about it.”

“It’s not entertaining, though. It’s just...sad.”

I went to the mantle of the fireplace and found a remote. It worked like the one in my sitting room. Clicking it on set giant flames full of heat and light blazing in the grate. This fireplace was the mega version of what I had in my quarters. The ambiance improved my mood. If I’d hid in my quarters, I would have missed sharing this with Dylan. I was glad he caught me.

I quickly turned and rushed back to the door. “While I’m gone, change to yer true self and get comfortable. I’m going to ask someone to bring us tea and food. Everyone in this place can read my mind at the moment but I want to shock them with my presence. I haven’t been in the kitchen since Henry and Gale moved in. I’m sure they’ll think I’ve gone mad.”

Dylan chuckled. “You’re such a strange person sometimes.”

His comment made me smile, and his teasing lifted my spirits. I realized how starved I was for a kind soul to show me they cared. “My strangeness makes me likable, though, don’t ya think?”

“Oh, yes,” he agreed. “It makes you very likable.”

“Don’t move from this room then,” I ordered as I raced out.

Five minutes later, I returned to the library with someone pushing a tea cart right

behind me. There were two vegetarian plates from the dinner I'd left, which I knew the far darrig preferred.

“They were working on our tea when I got there. Let's eat before talking.” I landed in a chair and positioned the cart between us. “Are ya planning to stay the night? Yer room is still available. I'm glad now that I asked Henry's people to hold off cleaning it for a few days.”

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Dylan froze in his seat looking like I'd slapped him.

I lifted an eyebrow as I sat in the chair across from him. "Why would the offer of a place to lay yer head make ya look at me like an animal caught in someone's headlights? Ya're making me think I'm not the only one needing a friend."

"You aren't," Dylan whispered. "And I'd like to stay here. First, though, I need to tell you my story."

The headache I had from dealing with Rasmus was gone. I picked up my plate and dug in before a new one could bloom out of my worry for Dylan. The nurturing thing I did instinctually needed to stop. Helping everyone I met was wearing me out.

"Eat, Dylan. Yer life can't be any crazier than mine."

"Are you sure? Because my parents disowned me."

My fork full of food stopped halfway to my mouth. "Why? Ya did exactly what they told ya to do."

Dylan waved my praise away and picked up his plate. "I shouldn't have blurted it out like that. Thank you for feeding me. I haven't felt like eating since I argued with them."

My fork found its way to my mouth again. I resumed my starved shoveling until my plate was empty. Dylan ate much slower but finished his as well.

I busied myself making us tea while I waited for him to collect his thoughts.

“Do ya still take honey and milk in yer tea?” I asked.

Dylan nodded as he ate his last forkful. He set his now empty plate on the cart next to mine.

“Before ya get into the details, I have one burning question to ask first. Am I going to need a shot of Jamieson’s to hear this without getting angry?”

Dylan tilted his head as he studied me. “I don’t know. What is it?”

“Jamieson’s is the best Irish whiskey in the world,” I said with a smile.

“Well, that’s appropriate. You’re sounding very Irish today. But I still don’t know how to answer that question.”

Laughter loosened the tightness in my chest. “Some people think me sounding too Irish is a bad sign.”

“You’re the first I’ve heard that wasn’t on television. I like the way you talk.”

“Thank ya,” I said with a grin as I handed Dylan his tea. “Alright. So what happened with yer parents? I figured ya’d return home to a hero’s welcome.”

Dylan snorted. “Yes, I thought I would as well. It was why I hurried there as soon as I dropped off the snake shifter at the zoo. Instead, my parents were upset that the angel gifted me with powers. They also weren’t happy that the artifact played dead whenever they touched it. I tried to explain it wasn’t anything I was doing on purpose but they didn’t believe me.”

“My daughter is the guard of a relic as well. Because of that responsibility, she’s saddled with that wicked angel as a magick teacher. I don’t like the situation but there is nothing I can change. Guarding the relic is Fiona’s destiny. Maybe working with yer relic is yours. Ya have a kind soul, Dylan.”

“I’m not even sure it chose me, Aran. Thatangel—if he truly was one—didn’t give the artifact much choice.”

“Does it still talk to ya?” I asked.

Dylan nodded.

“And do ya get a sense that it’s happy with yer actions in using it?”

My second question barely got a shrug. I’d seen him communicating with the relic his family had been charged with guarding all those years. What he did with it pleased an angel, for Goddess sake. His parents should have been nothing but proud of their child. I had half a mind to look them up and tell them so, but Dylan needed to embrace his role enough to defend it.

I set my tea on the tiny side table between our chairs. “If yer relic didn’t want to work with ya, it would go silent and that would be the end. Ya can trust me on that one. I babysat Fiona’s relic for a while. It talked to me because it found me entertaining, but I had no control over what it did. If yer animal stone works with ya, Dylan, that means it’s chosen ya. Now ya need to choose it back.”

“Do you think my parents will ever accept that?”

I picked up my tea again and held the cup for comfort. “I don’t know. Nobody can judge ya quite like a person ya’re related to.”

He nodded vigorously at that.

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I waved a hand in the air. “I can’t fix yer parents. Time might. But if ya want to stay here until ya get things figured out, ya need to know some things. Mulan’s parents are coming thisweekend, plus her sister and husband. From what I hear, they’re all prima donnas but foreign ones who don’t speak any English. Henry and his people will watch after them so ya won’t need to do anything except avoid them for a couple of weeks.”

“It was nice of you to let them stay with you. The Wu Shaman’s house is tiny.”

I chuckled low and drank more tea. “And I guess ya already figured out the guardian is back.”

“Are you too mad to even say his name?”

I shook my finger at the far darrig’s grin. “What ya don’t know, Mr. Comedian, is thatRasmusbrought hissisterback with him. Zara and I fought during a job several months ago. I chose not to kill her and that somehow led to me offering her a place to rethink her life.”

“So you collected another semi-villain like me to rehabilitate. You need a therapist to help you stop that habit.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ya sound like my mother. Being devious and determined was yer only crime. That's a stark contrast to the evil person Zara used to be before. The guardians can work miracles when it comes to changing a person.”

“Better miracles than wicked angels?”

When I mock-glared, Dylan laughed. “I guess it was too soon for that comparison.”

I grunted at him. “Tony changed yer life, but I’m not sure I’d call what he did a miracle. It was more of a compromise to keep me from murdering Hisser while he watched. What ya used yer relic to do to Hisser worked well enough for me.”

Dylan smirked but I saw pride in his expression. “Yet there’s a fairy with a sword in your foyer that you aren’t planning to imprison or kill. You could drop him into a volcano or slice him into pieces with your sword. Plus, you’re playing probation officer for a guardian who tried to kill you. Neither of those are rational reactions for someone with yer level of power.”

The far darrig’s conclusions made me laugh. He was not wrong about me being irrational. But it was sort of my natural state.

I shrugged. “I know it seems like I’m running a halfway house for reformed criminals, but trust me, that isn’t what’s going on. This is merely the madness of my life manifesting. If ya stay, Dylan, the risk is that ya’ll become a bigger part of my mess. I’d tell that to anyone.”

I stopped rambling and laughed at my attempts to explain my craziness. “What I’m trying to tell ya is that I’d be happy to have ya stay with me until ya get things figured out. There’s a time limit of five years on this house after which Conn, Mulan, and I intend to sell it. Surely yer parents will get over themselves during those five years.”

Dylan lifted his gaze to mine. “I would have to find work here in Salem. This is not the life I planned.”

I lifted both hands. “Ya’ll be in good company, Dylan. I’m not living the life I planned, either. Instead of creating a sanctuary, I wound up living in a museum. After what ya did to Hisser, I imagine Ben will see yer talents as an asset and want to hire

ya. He's a lot better boss than Ezra was, but I'll lie if ya ever tell him I said that."

The far darrig sighed. "You joke, but I will make myself useful to you, Aran."

I waved away his offer. "If Ben hires ya, contribute some money to Henry's housekeeping fund so they can keep feeding all of us."

"So..." Dylan said, "What did Rasmus do to make you so mad at him? I'm being nosy because I never, ever want to upset you as much as he has."

My snort was loud. "No worries, my far darrig friend, since the two of us are not sharing a bed. Rasmus and I are having a spat that I don't think he's taking seriously enough."

Dylan's olive complexion turned pink. "Oh... well, that makes me... uh... feel much better about staying here."

Ignoring his blush over my revelation, I snapped my fingers. "If ya want to have an overnight guest in yer room, ya need to check it with both me and Henry beforehand. I'll have to clear her... or him. It's a matter of safety for all of us. One of my greatest fears was Hisser showing up here."

Still blushing, Dylan shook his head. "I don't see that ever happening—having an overnight guest, I mean. I think I would take the person elsewhere for the night or go to her place. Just so you know, I'm aherkind of guy. "

"I wasn't prying—truly. I don't even ask my daughter many questions about her love life. Please keep Henry informed with a text of yer comings and goings. He uses the information for planning dinner and other events. Also, until I tell ya differently, everyone is to monitor the female guardian. I'll introduce ya to her tomorrow."

Dylan nodded in agreement, bowing his head. “I’m fine with all your rules.”

“Good,” I said. “I’m looking forward to seeing a friendly face across the dinner table. That way I can ignore the annoying ones.”

“Thank you for letting me stay, Aran.”

“Things have a way of working out as they’re meant to, Dylan. A good friend used to tell me that whenever I was struggling with some life lesson that wasn’t pleasant. I’ve never forgotten her advice.”

“I hope your friend is right.”

“Me too,” I said. “Me too.”

Chapter Five

“I’m sorry to interrupt your lurking, but there’s a fairy at the gate who claims you asked to see him,” Henry announced.

I jerked at my demon caretaker’s sudden presence but managed not to squeal. Was Henry transporting across the yard? I never heard his footsteps approaching and my awareness was nearly as good as Conn’s.

Goddess, fighting Hisser and Ezra had taken a toll on me. I hadn’t been the same since Conn and I had lost contact with each other. Maybe I should have blamed my jumpiness on the Dagda stone but I was trying to not think about it. I was afraid if I pondered it too much it would start talking to me and I’d have yet another being trying to run my life.

“Damn ya, Henry. Wear a bell or something. Lately, I never know when ya’re around.”

I’d been spying on Rasmus and Zara who were visiting the demon wolves.

“Is the fairy’s name Murray?”

“Yes. He came on foot.”

Murray had probably felt the wards and hadn’t been sure about crossing them. He’d popped up at the gate and played the game I’d laid out. Fairies had trouble with boundaries. I appreciated Murray not violating mine.

Sighing, I turned to walk back toward the house with Henry. He fell into step beside me. Unlike his son, Henry towered over me. The demon felt no urge to shorten his stature to match mine. Of course, Gale towered over me as well. I'd quickly gotten used to their tall heights but was still struggling with many of their caretaking ways. I wasn't accustomed to so many people going out of their way to please me.

"Murray's here about our fairy statue. Let him in, please."

Henry nodded and pushed a remote on his wrist. In the distance, I heard the loud clank of metal gates swinging open.

"I'll meet him outside the house and be his escort. Thanks for letting me know he was here, Henry."

"Of course. I'm sorry to have interrupted your spying." Henry's mouth twisted at one corner. "I've scheduled people to sew sheets together to hide the threatening fairy from the Wu Shaman's family. Should I cancel that work? The measurement is done, but they haven't begun sewing yet."

The idea of covering Ezra with a giant sheet to hide him made me chuckle. "Tell them to make it. The fairy folk don't work fast. Getting rid of Ezra before the weekend would astonish me."

"As you wish," Henry said. When he noticed Ezra patiently waiting for me, he hustled off to do more Henry-esque things.

I lifted my hand in a friendly wave and smiled at Murray. "Hello, Murray. Welcome to my new house."

"Hello, my Irish beauty," Murray said in greeting. "I wish ya were calling me here for a different reason."

“Yes. So do I,” I murmured, stopping to stare up at the tall, silver-haired giant. “I swear I’m not happy to involve ya in this mess at all, but I couldn’t think of what else to do. I could wait until Ezra’s family came looking for him but they won’t allow me to keep him that long. The Shadows Breakers in Ireland want me to send him back home to be incarcerated. I opted to keep Ezra here for sentimental reasons. Not that I intend to ever forgive him. That won’t be happening.”

“I hope ya don’t find this a rude question, my lovely, but was the wicked fairy one of yer lovers?” Murray asked.

Since everyone seemed able to read my bloody mind, I didn’t bother trying to deny it. Instead, I simply nodded. “Long ago, and before I married Fiona’s father, I slept with him. But Ezra and I were also work partners and friends for years before and after our carnal fling. I didn’t resist my urge to watch over him until he was safely back home. I’m hoping ya’ll ask his people to retrieve him.”

Murray grunted over my explanation. “Ezra of Airing Dale was a fool to toss a relationship with a child of The Dagda away. Power can be obtained from many sources. A loyal friend is not so easily attainable on either side of the veil.”

We paused at the door of the house. I didn’t fully trust Murray. Like many fairies, his pretty words could be nothing but air. I cared more about the next three minutes and his reaction to Ezra’s statue. That would tell me for sure if I could count on his help.

“Brace yerself for a bit of a shock,” I said in warning before we walked into the foyer.

Murray’s gaze swept the formal space and then looked at me. “This is a grand house. Did someone die and leave a fortune, Aran? Are ya woman of leisure now?”

Rolling my eyes over Murray’s teasing, I walked to Ezra. A normal-sized sheet

barely covered the top third of him. Whoever had draped it had worked hard to cover the sword and his face. I could see why Henry was having something custom-made. With the sword extended Ezra took up a lot of space.

“I wish I had something dramatic to say for the unveiling, but I guess his condition is dramatic enough.”

Then I pulled the sheet off.

Murray’s mouth dropped open. He walked closer to the statue—his eyes never leaving Ezra’s sword. He touched the point, which was shielded by a clear thin layer of what looked to be ice but wasn’t cold to the touch.

A purple spark zapped his finger and Murray yanked away. “What magick is this? It’s not yers or Conn’s.”

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“No, it isn’t. Nor is it guardian magick.”

Murray made a face. “Good Goddess, Aran. Tell me it wasn’t an angel who froze him.”

I crossed my arms. “Do ya want me to lie to ya instead? I’d prefer not to do that.”

Murray shook his head and turned away to pace. He walked nearly back to the front door before turning on his heels and returning to where I stood. Both his hands fisted on his hips when he stopped and stared at Ezra again. “The bloody idiot stole something from an angel, didn’t he?”

I thought of Dylan’s artifact. “Yes. He stole a sacred stone and used the power it contained to turn a snake shifter into a full-blown naga the size of a twenty-story building. Didn’t Conn tell ya this?”

“Connlander talked to me but I was having a pint. Who wants to listen to dull work stories when they’re drinking? I figured one of ya would tell me again when I saw ya.”

Murray’s honesty made me laugh. I might not trust this fairy but I liked him. I liked him as much as I’d once liked Ezra.

“Goddess, Murray. Ezra planned to help Hisser kill me so he could carve the Dagda stone from my chest. And somehow he’s learned to draw energy swords from the air. He also tried to kill my daughter, which is why the angel did this to him.”

"I understand now, you're talking about Fiona receiving angel training to become the guardian of the ring."

My mouth dropped open. "That's our family secret. I'm not even sure Ma knows the truth about it."

Murray grinned. "And I'm a well-connected fairy who loves chatting with people. Are ya judging me for my natural skills?"

My lips flattened as I glared. "Saying ya're well-connected tells me nothing."

Murray snorted. "A compulsion stronger than any ya can imagine prevents me from talking about how I know such things. Ya need to let this go, Aran. If I tried to explain it to ya, I'd end up writhing on yer floor like that giant snake ya talked about."

"Fine," I said as snidely as possible. I understood, but I wanted to make it clear that I didn't like it.

Murray blew out a breath. "Angel magic drains my people of their power. Afterward, it dissipates into the air like summer rain on a hot day. The fairy elders won't be letting Ezra cross the veil in this condition, no matter how much power he's been storing away. The way they will see it is that he's been poisoned."

"He tried to take my life and someone stopped him. What do ya mean he's been poisoned?" I yelled.

Murray pursed his lips and thought. "Would ya understand me better if I compared his condition to a deadly disease?" He pointed at Ezra. "As far as the fairy folk are concerned, he's been exposed to something as evil as yer Black Plague. If they let him across the veil, he might thaw from his angelic prison but the remnants of it

could affect his entire village. Why do ya think angels have been charged with ending the world?”

Now it was my turn to fist my hands on my hips and look indignant. “Ya can’t seriously believe that myth.”

Murray swiped an agitated hand through the air. “I met two of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, Aran. It’s not a myth. Their god worked for eons to give them the power to do that no matter what the guardians might try to do to stop them. Before humans and fairies ever came to be, the gods, the creators, and the watchers fought over controlling our planet. Yer boyfriend’s people won, in case ya didn’t know.”

“Goddess, that can’t be the truth, Murray.”

He shrugged. “It’s the truth as I know it.” He waved at Ezra again. “And it’s a truth yer fairy betrayer is learning the hard way. Ya never want to fight with an angel. It’s best to walk away no matter how powerful ya think ya are. It’s a real toss-up between them and the watchers—I mean, guardians.”

I had expected Murray to bring me a day and time to toss Ezra through a portal. I did not expect him to relate some story about Armageddon along with a warning about angel wrath.

I rubbed my face and groaned into my fingers. “I’m not keeping him in my foyer, Murray. I’ll be sending him to the Irish branch of the Shadow Breakers until someone among yer people comes up with a solution we can all live with. Ezra’s power is as large as Conn’s. I’d rather cut the statue into pieces and bury all of them on separate plots of consecrated ground. That’s how a witch thinks.”

Murray held up both hands. “I know ya mean that, Aran, but don’t do it. Please—as a favor to me—don’t kill the fairy out of anger or malice. I’m not excusing his crimes

or yer right to hold him accountable. Our people sorely need his collected power. The fairy folk use it to create the sky over their heads as well as all the trees and food sources. It's a known truth that our people need yer people."

"Yet you betray our trust by stealing from us."

"Our ancestors—the Tuatha de Danann—left this world for the sake of keeping the peace. Before that, though, we were of this world and needed its energy just as much yer people do. I'll keep looking into Ezra's dilemma. Trust me. This falls to those like me to resolve."

"Why should I trust ya, Murray? Yer people keep yer need for power a dirty secret even while ya're using us as batteries."

"Yer heartless comparisons wound me, Aran. I do not think of ya as a battery. Nor will I, not even when that relic inside ya wakes completely up. The Dagda's creations are nothing to be trifled with," he said with one hand covering his heart.

"Damn yer pretty speeches," I said, glaring at Murray for even pretending to care because I wanted to believe him. I couldn't let myself trust Murray was telling the truth, but it was nice that my swearing at him prompted a smile.

Murray turned to me. "Come and walk me out. I have to go report this to the powers that be."

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Was he talking about the fairy court of elders? Or the people he was under compulsion to never mention? I sighed as I trudged out with him.

“Don’t think my reaction to yer unpleasant news is a reflection on our friendship, Murray. I’m still grateful ya guarded Fiona while I fought the man-made guardians, and I’m grateful ya joined in to help take them down. Ezra’s a separate issue and I won’t hold yer news against ya. I appreciate ya looking into things.”

“And I’m grateful ya didn’t kill the messenger. Next time, I’ll set down my ale and listen more closely to Conn’s ramblings.”

My chuckle turned into a giggle. “Conn loves his drama. I think that’s why he loves Mulan. She’s walking drama in high heels and a short red dress.”

Murray looked off behind me. “Speaking of drama, I thought ya said yer guardians prized their neutrality above all else. Rasmus is looking rather murderous at the moment. I’d best be taking my leave from ya.”

“Come back when ya got better news,” I told him.

“Indeed, I will,” Murray said.

Then he leaned down and stole a kiss. I was too startled to offer a single complaint. Snickering, Murray waved a hand and popped away in a sparkle of silver mist.

I grunted at his nerve but enjoyed his reminder that Rasmus wasn’t the only male who was interested in me. It soothed my soul a little. Murray couldn’t be trusted—no

fairy could—but my ego didn't care about that detail. The fantasy of bedding him was enough to lift my sagging spirits a little.

“What did the fairy think about your statue?” Rasmus asked when he stood in front of me.

I blew out the breath I'd been holding while I waited to see what Rasmus would say. “Murray let me know his people view angel magic as a contagious illness. I don't know where this information is written. It seems I learned nearly nothing important about fairies in school.”

“I can understand him coming to give you that information, but why did he kiss you goodbye?”

“Oh, I think he did that to upset ya. It's what male fairies do. Just like Ezra, he wanted to make ya jealous. Did it work?” I asked.

Rasmus grunted. “Every human species on this planet loves to play games, don't they?”

I thought of the oblivious version of Rasmus who had comforted me after my fight with Orlin over Zara. That version of Rasmus understood the trauma of my human emotions. That version had rubbed my back and held me. I gave myself a few moments to mourn his loss because now I realized it was one.

My opinion of his right to be himself hadn't changed, no matter how mad I'd gotten over his obstinance. The surly version of Rasmus in front of me was the being Rasmus truly was. That other one was more human in the same way Zara was now more human. Both human versions were illusions, though.

Goddess knew that the surly Rasmus was not an easy male to deal with. Yet the surly

Rasmus was the version I'd eventually slept with and the one I still wanted even now. But I needed him to drop his "I'm-superior" attitude and at least try to understand why I was so upset.

I needed something more from him than pale platitudes.

I glared up at him. It was my default expression lately when he was around. "It's comments like that one keeping ya from my bed, guardian. I'll not share myself with a male who thinks so little of me and my kind."

"You forget I'm not a human male. I don't have feelings like one."

My snort was loud. "And ya know I disagree with yer cold, scientific conclusion about this human form ya put on like a suit of clothes. Ya think as a guardian that ya don't have any feelings but that's simply not true. The only feeling ya allow yerself is angry arrogance and it wears on my nerves. I honestly don't have it in me to tolerate it every day. So if ya have nothing kind or helpful to share, leave me alone."

When all he did was frown down at me, I turned to go back into the house.

"Aran... wait."

Sighing with frustration I stopped and turned back. "What now?" I demanded.

He eyed me with not a shred of warmth in his gaze. "We agreed to be monogamous."

"Which, as I recall, was my idea. Did ya bother to notice that I didn't kiss him back?"

Rasmus crossed his arms. "No. Jealousy makes me violent. I don't think well when other men hover around you."

“Well, I guess that’s two emotions ya count as real. Keep me informed if ya get to feeling any others, Mr. Scientist. I’m waiting anxiously for the moment ya realize that yer human body feels human emotions whether or not ya’re in denial about them.”

I waited a moment for a response. When it didn’t come, I walked away.

Chapter Six

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Mulan had rented a van to pick up her family at the airport. I was on my morning walk when she left early to retrieve them from their red-eye flight from Boston. Conn was not in the seat beside her. Things were tense between the two of them because Mulan was tense. No matter what arrangements we made to help her, Mulan remained churned up about their arrival.

The large rental van got parked in her single-car driveway where it completely hid the cute little two-seater ride she and Conn enjoyed. I'd offered her my car to pick them up because it had room for them all to sit if they fastened some of their luggage on top of it. The shocked face she'd made at my suggestion had made me laugh.

Like my daughter, the Wu Shaman hated my car. True, it didn't match my house at all, but it got me around when I needed to go somewhere. I felt no need to prove my value by owning fancy electronics or the latest version of some vehicle. I had better things to spend money on—like the teacher who was coming to help me keep everyone out of my head.

Besides, Henry had stashed his limo-sized vehicle in the limo-sized garage made for such a machine. He'd offered to pick up her family but Mulan had declined his offer. She didn't want her relatives to think she had money to spend on such things. She also didn't care if they knew the truth of what she'd accomplished alone in America through sheer grit. But I sure did. I wanted to educate them about a great many things.

I shook my head as I wandered over to the grove of trees where my sacred space was coming to life. A tent still shielded my firepit, but the greenhouse was on the verge of being completed. Gale had ordered a kit. It arrived yesterday and someone had

assembled the frame already. They'd probably finish it today.

To get all the plants and blessed dirt I needed, a shopping trip to the Black Cat Nursery was necessary. I'd also need to make a trip to a big box store for gardening gloves, pots, and all the implements. I had no idea if Jack still had my original gardening stuff but it wasn't worth the headache of asking for it.

On my way out of my sacred space, a giant shadow darkened the sky above my head to where I couldn't see daylight around me. I exited the trees to stare at the enormous creature. Black scales covered him and large black wings possessed a red-feathered symbol. His shaggy mane, a deep shade of red, made my unkempt locks seem tame in comparison.

The creature landed near me and folded his wings against his back. The dragon was as big as Mulan's cottage and stood nearly as tall. His large dragon mage head bowed to me. "Greetings, Aran of The Dagda."

Goddess, I hadn't seen a dragon mage in ages. "Greetings, dragon mage. How did ya get by my wards?"

He shook his red hair out of his eyes to better stare at me. "Is that what tingled when I landed? I thought my phone was buzzing against my scales. I can't use the phone when I'm in dragon form. I have to carry it in a bag."

"Ya're trespassing, dragon. What's yer purpose in coming here?"

Ignoring my question, his colossal head turned toward the house. "Are ya entertaining angels in there?"

I stiffened at his amazing instincts. There would be no fooling him. "The only angel I know has come and gone. There are a couple of guardians in residence. Ya might be

feeling them.”

He turned back to gawk down at me. “I thought Henare of the Fir Bolg was joking about the Ancient Ones vacationing here. Ya must be special to them, Aran of The Dagda. Those ya call guardians are very reclusive. They are like my dragon sire who watches over my kind from beyond the veil.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Are ya descended from the first dragons who existed on this planet? One guardian told me a story about how dragons were here first.”

“Aye, lass. I’m one of those. To my eternal regret, I slept through centuries of dragons dying out and ignored all the many millennia of creatures who came after us. I woke only after humans had taken over the Earth. Yer kind was so primitive back then that I thought ya were only good for food. Fortunately for ya, I don’t think that way anymore.”

“What’s yer name, dragon?”

“Zenos.”

My eyes went wide. Could it be the same Zenos I’d studied about in school? Rumor had it he’d been Merlin’s pupil—or teacher. The stories I read were still unclear.

“Why are ya here, Zenos of the One?”

“Henry said a daughter of The Dagda needed a teacher. Since I owed him a few favors, here I am to pay back one of them.”

I stared open-mouthed at him. So this dragon was the teacher Henry had gone on and on about hiring for me. Nothing could have surprised me more.

“By the Ancients, ya’re easy to read, woman. Now I see why the demon called me for help.”

The dragon chuckled as flames erupted all around him. When they died down, a very large male with long red hair remained. He was even larger than The Dagda who I’d never seen take a form less than seven feet tall. Zenos dressed in clothing from the Middle Ages that had been made to look as contemporary as possible. He presented quite a romantic picture. Saying he was good-looking didn’t cover it. He was regal and raw all at once.

I lifted a hand and pointed at him. “I read about ya in school, Zenos. Ya’re a dragon mage.”

“Aye. I needed something productive to fill the eons so I learned magic. I’m quite good at it too. Truly, lass, I’m quite good at a lot of things. If ya weren’t pining for that watcher ya drew to ya, I’d be tempted to show ya more of those things. My mate passed a century ago and I’ve yet to find her equal.”

I ran both my hands through my hair. First, it was Murray flirting and now this dragon mage hinted at wanting to bed her. Was there some sign on my forehead that announced I was sleeping alone these days? Every time I thought life couldn’t get any stranger my life proved me wrong.

“I was heading back to the house for breakfast. Are ya hungry, Zenos? I’m sure Henry and Gale would be happy to feed ya.”

“Yes, I’m famished,” Zenos declared. “Flying takes tons of energy and requires a lot of fuel.”

“Will ya be staying long with us?” I asked.

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Zenos stopped and turned to stare down at me. He studied me for a long while and then grinned. “It seems I’ll be staying a few weeks. Ya got some unlearning to do first. It’s all that formal education. If magick isn’t explained in a book or a scroll, witches rarely bother to investigate it.”

I resented the lecture. I’d learned plenty from watching others. What kind of teacher was he?

“How can ya teach something not in a book?”

Zenos chuckled. “Have ya always had this problem of people reading yer mind?”

I frowned at the question. Now that he mentioned it, no, I hadn’t always had this problem. It hadn’t happened until I got out of the demon hunter’s prison and merged with the Dagda stone.

Good Goddess, could that be what had unlocked my mind? Was the stone messing with my body? I put a hand over where the stone pulsed under my skin.

“No, I haven’t always been like this, or not that I knew. I worked among all kinds of paranormals over the years. One of them would have said something if that had been the case. It’s been happening a lot since I merged with an ancient artifact. I can’t keep anything a bloody secret.”

“Well, at least ya’re a quick thinker.” He waved a hand as we approached the house. “Why did ya leave Ireland, lass? Salem is the place where they killed all the witches.”

Laughter burst out of me. Feeling snarky, I lifted my lip in a sneer. “I married a bloody Yank who put a babe in me so I had no choice but to follow him here. We parted ways after I got out of the prison he put me in. I’m talking about an actual prison and an actual bad marriage. I escaped from both but it took a while.”

Zenos snickered. “Ya can’t trust most men when there’s significant power at stake. And now ya’re bedding someone with more power than even ya possess.” He held up a hand when I glared. “Don’t freak out on me. Ya’re not broadcasting yer sex life. I only know what I know because Henry warned me about yer relationship to the guardian.”

I grunted in disgust. “Rasmus is here in a mostly human form and not his usual formidable self. I’ve not tested his powers yet but if he keeps annoying me, we’ll all be finding out.”

Zenos entered the house and smiled at Henry. Then his smile fell away as he turned toward Ezra who was now covered from head to toe with several sheets sewn together to make one large drape. The dragon mage looked at the statue and then back down at me. “I smell fairy mixed with a bit of angel. Ya’re quite the little warrior, aren’t ya?”

I glanced Ezra’s way. “Yer nose is correct, dragon. A powerful fairy tried to kill me. The angel ya smell froze the fairy to save my daughter’s life and saved mine. Please don’t read my mind about the details. It’s a long story containing a family secret and not one I can share.”

Zenos held up a hand to show he would heed my demand. “It sounds like a story that requires many glasses of ale to properly enjoy.”

I didn’t want to anger him since he came here to help me so I shrugged as I offered him a wicked smile. “It takes a shot or two of Jamieson’s to make me forget about the

statue. The frozen fairy is a problem for me to solve but it won't be one for anyone else in the house."

"Like yer Chinese visitors won't be a problem for anyone?"

He glared at me for teasing. "I see Henry warned ya of them as well."

"Oh, aye... he warned me. Ya might say he warned me off. I enjoy a good prank but I promised to behave."

Henry interrupted us and swept the dragon mage up in a man-hug. Zenos turned into the hug and grinned. I waited politely for the two long-time friends to say their hellos before rejoining the conversation.

Henry was still smiling when he looked at me. "Lunch for you and Zenos will be served in the dining room. I invited the guardians and your far darrig friend as well."

"Thank you, Henry. Have ya seen Conn today? I didn't see him in the car when Mulan left."

"I haven't seen him yet but he's coming to lunch as well. The Wu Shaman sent word that her family got detained in Boston for sneaking illegal herbs through Customs."

I rubbed my face. Poor Mulan. "So she's still waiting at the Salem airport for them."

Henry nodded. "New connecting flights had to be arranged. Conn said they would be here later today."

My sigh was loud. "Or she might shake her Shaman stick at her parents and put them asleep for a week in the rental van. Goddess knows, I wouldn't blame her."

Zenos rubbed his chin. “I knew a Wu Shaman once. We had quite the time together until she decided to try time travel as a path to immortality. I warned her it wouldn’t work the way she imagined.”

It was obvious this dragon mage got around. “Yes, I heard a similar story. The shaman mastered traveling but her body died the moment her spirit returned to the timeline she left.”

Zenos nodded. “Death is necessary for most creatures. Even those ya call gods eventually change forms.”

I turned and looked up at him. I could tell I’d be doing that a lot in the next two weeks.

Zenos chuckled and held up a hand. “I wasn’t speaking of myself, lass. I made a bargain long ago that guaranteed I would live forever. That’s how I met Henry. Every so often I have to die and regenerate similar to the way demons do. Henare of the Fir Bolg acted as my teacher. He showed me how to get through the transition in the best way possible.”

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I smirked as I shook my head. “I don’t want to live forever or hang my hopes on who I’ll be next time. I just want to live my current life with no regrets and as much peace as possible.”

“Ya’re a warrior and a witch, Aran. Are ya sure peace is what ya want?” Zenos asked.

“Yes,” I answered with a smile. “It’s what I truly want.”

Zenos wagged a finger at me. “I find that middle-aged women don’t always know their own minds. Age makes them fascinating yet unpredictable creatures. We’ll discuss that more when we start our training.”

Before I could challenge his misogynistic statements, Henry interrupted.

“Let me show you to your room,” Henry said, tugging on Zenos to move him away from me.

I grinned at the dragon mage. “Henry rules all our schedules. Ya should do what he says. Things will go much easier for ya if ya don’t rebel.”

I snorted when my alleged teacher walked away laughing. I also wondered what in Danu’s name I’d gotten myself into.

Rasmus glared at Zenos over his couscous salad while I worried if the food was substantial enough to satisfy the dragon mage. Would I have to buy whole cows to feed him? I made a mental note to check with Henry. He probably knew anyway.

That demon knew everything.

I'd explained to everyone that Zenos was a dragon mage here to help me. Still feeling protective of myself, I did not go into the details of what I intended to learn. Or "unlearn" as Zenos had put it.

I fished a set of car keys from my pocket and pushed them across the table to Dylan. The far darrig stared at them until I waved my hand at him and them. One blond perfectly groomed eyebrow arched in question. I smiled and wondered what Fiona would think of his appearance. He and I had discussed him remaining in his human form while Mulan's family was visiting. He had done that while working with his family so he claimed it wasn't a hardship to hold it that long.

Of course, I hadn't known about Zenos coming at the time we'd talked. I didn't want Dylan to feel overwhelmed by all the strangers milling about so I gave him the only freedom from it I could.

"Ya've seen my car so ya know it's not much to look at, Dylan, but ya're welcome to use it. If I need to get somewhere, I'll get Henry to drive me. Mostly I plan to stay put while Mulan's parents are here."

"Thank you, Aran. That's very generous of you and I appreciate it," Dylan said.

I waved away his thanks. "It's only fair that ya can escape for a few minutes when the need hits."

Dylan smiled as he pocketed the keys. My good deed done, I turned to Rasmus. "The same goes for the two of ya. Henry can help if Zara or ya need a lift somewhere."

"We won't be going anywhere. Who would help you with the fairy if everyone was gone?" Rasmus asked.

I supposed that was his way of letting me know he wouldn't be making the mistake of leaving me again. Men would do a lot for sex, but it surprised me that the guardian would stoop to making promises.

"I believe Conn and I have him covered. If I get concerned, I can put out a call for help. Ben's offered a guard but I'm not keen on having some agent with a weapon camping out in the foyer while Mulan's family are staying here. My insurance doesn't cover sniper fire."

Conn looked grim as he agreed. "I imagine I'll be running a constant intervention between Mulan and her family for the next few weeks."

Sighing, I nodded at Conn's summary. "I know this is a lot happening at once when we rarely have anything going on. Please, just do the best ya can to tolerate things. We'll all get back to work when Mulan's family is gone."

I looked at Zara. We hadn't spoken about the demon wolves since our initial talk. "I noticed Rasmus and ya visiting the wolves yesterday. Are you deep in thought about their situation?"

Zara looked upset that I'd put her on the spot but she answered me anyway. "Yes, I thought we agreed that was my task."

I glanced around the table before looking back at her and shrugging. Except for Zenos, everyone here knew about everyone else. There were nearly no secrets left to hide. "I'd rather ya not help them if ya're not compelled to resolve their problem. No one's tampering with yer free will or twisting yer arm to make ya lend yer aid to them."

Zara looked at her arm. "I understand the reference but must you speak in metaphors all the time? I prefer you to be more to the point."

I wanted to answer her snark with some next-level smack of my own but Zenos beat me to it. The dragon mage smiled at Zara. She was a beautiful woman who only smiled in rare moments. The female guardian had great physical appeal if the widower was hunting for a female to bed.

“Aran and I hail from the same motherland,” Zenos explained. “We’re taught from the womb to tell a good story and not just recite the boring details. Perhaps our manner of speech seems frivolous to ya guardians but remember that ya are on vacation here. To get the full human experience, ya might want to focus on the intentions of Aran’s words rather than yer expectations that she will learn to communicate like she’s one of ya.”

Zara looked up from eating to glare at him with all the disdain her expression could show, which was a lot.

“I know what you are, dragon. I know your kind,” she said.

“And I know what ya are as well, watcher. I also know the sins of yer kind as well as I know my own. For Aran’s sake, I hadn’t planned on reciting the list of them to her. We both know it would be a very long list if I did.”

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Zara dropped her gaze to her salad. “I’ve not heard us called watchers in a long while. It reminds me of what I chose all those ages ago.”

“I wasn’t trying to bring up terrible memories. Would ya rather I call ya a guardian instead? I know Aran calls both of ya by the more neutral moniker ya chose.”

Zara shrugged. “I do not care what humans call me.”

“Ya might if one ever got angry enough to become inventive,” I said, smiling to ease the sting of the statement. “Some of us don’t mind being rude. It lets people know what we’re thinking.”

Zenos ignored my interjection and studied both guardians as he ate. “To answer yer blunt question about my business here, I’ve come to educate the daughter of The Dagda and haven’t yet decided what form my teaching will take. There are a few things I could share about yer kind that I think Aran would find interesting, and more importantly, that she would find useful in dealing with ya.”

“Please excuse my sister’s irritated attitude,” Rasmus said, calmly addressing the dragon mage. “Zara is still recovering from an accident that required a lot of healing. She suffers daily and the discomfort makes her churlish. We’re grateful to Aran for hosting us. Zara is here to heal but I’m here because Aran is important to me. I am here to spend time with her because I value her greatly.”

Zenos glanced up from his meal to stare boldly at Rasmus. “Is that right? Well, that explains everything critical, now doesn’t it? The two of us are both here to make

Aran's life better."

Conn, Goddess bless him, broke the rising tension by reading a ranting message on his phone from a very agitated Mulan. When he was done reading, he shook his head. "Her parents finally boarded their flight to Salem. They insisted on waiting for a plane with four openings in first class. I need to warn Henry about what he'll be dealing with."

"Goddess, help us all," I said as I palmed my face, leaned an elbow on the table, and laughed dryly over our prima donna guests.

Dylan chose that moment to excuse himself and I didn't blame the far darrig one bit.

I wished I could have gone with him.

Chapter Seven

Rasmus and Zara were avoiding me. They had disappeared after breakfast and I couldn't locate their energy. For all I knew, the guardians might have abruptly ended their human vacation. Rasmus often left without saying a word. Believing that would have been my first reaction, except Conn said they were still around and I trusted him.

My demon familiar was ensconced in the library, making use of Henry's elegant desk for his personal paperwork. It was always strange for me to see Conn deliberately doing something as human as working on his bills. He and I were spread out far more now than we'd been in the thousand square feet of our rentals.

During our time away from work, I'd taken to tracking everyone. Call it paranoia or my need to control my situation, but I felt no guilt for it.

Conn was easiest for me to energetically trace because of our connection. Maybe I was extra-sensitive after having experienced my first energy separation from him since I'd accepted our contract. It comforted me to know where he was, even though I don't think he shared my separation trauma. He'd had centuries and centuries of working with my many predecessors. I'm sure that taught him not to be overly concerned.

Eventually, I ended up back in my room. Lunch had been a series of sandwich boxes everyone had picked up at their leisure. I grabbed mine and hid in my sitting room to eat it. Some of my temporary furniture was disappearing, though. I was down to one chair and a tiny side table barely big enough to rest a cup of tea on. Maybe Henry was nudging me to get serious about choosing furnishings for the room.

Not that I could go shopping. Dylan was out in my car.

I hated feeling so out of sorts. Boredom rarely happened to me.

Zenos, who was supposed to be helping me learn to use my magic more effectively, was also missing. He'd patted my shoulder as he left the table after breakfast and ominously promised to see me later. Well, several hours had passed now without him tracking me down.

I finally finished all my unpacking—well, all I could do until I went furniture shopping and found a chest of drawers.

The housing was buzzing with activity around me. Henry was busy preparing for Mulan's parents to arrive. Gale was revising the meal plan to hopefully keep Mulan's family from finding fault with their meals.

Ya could say I was waiting to play gracious host once Mulan returned with her people. Her family's plane should have landed by now. Had she toured them around

Salem on the way home? If so, she could have called to say she did that.

Time off didn't mean I wanted to be lazy. After seven years in prison with nothing productive to do, I saw time off from work as time available for doing enjoyable activities. Waiting for Mulan to return with her family was everything but that.

Maybe I should go check on the greenhouse. A message from Gale informed me it would be finished today. Maybe I could make a list of plants. That would pass the time productively.

Grabbing a notepad and pen from one of my newly organized storage containers, I headed out of the house. A short walk later, I discovered the workers truly had finished it. Someone had also removed the tent and exposed my firepit to the elements once more. Workers had cleared away all traces of construction, and someone had sprinkled a handful of sage on the open ground to clear the negativity.

I prowled around trying to imagine pots full of blooming plants hanging from the beams and sitting on the shelves. I wouldn't try to grow mugwort or mushrooms. Sarah Templeton's shop supplied good quality ones. I would content myself with growing lavender, sage, lemongrass, and the simpler herbs needed for spells.

A sudden loud screech brought me out of the structure to investigate. Standing next to the firepit was a giant bird. When it saw me, it screeched loudly again.

I stared at the mystical creature in blinking shock until understanding dawned. I instinctively put a hand to my chest where the Dagda stone lived.

Then a voice suddenly boomed in my head. Do ya spend a lot of time feeling sorry for yerself? That's such a waste of time, lass.

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I bowed to the majestic Phoenix. “Ya’re only the second firebird I ever saw, Zenos. Give me a moment to get over my awe.”

His giant phoenix form faded away as I watched. Soon a fully dressed Zenos faced me as a human male. His change from creature to creature exuded magick yet appeared effortless.

I smiled at him. “Do ya see yer human form as just another version of yerself? I’ve always wondered how shifters prioritized their humanness. Most I’ve known had only two appearances—human or beast. Ya seem to become whatever ya please like a djinn.”

Zenos rolled his eyes. “What did they teach ya in that bloody school ya attended? A djinn is an elemental. They’re made of smoke, wind, and fire. I’m made of the same stuff ya are, Aran. I just control it better.”

“Indeed, ya do,” I said with a laugh. “And I wasn’t out here brooding. I was making a shopping list to buy some plants for my greenhouse.”

“Oh, sure ya were,” Zenos said with an eye roll. “Unhappiness rolls off ya in great waves, lass. If ya won’t be brutally honest with me, our working together is a waste of my time.”

I sighed. “Fine. I suppose ya could say I was a bit frustrated.”

“Yer unhappiness is not the watcher’s fault. That male will be back inside ya the first chance ya give him to do so.”

“That’s not why I’m unhappy... and his name is Rasmus. Her name is Zara. And they like to be called guardians, not watchers.”

Zenos grunted. “They changed their name because the things they did when they were called watchers still shames them. I’d have wanted a new title too after what they did. The males bred cannibal giants with human females because they couldn’t keep their too-powerful cocks in their pants. The watcher females bred with humans as well but their offspring became legendary heroes. Their children fought each other to the death. Yer precious guardians had to all but destroy the planet to kill their wicked offspring off.”

“That’s old news. What’s yer real problem with them? I’ve got a list but I seem to be the only person not fooled by their calm claims of superiority and their philosophizing about lowly humans.”

Zenos grinned at me. “Now I can see why they’re camped out with ya. They like a challenge.”

I snorted. “I doubt they see me as a challenge. I’m more like a thorn they stepped on and can’t pull out of their foot.”

Zenos shook his head as he chuckled. “I don’t hate them, Aran. I just don’t respect them.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Tell me why. I’d like to hear that story.”

Zenos spread his hands. “Dragons can sleep for ages, ya know, and often do. The ancient overseers let their creator people bring in other cultures while we slept. The watchers were a bunch of bored light beings who became overseers. But in this dimension on this planet every physical body, even if not completely human, comes with feelings and emotions that need to be dealt with. The biggest emotion for the

watchers was lusting for those they guarded. Sex is a universal urge.”

I nodded. “Rasmus tells me he doesn’t feel human emotions but I know differently.”

Grunting, Zenos bent to the fire pit and rearranged the rock boundary. “A basic goodness from them having ascended once from physical to light is all that saves watchers from being evil. I’ve heard that humans closely resemble what they were like before they ascended into light being forms. Some, like yer two guardians, decided that repeating the life and death cycle was a less boring way to live. Instead of admitting that boredom, they cloak it in pretending they’re doing it for the sake of helping humans. Bullocks to that is what I say.”

Zenos was recounting the same stories Rasmus had shared with me. “Rasmus told me his original form looked nearly exactly like how he does now, except that he had two pairs of arms.” I chuckled a little. “I can see an extra set of hands being very useful during a fight.”

Zenos chuckled too. “Dragons possess two wings, as well as four legs and claws. I’ve used all of them many times.”

“Rasmus has wings. All the guardians do.”

Zenos nodded before smiling. “I asked for wings when I was a wee dragonling. Dragons are born with them now, the lucky buggers, but ya had to endure some painful magick to get your wings to grow back then. My mother was our hoard leader. She made me wait until I was nearly a century old before she allowed me to go through the process. When I think back on it, I believe that was just her way of keeping me around and out of trouble.”

“Wow,” I said as I remembered Zenos as a dragon. “Was it the flying part that appealed to ya most? Rasmus said wings were required for military dragons. He

doesn't bother sharing all the details of the why and why not with me. I end up having to connect the dots for myself."

"Wings were for any dragon, but yes, military dragons were required to get them. I was a scholar in my early years, not a fighter. My heart ached for wings because they represented the ability to break free from earthly bounds and embark on grand adventures across the globe. I dreamed of nothing back then except getting away from the only life I'd known."

"Aren't we all like that when we're young?" I asked with a smile.

Zenos shrugged. "I think some of us are that way forever. It was my nature to want to learn and I'm still like that."

"So why didn't ya stay awake and study all the other beings that got put on this planet? The stories I've heard were very interesting."

Zenos looked off into the distance. His fierce glare was aimed at beings in the distant past.

"Long before humans were created, I made some mistakes with my mother's people. That hibernation was me brooding about life. I woke when humans came along. Their hedonistic desire to survive was contagious. That was when I made the biggest mistake of my life and the one that cost me my original dragon form. So once again I chose hibernation over facing what I'd done."

I nodded at the regret in his voice. "No one can claim to have lived without experiencing a few failures and setbacks. Screwing up is part of living, isn't it?"

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Zenos shrugged. “Humans did terrible things to dragons for many years. And we did terrible things back. Yet dragons aren’t the only immortal beings who struggled with yer kind. When the watchers realized their horniness had created some tremendous problems for the planet, they woke us hibernating dragons to help them kill their monstrous children. After the dirty deed was done, though, they deeply regretted all that loss of life. So instead of showing gratitude to dragons for doing their dirty work, they blamed us for their emotional pain. They owe my kind an apology and they know it. I will hold them accountable for their misdeeds until they truly repent, which will probably be never. The assumption they have of their own superiority precludes any admission of having made a mistake.”

I huffed in disgust. “Yes, I’ve seen that for myself. Did ya go hibernate again after that?”

Zenos nodded. “Aye, I slept again and would have slept forever if people would have let me be.”

“What woke ya the next time?”

“I’m sure I don’t have to tell ya, lass, that all creatures bicker with one another. Humans are bad about starting wars and dragons are a close second. My father was one of the ancients—a black dragon who sacrificed his whole life to serve dragonkind forever. He’s like yer demon king in that regard. What remained of my mother’s dragon descendants wanted to kill me for some wrongs my family and I did. Some would say they had goodreasons but taking yer revenge on a whole family is always unfair. My father learned of their treachery and woke me before they could succeed. I’ve stayed away ever since.”

“I learned about dragons in magick school, but it was The Dagda who shared most about them. I knew the stories of dragons still existing were real from seeing them in my work. I also knew they sometimes were a problem for humans. What I didn’t know was they were a problem for each other. Ya’re the first to tell me that.”

Zenos shook his head. “There’s less of that going on now because they’re being meditated by one of yer kind. I’m speaking of a multi-talented witch who ironically turned out to be a descendant of mine. She takes dragon form and has mighty magickal powers when she does. We dragons live mostly in peace because of her insistence that we do. Because of her I’ve returned to my scholarly ways and can’t say as I regret it.”

“Wow,” I said, thinking of what it must be like for someone born human to learn to shift into the most apex predator in the world. I’d never longed for shifting talent, but now I think having wings might have been nice.

Then I thought of the demon wolves. They were also humans who would have to master the skill of switching forms. Magick had altered their genetic makeup too much. The longer they lived as wolves—the more their animal natures developed.

“So... anyway,” Zenos said, getting back to his story. “After my father saved me, he said I shamed my dragon mother and their love that had created me by hibernating too much. He ordered me to live again and made sure I did. That was several centuries ago now.”

I stared at him in shock. “Goddess, Zenos, yer mother and ya lived the dragon version of what the watchers did with humans. Ya’re a child of a dragongod—a child who shouldn’t have everexisted at all. It must have been hard for ya to live all this time with no others like ya. My family is all that keeps me sane.”

Zenos stabbed the air in front of me with a finger. “Ya’re quite sharp for a middle-

aged witch, Aran. I like that in a female. I bet yer guardian does too.”

I snorted. “Ya’re not the only one with secrets, Zenos. The real reason the guardians hang around me is that one of them claims to be my ancestor. They kept right on having sex with humans even after the mess they made.” I chuckled dryly when he froze. “Did I surprise ya with that information? It sure surprised me when I learned it. We’ve all heard the stories but it’s vastly different to be told ya’re related to one of them.”

“No, Henry didn’t share that bit of gossip about ya,” he said with a smirk. Then his frown returned. “I can’t believe those bastards kept knocking up human women. That proves they’re not as high and mighty as they claim to be.”

Laughter bubbled up from deep within me. “Goddess, I learned that about them almost immediately. My ancestor, Orlin, tells me he loved my grandmother. Now he shows up randomly to visit. He’s also promised me that they’ve learned to mate with humans without creating monsters—unless ya consider me one. I know a few people who would think that about me. He also says there will be no more offspring because they’ve finally perfected birth control for their male human forms to keep them from replicating. The females got new bodies. The male guardians made them sterile. As ya can imagine, the females are rightly pissed at that.”

Zenos laughed loudly. “Ya’re a fascinating person, Aran O’Malley. Henry said ya saved a female guardian’s life and got stuck with being her jailer. Is that true?”

“Yes, but I had reasons to make that commitment. If ya turn yer head, ya can see them running around in that pen over there playing frisbee with their demon caretaker. She turned two humans into animals.”

“I can’t believe a guardian turned humans into other creatures against their will. It’s against their precious code to interfere that much,” Zenos said with a sneer.

My sigh was long. Not a day went by that I didn't worry about whether or not Zara would succeed in changing them back. "The female guardian combined new magick with ancient magick that she learned from a race who were here before humans. That race mastered genetic manipulation. No one knows that old magick but her because she loved a male among them. A grief older than the human race motivated what she did."

Zenos stared hard at me. I swallowed nervously and wished I could read his mind, but I couldn't, so I just went on talking. Why did I care if he understood my reasoning or not? He wasn't there when I made the original decision.

"If I'd killed Zara, I would have killed any chance of her turning them back into humans. The guardians went to a lot of trouble to make Zara as good a prisoner as I could expect to have to keep tabs on. We both stand to gain from our agreement if she learns how to undo what she did."

Zenos snorted as loud as a bull. "For the sake of the guardian's victims, ya walk the edge of the wicked female remembering the truth. That's not very smart of ya, lass. The bastards are using ya to do what they don't want to do themselves. That's the same thing they did to dragons."

Shrugging off his warnings, I sighed again. "If Zara turns the demon wolves back into humans, all my troubles will be worth it. She originally intended to do that anyway, but now she gets a legitimate chance. The details of her story remain the same. Only the plot points have changed."

The dragon mage laughed. "Ya Irish are so whimsical in yer views."

"And where do ya hail from, Zenos? Ya sound just like me. I know ya must be Celtic."

“My hibernation was in yer homeland but not on yer soil. It was farther up north.”

“Oh. Ya’re a highlander,” I said, wrinkling my face. “That’s like someone from the south calling someone a Yankee here.”

“I don’t concern myself with that level of detail. I slept inside the rocky cliffs there. I woke up and stayed for a while. Mostly, I still call that land home, but I don’t label myself with any human term.”

My ears pricked at the sound of a vehicle. “I believe I hear a vehicle coming down the driveway. That must be the Wu Shaman returning at last.”

Both of us rushed out of my sacred space and headed back to the house.

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Zenos lifted a finger and pointed at Mulan's rental van. "One of her family is hiding a big secret, Aran. I could tell ya what it is but then I would miss watching ya deal with it. Life is boring for immortals. We highly value our entertainment. It's also going to be a lot of fun when the fairy pops free. Is yer life always this lively?"

I frowned at his predictions. Mulan's people didn't worry me, but Ezra escaping sure did. "Ya aren't planning to aid the fairy in breaking free, are ya? Ezra wants me dead, Zenos. If he escapes, I'll have to kill him."

"Don't be naïve, lass. Surely ya know the fairy's been working on his escape this whole time. Yer angel stopped him good but he's not caught in a void. And as loaded up as the fairy is on power, the magick that bound him will not hold him as long as ya were told it would. Angels are full of themselves. They screw up less often than most but they do screw up."

"Do they screw up more than guardians?" I asked.

Zenos laughed at my question. "I think it would be fun to do a comparison."

I rolled my eyes. "Did ya come to teach me or just harass me for yer amusement?"

"How mad would ya be if I said I came for both?"

I heard the teasing in his question so I let it slide. "What do ya know about the Wu Shaman's family that I don't?"

"Something juicy," he teased.

I was about to demand the juicy details when the wards halfway up the driveway hit Mulan's rental vehicle and flipped it up into the air.

A startled Zenos barked out a spell that hung the van in the air. "I keep forgetting ya set wards on the place. My magick won't hold them long. Let me shift to dragon and catch the vehicle when it drops."

Conn ran from the house shifting into his natural form as he moved. By the time he reached the spot where Mulan and her people hung in limbo, he was as big as Zenos was as a dragon.

"Well, that's impressive. Now I see why they still consider him their king even after all this time," Zenos said, crossing his arms to study Conn.

The demon tried to grab the van but encountered a force field of some sort. Conn turned his demon head toward us and growled.

"No need to growl at me, yer majesty. It will fall in a moment," the dragon mage bellowed at Conn.

And it did.

Conn caught it upside down and rolled it over in his giant demon claws before setting it gently on the ground. My eyes watched in horror while my mind quietly decided that wards were yet another good reason to always wear a seatbelt.

As I got closer, I could see Mulan slumped in the driver's seat. I ran down the driveway to see if they were okay. Zenos stayed by the house and watched. When I glanced back, I saw Henry and Gale standing beside the dragon mage as well.

Once the van was safely settled on the ground, Conn shrunk to a more normal size

and destroyed the seatbelt to release a now unconscious Wu Shaman from her seat. Being in the front, Mulan had caught the worst effects of the wards going off.

I glanced in the backseats at her family. They stared wide-eyed at a growling Conn while he checked Mulan for injuries. I pushed open the side door to release the four of them from the vehicle. One of Henry's people zoomed up beside us in some sort of small vehicle with three seats and room for luggage. It had enough space to transport all of them to the house at once.

"I'm Aran. Do any of ya speak English?" I asked.

It took them a long time, but they finally tore their startled gazes away from staring at Conn to stare blankly at me.

"Do ya speak English?" I asked again, stating the question as clearly as my accent allowed.

A grinning Zenos appeared at my side. "Need some help communicating, lass?"

"I think it's a lost cause. They don't speak any English."

Zenos said something in a Chinese dialect. When he got no response, he tried another. On about the fourth try, Mulan's father answered him back. They seemed to struggle to communicate but at least partially understood each other.

"Ask if they're hurt, Zenos."

Zenos spoke to the father, who spoke to the others in the language I recognized only because Mulan often swore in it. The four of them looked at me and shook their heads.

“Good,” I said, nodding my head. “Tell them to get into the cart and go to the house. Henry will show them to their rooms and help them settle in.”

Zenos pointed to the cart and motioned them to come out. He spoke a few words and then bowed to them. They inclined their heads to him without replying before slowly exiting the vehicle.

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Thankfully, Conn had shifted back to his human form by that time and remembered his clothes. He gently slid a moaning Mulan from the driver's seat. "She's not injured badly but I think she smacked the windshield with that hard head of hers. There's a red spot above her eyes and she keeps passing out on me."

"Put Mulan in my bedroom, Conn. She can stay there until we know she's okay. Her parents will probably want to check on her. Ya don't need them invading yer house to do it."

Conn glanced at the people climbing into Henry's clever transport. "I doubt her parents would care if she'd been killed. They haven't even asked about her or shown any concern."

I rubbed Conn's arm as we walked. "I noticed. When Mulan comes around, perhaps we'll ask them to leave. We don't need this additional stress in our lives. We have enough."

Conn made a growling noise before responding. "No, that would bother her too much. If I have to compel them to behave while they're here, I will do that. I thought her father was a nice person when we met. How could he not care about her at all? She was driving them. She wasted her entire day waiting for them to arrive."

I blew out a breath. "I know ya visited their country to talk to her parents, but did they ever see ya in yer demon form? If not, maybe they were in shock. Ya looked quite fierce in yer full demon glory and I'm sure they saw ya. What you did even impressed the dragon mage. He said he understood why ya were the demon king."

The comments I relayed didn't seem to matter. I knew that was because he was worried about Mulan. I was worried too. But babbling and talking was how I diffused tension, whether it was mine or someone else's.

"I did this to her," Conn bit out. "I reinforced the wards because of the fairy being here. It's my fault she's hurt."

I shook my head at his ranting. "Don't be an idiot. Only something dangerous would have set the wards off. This was no accident. Zenos told me someone in Mulan's family had a big secret but the bastard wouldn't tell me more. We'll find out what it is in time and make sure it doesn't hurt the rest of us."

Conn's reply to my determination was a grunt.

I followed him inside the house and sighed at the empty foyer as he carried her to my quarters.

Once Mulan's parents were safely upstairs, Henry's people retrieved the rental van and parked it in Mulan and Conn's driveway. Outside of the now shredded seatbelt, it looked to be mostly unscathed, even after Conn flipped it over in his giant demon hands.

I didn't believe for one moment that the wards had failed us. The purpose of them was to disarm and detain. They had mostly accomplished their task, even though Mulan had gotten banged up.

There was only the mystery of why to solve. If Zenos was right, then it was someone in Mulan's family. I imagined whoever was responsible would be feeling relief to not have been discovered yet. If I had my way, that relief would not last long.

In the meantime, I would make sure the entire household got put on alert.

Chapter Eight

Feeling the need to bring everyone up to speed, I searched for Rasmus and Zara. I found them on the third floor of the house. The room mirrored the library except it contained no books. Instead, Henry made it look like a picture gallery. The two guardians were quietly reading books at a table set in front of a large window that peered down the driveway. That meant they had witnessed what had happened.

Both of them looked at me as I entered, but it was Rasmus who spoke. “We would have come to help but didn’t want to be one more problem for you to deal with. Is Mulan okay?”

“I hope so. Conn thinks she hit her head on the van’s windshield when the wards went off.”

Rasmus closed the book he was reading to give me his full attention. “What caused the wards to react to her vehicle? The car has been in her driveway for several days with no problems.”

I shrugged. “I honestly don’t know. Someone in Mulan’s family probably caused the problem. Watch yerselves around them. They speak no English and don’t give a flip about anyone but themselves. They paid Mulan no mind when she got hurt. If I hadn’t given my word to Mulan, I would have hexed them.”

Rasmus grinned at my irritation. “Would you like me to incapacitate them until you can discern the level of danger they present?”

I froze where I stood. "Would ya actually do that for me?" I knew I sounded shocked but I had a right to be.

Rasmus shrugged. “The magick is harmless and triggers a level of deep sleep that

most find it difficult to awake from for many hours. It didn't work as well on you but perhaps it would on them. Their jet lag might also work in your favor."

My mouth twitched at one corner. It wasn't funny, and yet it was. "I guess I'm just special."

"You are certainly unique," he said with a smile.

I looked over at Zara. I didn't want her to feel left out. "How are ya doing today, Zara?"

She shrugged without meeting my gaze. "The books Henry provided are quite challenging to read. I seem to know the ancient language of them but I'm drawing a blank about some of the context."

"What books?" I asked politely. Then I remembered Orlin had been the one who'd brought books for Zara. "Oh, wait... I know what books. They're the ones my grandfather sent to me about forgotten races who practiced the ancient magick ya used to change the women into wolves."

"Indeed," Zara said flatly. "You have an impressive memory and an extensive knowledge of witchcraft."

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“Perhaps, but only the version I practice. My dragon mage teacher delights in showing me that I have much magick left to learn.”

“The dragon is as immortal as my brother and I,” Zara said as if warning me. “His view of your kind is just as tainted as ours. I would imagine he hates you even more since humans killed most of what remained of his species.”

I snorted at her words. “As powerful as Zenos is, he could have ended humanity long ago and without the guardians helping him. He said he finds humans entertaining. We’re the comedic relief for his immortal boredom.”

Zara didn’t roll her eyes but her glance away from me served the same purpose.

I smiled at her. “I consider being human and forty makes me and the guardians two of a kind. I’m as set in my thinking and determined to do as I damn please as any guardian is. Sometimes I think I’m in training to be a guardian in my afterlife.”

A smiling Henry appeared in the doorway briefly. “Sorry to interrupt, Aran, but the Wu Shaman is awake. I thought you’d want to know.”

I turned to leave but Rasmus stopped me with a touch on my arm. I hadn’t realized he’d been close enough to reach out.

“Do you need a place to sleep tonight? I noticed Conn put Mulan in your bed.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Is that an offer to share your bed with ya?” Rasmus looked so hopeful that a smile bloomed across my lips. “If the Wu Shaman stays in my quarters

tonight, I'll check back with ya. How does that sound?"

"Hopeful," Rasmus said with a smile of his own. "It sounds very hopeful to me."

Henry could easily fix me up with a bedroom of my own. I could have told Rasmus that even with all the guests in the house, there were still empty rooms on the second floor with nothing in them. The third floor provided rooms for Henry and Gale and their helpers, but they weren't all full, either.

If I was temporarily kicked out of my quarters, the idea of sleeping next to Rasmus with Mulan's parents down the hall held more appeal.

That way, if Mulan's parents gave me any grief, I'd hold Rasmus to his promise to knock them all out.

Despite Conn growling, the woman was determined to stand. I had to push on her shoulder with considerable force to help keep her in place.

"Stay where you are, Mulan. Ya're recovering from a concussion, and that's nothing to mess with."

"I do not understand this," she said.

I released my grip to pat her instead. "There's nothing to understand yet. The wards went off halfway up the driveway. We don't know why."

"It happened just as I told you," Conn said.

Mulan raised a hand to feel her forehead. She winced at the bandage that now covered her head scrape. "Did I pick up more than family at airport?"

I patted harder. “If ya did, the beastie hasn’t shown itself yet. The most important thing right now is whether or not that hard head of yers got permanently damaged. So behave and let us fuss over ya until we know for sure ya’re okay. Conn and ya can spend the night here. That way ya’ll be close to yer people.”

“Where will you sleep?” Mulan asked.

“This giant house has all kinds of empty bedrooms. Henry will find me a place.” I straightened until I stood over her. “Zenos says Ezra is on his way to breaking free of the angel’s hold. Ya need to be strong enough to shake yer shaman stick at him if that happens.”

“Staff is in van. You must fetch. Connlander cannot do it because he is too angry.”

I nodded. “Okay. I’ll go get it now. What’s it look like today?”

“Small vibrator in purse,” Mulan said, rubbing her bandage.

I fisted both hands on my hips. “Ya can’t be serious.”

“No one touch it or try to steal it,” Mulan said.

I sure wouldn’t mess with another woman’s sex toys, but she was with her family. What if someone in her family had found it? They could have taken her purse. The very thought of Ma finding a vibrator in my purse made me shudder.

“I’ll retrieve yer purse for ya. I’ll do it right now,” I said.

I left quickly before Conn questioned her unusual camouflage. That was a discussion I wanted no part of today.

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I had to track Henry down to get the keys because the van was locked. His people had turned them in to him for safekeeping. The inside of the van smelled faintly of cherry blossoms but also a muskier scent, like wet soil after a rainstorm. An electric charge echoed off the trapped air in the vehicle and it tingled my skin.

Maybe Mulan had picked up something at the airport. Or maybe her family had dragged something wicked along with them from their homeland. Whatever it was raised my hackles and all I wanted was away from it.

I rescued her purse from between the seats and searched inside it for the staff. The last thing I wanted was to tell her it was missing. I'd seen her transform it into a stick, a ball bat, and something that resembled a tire iron. She'd also turned it into a small baton that she often hid on her person.

It took me a while to sift through all the makeup, hairbrushes, and hair gels. Finally, I pulled out something that felt like rubber out from under all her female crap. The thing was ten inches long and anatomically correct. I shook my head at what I now held in my hand and tried very hard not to wonder about where she got her inspiration.

"I'm sorry, staff. I'm sure the Wu Shaman meant well. I also hope ya don't feel demeaned by her choice of camouflage," I told it with a laugh.

We are fine with her, a female voice announced in my head as the vibrator turned on in my hand.

I dropped it and watched as it bounced against the floor mat. "Shit," I said, grappling

for it as it buzzed toward the door. “Goddess, I didn’t know ya bloody could talk. She never said ya could do that.”

I finally wrangled it and shut it off. I shook it to make sure it didn’t turn on again.

We cannot talk to her. We can only talk to you.

I frowned at the thing I held because that didn’t seem fair to Mulan. She would not be happy when she realized I could talk to her staff and she couldn’t. It was doubly horrifying to talk to something that looked and acted like a vibrator.

I also didn’t know why I possessed such a skill. “Why can ya talk to me and not her?”

Because of those you carry. You allow us to be heard.

I put a hand on my chest. The Dagda stone had talked to me in the cave but had said nothing since. It certainly hadn’t told me I was special. It had barely kept me alive.

I shook the vibrator again. “Are ya saying I can hear ya because of the Dagda stone?”

We are the spirits of the staff. We talk to the Wu Shaman in our own way.

I held the vibrator up to the window so I could get a better look at the thing. It looked exactly like something ya’d buy at the sex toy store but certainly not anything magickal. Well, not magickal in the non-carnal sense. It turned on and vibrated—Goddess, help me.

I retrieved Mulan’s purse intending to return the vibrator to its hiding spot under the rest of Mulan’s precious woman things. I certainly didn’t want to hear that lecture again. My lack of femaleness was still a sore point between us.

Zenos laughingly yelled as he suddenly pressed his face against the passenger-side window. I screamed and swore at the sight of him. The stupid vibrator went flying as I frantically freed my hands to call a weapon like I always did when startled.

At least, the thing didn't turn on when it hit the floor this time.

Swearing at Zenos and insulting his mother with every breath, I rubbed my chest as I once again searched for Mulan's weapon on the floor.

Zenos opened the van door then and grinned at me. "Did ya lose yer cock, lass? I know where there's one ya won't have so much trouble keeping a grip on."

"I ought to cut yers off with one of my demon swords for scaring me," I said with a glare.

The wicked dragon mage snickered at my tone as I buried the vibrator under all of Mulan's stuff again.

"And it's not mine, ya dirty-minded bastard. I don't use sex toys."

Zenos stopped and smirked. "Well, why not? Is the guardian's male human ego too fragile to handle his woman's need for a little bit of extra fun?"

I grunted in disgust. Good Goddess, the one thing I could honestly not fault Rasmus for was his generosity in bed. Not that I intended to brag about that to my irreverent, too-nosey teacher. My sex life was no business of the dragon mage's.

"Tell me something, Zenos. Is yer mind always in the gutter?"

"No—not at all," a grinning Zenos said with a headshake that sent his long red hair swinging around his massive shoulders. "My mind is usually in some woman's pants

as I'm imagining what she and I could do together. Since ya're not getting any cock from yer guardian at the moment, I figured that justified my fantasies about ya and made them less wicked. Ya're ripe for seducing, Aran."

I glared up at him and growled in my throat to keep from screeching at him.

There was no doubt Zenos could fulfill every promise I saw shining in his eyes. But so could the man I cared about who also cared about me. Sure, he might often leave me with no word of goodbye, but he never attempted to use me in bed—never.

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Zenos saw me only as a conquest. I felt sure he looked at most women that way. Maybe he missed his mate. Maybe he didn't. Whatever the truth of his feelings for her, Zenos needed to restrain himself in my presence. I was already taken. Wasn't I?

"Piss off, dragon. I'm not interested in ya," I said, slinging Mulan's now vibrator-laden purse up my arm and over my shoulder. "If I was ever that desperate for a man, ya wouldn't even be on the shortlist."

Zenos chuckled. "Well, I guess ya put me in my place then. Now I'll have to behave around ya. Forgive me for teasing ya, lass."

I nodded stiffly and marched off. Even though his wicked, lustful expression might be burned into my brain, I wasn't a woman who indulged herself with outright scoundrels just because they looked as good as he did.

Well, I wasn't that kind of woman anymore. Prison had changed me.

I sure hoped it was for the better. I'd refused to sleep with Rasmus for good reasons. I would not bounce in and out of the dragon mage's bed to pay for his teaching services, either.

I prayed to Danu that I'd be able to laugh about this later. A mature woman ought to hold a vibrator in her hand without feeling ashamed of it. But it was one thing to know ya should feel okay and another to pull off not caring about the opinions of others with dignity.

My face flamed the entire way to the house. Since I made it back unseduced and not

much more emotionally scarred, I counted myself lucky. That lusty, teasing bastard calling himself my teacher was exactly the kind of male I used to like.

Chapter Nine

I practically forced Mulan and Conn to stay the night. Mulan looked so fragile against my bed covers that I needed to do something to ease her pain so I could ease my own. Loaning them my room was all I could think to do.

Going to Mulan's house for the night was out of the question.

None of her family emerged from their rooms to even ask about her. For that reason alone, I wasn't about to leave her in the same house with those cold-hearted people.

Conn would be with her but I didn't want him distracted.

I thought about camping out on one of the couches in the library but didn't see Henry taking that well.

Sleeping in the foyer was out for the same reason, even though that would have been the smartest decision. I could have kept an eye on Ezra's statue and seen anyone coming down the stairs. Zenos had made me paranoid with his teasing warnings about Ezra working on freeing himself. He nearly had me reconsidering Ben's offer of an armed guard.

The obvious choice for me was to sleep with Rasmus tonight. It would have accomplished everything to spend the night with him. Lying next to him would erase the unwelcome memories of the dragon mage's attempt to seduce me.

The repentant guardian had already promised to help me if Mulan's family started any trouble. That potential was yet another warning Zenos had dropped on top of my

other concerns, yet refused to explain.

Goddess only knew everything was pointing me in the guardian's direction. Even if he didn't welcome me with open arms after all the fussing we'd done, we both knew I belonged with him and not out here sitting in my greenhouse.

But my pride wouldn't let me ask him. Even if my brain was broadcasting my resistance to every guest I had, I couldn't go to the guardian and beg him to sleep with me. Not in my own house.

My eyes were closed when a large male presence filled the greenhouse doorway. I reluctantly opened my eyes and found Rasmus staring at me. He leaned, hands in his pockets, against the door opening that was barely tall enough to allow him to enter without ducking.

My tired sigh filled up the rest of the space. "This is turning out to be a shitty vacation for us both, isn't it?"

To my utter surprise, the guardian laughed at my poor joke.

His smile was warm. "Maybe you should have taken a trip instead of staying home. I hear that works out better."

My lips twisted into a smirk. "Well, I do like going to the beach. Maybe I'll do that next time I take some time off. Staycations obviously don't work out for me."

Rasmus came inside the little building and sat down beside me. "Are you still angry at me?" he asked.

I turned my head to look at him. "Yes, but I'm nearly to where I can't remember why I was so mad to begin with. It turns out that holding a grudge takes a lot of effort. I'm

way too busy with my problem guests for that sort of thing.”

When Rasmus laughed again, I could do nothing but stare at him in shock. “Do you genuinely think I’m funny? Or are ya playing nice to suck up to me?”

Shaking his head at my question, the guardian stood. “Once you get over being mad and decide we’re okay again, you know where to find me.”

“Wait,” I said before he cleared the door. “I think I’m over it.”

“No, you’re not,” Rasmus said with another chuckle, but he still returned to my side. Grinning, he scooped her up in his arms. “Did you ever read *Gone with the Wind*?”

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I shook my head. “No, but I saw the movie. I thought it was brilliant of Scarlet to make a fancy dress out of her curtains. Ya have to admire that kind of inventiveness in a person.”

“Must you be so practical? I was talking about her romantic relationship with the hero of the story.”

I giggled as Rasmus carried me out of the greenhouse. “It’s a long walk to the house, Rasmus. Are ya intending to carry me up all those stairs too?”

“Yes. Rhett Butler has nothing over on me,” he said with a smile.

I giggled and lifted a hand to his jaw. “Ya’ll be too tired to seduce me when we get to the top.”

“No, I won’t be, but I will still restrain myself. My new room is not as private as your suite.”

I sighed in understanding against his shoulder. We liked our alone time and being completely alone. “At least yer room doesn’t have an injured Wu Shaman recovering in it.”

“We’ll have to content ourselves with pretending things are back to normal between us for a few hours—even if they’re not. I’m desperate to repair our relationship. How about you?”

“I admit I have missed ya a little.”

“Only a little?” he asked.

I sighed and rolled my eyes as the house door opened for him without a single chant or spell leaving his lips. How much was he restraining his magick to lessen my wariness of his guardian powers?

He started up the stairs with me and I realized he wasn’t even breathing hard. I stared at him until he stopped ascending the stairs to stare back.

Then he abruptly started walking again. “It’s not that I restrain my powers so much as I choose not to use them. I conserve my power just as you conserve yours. I know you like candles by hand even though you could light them with a chant.”

“Ya’re reading my mind again, Rasmus.”

“I’m not reading it. Your mind is shouting at me. I’m simply not shutting out your thoughts. You really need to get the dragon mage to show you how to shield them if that bothers you so much. Henry said that was the point of his visit. He also suggested we give you space and pretend not to hear you.”

I dreaded having to deal with Zenos after the vibrator incident but knew there was no choice. I desperately needed to learn to shield my thoughts, especially from the handsome, sexy bastard carrying me up the stairs to his bed. Rhett Butler, my Irish ass. Sure he made it look good, but I would bet good money Humphrey Bogart got winded doing that movie stunt. The actor was no bodybuilder and Olivia de Havilland was no lightweight.

“Zenos is wicked. He knows secrets about Mulan’s family that he won’t share. The bastard is keeping them from me just to watch me squirm.”

“The dragon is a powerful immortal. I can see why his attention would flatter you. If

you chose him for a lover, I would understand.”

That answered my question about whether or not Rasmus knew Zenos had been flirting with me. But he should have also realized I turned him down flat.

I stared at Rasmus as we entered his room. “Wouldn’t ya mind if I let Zenos seduce me?”

The guardian nodded in the dark of the hallway. “Yes, I would mind because I don’t want to share you. It’s the most selfish I’ve ever allowed myself to be about anything. And it’s not only because you taught me what it’s truly like to live as a human. I’m grateful for those experiences but my unwillingness to share you is more complex. I want all your affection and exclusive rights to share your body.”

His whispered declarations were probably the most romantic thing any male had ever said to me. That I had taught the guardian anything was news but I didn’t interrupt his speech to tell him so. Nor did I ask Rasmus what he meant. I wanted to do both but feared ruining his mood. I didn’t want to go full Scarlet O’Hara on him and fight what we had.

So I told him the truth. “Zenos isn’t the only powerful male in this house. And ya’re not even yer fully powerful self. Many women in this world would value you as a lover, Rasmus. Many would choose ya over Zenos like I did.”

“None of those imaginary women are like you, Aran. I know that because I looked for centuries for someone worth being human with. There is only one you.”

This was why Zenos hadn’t stood a chance with me. No other male did. My heart only had room for one and it had made its choice.

“Is yer bedroom nice?” I asked.

“Look for yourself.”

His bedroom door quietly opened on its own as he carried me inside. It closed behind us and locked just as quietly.

His power, even in human form, was like a djinn's or an angel's. There were no chants and no discernible spell casting. Rasmus controlled his magick with nothing more than his thoughts.

“Henry has a nice touch when it comes to furnishings. He's done a great job with my sitting room.”

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“Looks aren’t everything,” Rasmus said. “If we wanted to use my bed for anything other than sleeping, we would need a much bigger one.”

“Let’s reserve my bed for that pleasure,” I whispered.

His grin was sexy and full of intent. “I’m going to make you keep that promise, even if you get mad at me again.”

My sigh of longing informed us both of how I felt about sleeping with him. Rasmus didn’t need to read my lusty thoughts to know. I’m sure it was written on my face as I stared at him.

The guardian set me on my feet beside his bed and removed everything I wore. Then I felt him press my naked body down on his cool cotton sheets that smelled like the body wash he used.

I scooted to the middle of the bed to make room for him. His bare body sliding along mine felt like coming home.

The adult in me knew sharing a bed wouldn’t solve our real issues. Tonight, I didn’t care about them at all. It was enough to have my hope restored.

The next morning I reluctantly left a naked and still sleeping Rasmus sprawled across his bed.

Zara moving around next door had woken me but her presence hadn’t stopped me from lusting for him. However, the coziness of his normal-sized bedroom made me

realize the vulnerability of our being together within Zara's hearing.

I left before my willpower gave out.

It was a matter of trust. The only people I didn't care about hearing me with Rasmus were Conn and Mulan. Zenos, Zara, Dylan, and Mulan's family were basically all strangers. Dylan might have been the one other exception but I still didn't want him using my sex life against me in the future. He could be a terrible tease as well.

I passed Henry's people coming up the stairs with loaded breakfast trays for Mulan's family. I smiled and said good morning to them as I headed down to my quarters.

I knocked on my bedroom door and entered when Conn called out in greeting. Inside, I found the two of them eating their breakfast. Mulan had a bed tray. Conn had fetched the little side table from the sitting room for himself.

"Good morning," I said to them with a smile. "I'll only be a minute. I came to find some fresh clothes. Are ya feeling better today, Mulan?"

Mulan nodded. "I must speak to parents soon."

I waved her concerns away. "Henry and Gale got them settled in just fine yesterday. Zenos could talk to them enough to get their cooperation. I would give them another hour or two because I passed their breakfast being delivered on my way down. I hear Henry made them a common room on the second floor where they all could eat together. He and Gayle have the whole second floor set up like a regular bed-and-breakfast place. I may need to install an elevator if we keep entertaining this many guests all at once."

Conn grinned as he shook his head. "I can't believe you want to install an elevator to spare Henry's people from carrying food trays up the stairs."

“Why not? They shouldn’t have to walk all those trays up and down. One of those small elevators would be a big help to them. They’re not my servants, Conn. They’re like business partners.”

Conn spread his hands. “You always amaze me, Aran.”

“Thanks. I amaze myself too,” I replied, and then laughed at my bragging. “Someone needs to tell my daughter how amazing I am. Fiona sure as heck doesn’t believe me.”

I bent and opened a storage tub to search for clean clothing.

“So, where did you end up sleeping last night?” Conn asked.

“I slept upstairs, of course. Why do ya care where I slept?” Focused on sorting out my underwear, I didn’t bother to lift my gaze.

“You’re in a strangely good mood for someone who slept in a strange bed last night and who hasn’t had her coffee yet.”

“If ya’re trying to rile me this morning, it won’t work. I slept very well. The only bad part of my day will be dealing with a dragon mage who believes he’s a gift to women of every species. He’s a worse flirt than ya used to be before Mulan tamed ya.”

Conn’s grin when I looked his way was wide.

“Oh, stop smirking,” I ordered. “I don’t have time for yer nonsense. Nothing happened.”

Mulan giggled around a bite of food. “Shelies. Somethinggoodhappened.”

“No,it didn’t,” I insisted. “And ya have no right to point fingers at anyone. Ya should

be ashamed of yerself, Mulan. Ya turned yer powerful shaman staff into a sex toy.”

Mulan giggled. “People take wallets and keys but no one steals love toys. They will empty purses and leave love toys behind,” she said while pointing at Conn. “He gave me idea.”

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“Of course, he did,” I said, glaring at a snickering Conn. My high demon familiar looked quite proud that Mulan had credited him for her misdeeds.

I stood with my clothes in my arms and stared at their smiling faces for a moment. It made me happy to see them happy. Mulan had not been happy in a long while. If I told them the shaman staff had talked to me, they would stop laughing. Plus, I would have to explain way more than I felt like explaining this morning.

Not to mention all the questions I now had. Questions like... how did Mulan make her staff and how did she make the others she told me she'd made? Was she a closet necromancer of the magickals powering it? Or was there a spell that searched the world for the wandering souls of magickals who weren't currently powering artifacts?

Part of me didn't even want to know the answers. The part that wanted to know could just shut up this morning. Any discussion about talking artifacts needed to wait.

Unable to think of anything else safe to say before I had coffee, I headed to the bathroom to dress for the day. There was a carafe of liquid black heaven waiting in the dining room and it had my name on it.

Chapter Ten

Today I was the one hiding but I refused to be ashamed.

After spending the night with Rasmus, my thinking was clearer, and my confidence was stronger. That was why I'd dragged Zenos from the house when I saw Mulan

climbing the stairs to see her parents. The loud discussion that followed echoed through every corner of the house despite its size.

Since it was happening in some form of Chinese dialect, I couldn't understand a word being yelled. It crossed my mind to find Rasmus who'd smiled and winked at me at breakfast. I had a feeling he understood what was being said but preferred no one to know that fact.

I didn't accuse him of holding out because of his standing offer to silence Mulan's family. Also, I wasn't sure about whether to let Rasmus confine them and then seek Mulan's forgiveness afterward.

They were getting on my last nerve with their spoiled demands to Henry's people. One demon spoke enough of their language to understand and communicate what they expected.

So I ran like a coward after breakfast to avoid the situation and I took the snickering dragon mage with me. We went to my sacred space and found wrought iron seats someone had thoughtfully placed around the fire pit.

Maybe they thought I would use the fire for roasting marshmallows. I'd never done such a thing, not even when Fiona was small. After I consecrated the pit, I would use it only for rituals and spell casting. I made a mental note to tell Gale we needed a separate one for personal use. Maybe putting it behind Fiona's house made the most sense. She was the only party person among us.

I'd only offered to play hostess but not to mediate between the Wu Shaman and her family. My part of the deal was to offer them a place to sleep and Henry's help to feed them.

"I appreciate all the patience ya've shown me, Zenos, but don't ya think we're at the

point where I should learn something? All ya've done so far is test me and my patience."

Zenos shrugged as he grinned at me. "Yer life is far too chaotic, even for me. We haven't spent more than a few minutes alone."

I stared at him and sighed. He had a point. "Yeah, I know, but I desperately need to learn to keep people out of my head. Everyone hears what I'm thinking all the time."

"At least yer thoughts are not boring. Ya have a wild imagination, which is fun. The only downside to listening to yer thoughts is that ya hold yerself accountable for bloody everything under the sun. Yer angst isn't very entertaining."

"Can't ya be serious for five minutes?"

"Of course, I can," Zenos said. "I just choose not to be. Being serious is boring."

Out of threats that I felt might sway him, I hung my head and groaned. I raised it quickly when I heard the Wu Shaman's family talking to each other in rapid whispers. They paused when they saw I'd noticed them, and then began whispering even more fiercely to each other.

I didn't know their language at all but I certainly knew when I was the topic of conversation. I snorted and rolled my eyes, before turning away from them.

They were as rude to me as they were to Mulan—completely and utterly rude. It made me wonder if Mulan had been adopted. She was many things but never rude without reason.

"Bloody hell, Aran, we don't have time to mess with those unbelievers," Zenos declared, swinging his chin toward them. "Use yer magick and scare the buggers

away.”

I threw up my hands. “Scare them? What do ya want me to do?”

“Be a witch, Aran O’Malley. Ya claim to be one so let’s see what kind of magick ya wield.”

I glared at him. “I thought ya were a powerful mage.”

Zenos grunted in disgust. “Oh, I am one. But those people whispering about ya are not my problem. Why should I waste my powers on them? It’s not me they’re yammering about, but ya still should chase them away for both of us.”

“They’re not my problem, either. They’re Mulan’s problem.”

“One of them is a problem for all of ya.”

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Right. Zenos had said that before. “So tell me which one and I’ll deal with the person.”

“What kind of teacher would I be if I did everything for ya? Figure it out, woman.”

Glaring at him, I chanted until the wood in the fire pit caught and flamed.

“That little bit of fire wouldn’t scare anyone. Make it bigger,” Zenos ordered in a whisper.

I waved a hand until it roared upwards. Mulan’s people made alarm noises and turned back toward the house.

Zenos chanted something and dropped purple dust into the flames. It created a smoke that filled the surrounding woods. I watched as Mulan’s new brother-in-law used his cane to outrun his new wife and in-laws.

The dragon mage’s snickering stopped my musing. I faced him and glared. “The brother-in-law is my pick for a villain. He hobbled away from his wife and in-laws. If he could have, he would have left them to deal with the crazy magickals instead of facing them himself.”

Zenos snickered. “Ya’re fun when ya get riled.”

“Stop laughing at me, Zenos. Even if it’s not him, he’s a selfish old jackass.”

“Aren’t ya worried they’re reading yer mind and hearing yer opinions about them?”

I snorted as I stared at them. They huddled by the front door whispering again. It was hard not to sneer, and harder still not to conjure a murder of crows to shit on their heads.

Goddess, I had never disliked people as much as I disliked them. They treated Mulan like shit, were rude to Henry and his people, and viewed me—someone kind enough to take them into my home—as a devil.

I turned to see Zenos rubbing the grin from his face. It was obvious I did not need to explain my feelings to him. He'd already heard them. Maybe they had heard my thoughts. But they were only humans, weren't they? Mulan mentioned none of her family being magickal, except her.

“That’s a lot of anger ya’re keeping under control there, lass. Ya seriously need some way to keep people out of yer head, don’t ya?”

I sighed and shrugged. “That’s what I’ve been telling ya. My Irish temper rises easily when I’m treated poorly. I also don’t like it happening to my friends.”

He leaned forward. “What if I told ya that ya possessed a hundred times the amount of magick ya’re aware of having?”

“I’d tell ya to prove it.”

The moment I uttered the words we were suddenly in a different place. The chairs were gone, as were the fire pit and greenhouse. Zenos and I stood in a grove of fruit and olive trees.

A bunch of people milled about chatting in groups but they seemed completely unaware of us.

“Where in Danu’s name are we?” I asked as I looked around.

Zenos grinned at me. “This is one of my sacred spaces. Well, not mine exactly, but I have permission to use it. The grove belongs to Goddess Morgana. She and I are friends. The people ya see here are dead, though. They came to Morgana in their afterlife. I walk among them invisible as a ghost with no one asking anything from me. My soul gets to rest here. Ya’ll want to find spaces like this of yer own.”

I couldn't imagine instantly transporting to somewhere and coming back without paying a heavy, magickal price. “How did you bring me here, Zenos?”

Zeno lifted one bushy red eyebrow. “I didn’t bring ya, lass. The beings ya merged with brought ya along. Whoever bound them to the stone was a very powerful mage.”

“The Dagda is not a mage. He’s a god. I talk of him in the present tense because he took human form again to train me. The guardians helped him but I still don’t know why they got involved or how he knows them. Those claiming to be superior beings have decided I don’t need to know the details.”

Zenos chuckled at my rant. “Well, I’ll tell ya. Danu was one of the original beings who came to watch over the world. Legend says Danu got promoted over and over. Yer God ancestor was Danu’s child. He was also her first druid.”

I shook my head. “No, The Dagda wasn’t a druid. The Dagda was the first king of the Tuatha de Danann. I never heard him call himself a druid.”

“Druids, mages, and witches are just names we give to natural-born magickals. Yer ancestor was of both worlds—the elemental one that keeps our planet spinning in space and the one made of light that few have eyes to see. The first magickals all pulled power from the earth and the elements. Witches still practice those old ways but the greatest power passes through blood. Yer mother and father were both witches

by blood, but yer father didn't practice the craft, so his power never passed to ya. It's the ethereal genetics that the watchers—or those ya call guardians—monitor. They see beyond the physical to the light energy of a person.”

I couldn't argue about the power Rasmus had or what he saw in humans. I had yet to figure those things out. All I knew was what Rasmus had told me, which was that he was a scientist among his people.

And I believed that because I knew I was part of his experiments. He'd all but confessed it.

But the dragon mage seemed unclear about my family. I knew what I knew about Da and would defend that truth until my last breath. “My father was not a non-magickal. His power passed to my daughter. We only recently found this out.”

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“I didn’t say he was a non-magickal. I said he neglected his craft. That’s a different matter. Yer girl, though, she’s got an angel riding her arse. He’s on a mission to train her in powers she doesn’t respect but she won’t be rid of him until it’s done. If the angel fails, he becomes completely mortal and therefore powerless. Angels would never risk losing their powers so failure is not an option. They’re as full of themselves as any other immortal.”

I shook my head. “Why did no one teach me these things before you?”

“Ya aligned yerself with males who decided what to tell ya based on what they considered being in yer best interests. They believe in the ignorance is bliss approach to handling women.”

I grunted. That definitely was the case with my parents and Jack.

“Or ya could have aligned yerself with a non-magickal and yer magickal keepers decided it was best to keep ya in the dark so ya’d keep yer non-magickal in the dark.”

My parents had done exactly that. They’d hidden the truth of my heritage from me for years.

“Damn you, Jack,” I said, rubbing my face. “The latter was my issue. Everything in my life always comes back to the selfish, power-hungry bastard I married. He’s not a complete non-magickal, but he’s close to one. He possesses a wicked nature. Ya can’t know how much I hate him.”

Zenos chuckled. “None of his light energy lingers on ya, Aran. Hating him gives him

yer energy. It also elevates him to something he's not. Ya need to lower yer feelings until yer ex-husband is no more important than someone ya might hire to help ya with vile household tasks ya don't want to do, like cleaning yer gutters or scrubbing yer toilets."

I laughed at his description. "Oh, if only it were that easy to stop hating my ex."

Zenos glared at her. "Well, work on it. Dealing with that annoying male energy is holding ya back. Do ya want to hear the rest of what I want to share? Or have ya decided to be stubborn about it?"

I blew out a breath. The dragon mage read me like a book. "Sorry. I want to hear everything. Can we go back to the fire pit? I don't want anyone to worry about where I went."

Chuckling, Zenos shrugged. "Ya mean ya don't want the guardian worrying."

I shrugged as my face turned pink with guilt. "We've found a new peace between us. I'd hate to disrupt it right away."

Seconds later, I was back in my wrought-iron chair, and Zenos was back in his. I put a hand over my chest and felt the stone vibrate against my fingers.

Had the stone brought me back? Or had Zenos?

The dragon mage leaned forward and clasped his hands as he stared into my fire. "I have an intriguing history lesson to share with you. During what yer four Celtic tribes called the Great War, demons weren't the only ones who fought and lost. An assortment of earth-born magickals were involved in the battles. When those magickals got defeated, they begged the ancestor God ya love so much to take their lives in a manner that preserved their magick. This is how most powerful artifacts

came to be. The souls of those magickals who were conquered now power them to this day. Yer far darrig's stone works like that."

My hand went to my chest. Goddess, I'd voluntarily put the artifact The Dagda created inside me. How many dead magickal souls powered it?

Three, came the answer. Always three.

Hearing them speaking to me in my head, I blinked at Zenos in shock. "I put the souls of three dead magickals inside me. Why did The Dagda never explain that to me?"

"Because for him, the artifact was an experiment that luckily worked out well. He designed it so his magickal son could call on the conquered magickal souls for extra help when life became dire. Cermait made his father's stone a part of him so no one could use the power against him. Yer demon said most of yer predecessors never used the stone at all. They thought of it as a magick bauble. What were yer reasons for merging with it like ya did?"

I laughed dryly and rubbed my face. "I put the stone inside me to keep my ex-husband from stealing it again. Jack's girlfriend had it in her possession the whole time I was in prison."

"Why didn't ya kill that betraying bastard and be done with him?" Zenos asked.

"Our daughter's a crier," I said bitterly. "If Fiona ever found out I took her father's life, I'd have heard about it for the rest of mine. Ending his life occurred to me countless times, and if I had a nickel for each instance I'd dreamed of it, I could have easily paid for this property in cash."

The dragon mage's laughter rang out through my sacred grove.

I sighed and smiled. “Thanks for telling me the truth, Zenos. It helps me see things as they are. But ya still haven’t told me how to keep people out of my head.”

“Achieving that goal requires a complete commitment, with no room for compromise. If ya shut everyone out, ya’ll not hear yer artifact, either.”

“Oh,” I said, crestfallen that I would have to make such a choice. “That’s unfortunate.”

“Aye,” he said. “But maybe I could make ya a charm that would prevent some from hearing ya. It wouldn’t be a hundred percent.”

I considered that for a moment. “What’s the catch?”

His chuckle was soft. “There are several catches as you call them. I would be one of those who would always hear ya.”

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I smirked at his grin. “Fine. I can live with ya hearing me. Ya already know all my secrets.”

“The charm also wouldn’t work on demons.”

My sigh was loud. “I guess that’s because of my connection to Conn. My energy is merged with his.”

“Precisely,” Zenos said. “And I’m not sure about the guardians or yer Wu Shaman. It likely would work on yer witchfamily, the fairies, and I think on yer far darrig friend. Time would tell.”

I shrugged. “That would at least cut my embarrassment by half.”

“See now? That’s why I like ya so much. Ya’re a realist, Aran. Would it change yer mind about bedding me if I told ya I’m better between the sheets than yer guardian?”

“No,” I said with a chuckle. “I’m a monogamist. But I will owe ya for yer training.”

Zenos nodded. “The only thing I want is for ya to let me stay for the big finale. Things haven’t got exciting yet.”

I waved a hand. It was work to pretend his teasing didn’t worry me and I was sure he knew it. “Stay as long as ya like. If ya want to give me any other lessons, I’m available for them—providing they aren’t of a carnal nature.”

“Done,” Zenos declared, slapping his knee. “I love a good bargain.”

Normally, I loved one too, but something warned me any agreement with Zenos would not be good.

Chapter Eleven

Zenos left me alone by the fire pit with my thoughts. Claiming a need to shift forms, he changed into a Phoenix and flew up through the space between the trees.

I sat there silently for several long moments and then just had to know.

I put a hand on my chest. “Talk to me,” I ordered. “Tell me about the three of ya.”

We are only one.

“Were ya mages?”

We are one power.

“What kind of power? How do I use ya?”

We are the power of three.

Talking to the Dagda stone was like talking to someone who couldn’t understand my words. I felt that way whenever I tried to speak with Mulan’s people. Oddly, talking to her staff was like talking to an old friend. I guess each artifact had a distinct personality.

I formed an image of all four of Mulan’s family members in my mind. “Show me which of them is evil,” I ordered.

An image of the four of them bound with a black rope instantly popped into my brain

to replace my own. The sister's husband faced his wife and parents-in-law. He was on the end.

Great. How was I supposed to tell the Wu Shaman that her family were all demon-possessed? Why didn't she know this for herself? I reacted with a stress call.

Conn? I need to talk to ya. I'm in the grove.

Be there shortly, he replied.

I fed the fire pit flame more magick until it flared again.

Conn hadn't bothered walking to me. Moments after I called, he materialized right beside me. "You bellowed?"

"Yes. We have a problem."

Conn smiled and sat down in one of the chairs. "Are you referring to Mulan's family members all being possessed by some ancient and very powerful demon who is not me?"

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I glared at him. “How long have ya known about him?”

“I suspected it shortly after the van got caught in the wards. I’ve been studying them for days now. I could call him out with a challenge but that would make our wards seem like no threat at all. The best option is to wait for the demon to attempt something else.”

I gaped at him in shock. “Ya think we should wait for more trouble?”

Conn shrugged. “Yes. He has harmed no one yet. Mulan got hurt a bit, but she’s better now.”

Of all the things I expected Conn to say, telling me to let it go was not one of them.

I crossed my arms and stared. “Why hasn’t Mulan cast the demon out herself? That’s what Wu Shamans do. They cast out demons. She told me that herself.”

“I don’t think she cares enough.”

I grunted. “He uses that bloody cane to fool people into thinking he’s only an old man.”

Conn blew out a breath. “He can probably kill them with a thought but he won’t because I think they’re bait for a much bigger prize. And I’m not talking about Mulan, even though she is one of his targets.”

“So what do we do? We can’t let him terrorize Mulan’s family.”

“I’ll let you know. At the moment, I’m still looking for his weaknesses,” Conn said, spreading his hands. “He’s from the other side of the world, Aran. They don’t do things the same way we do. They follow different rules. Possessing humans for him is like me buying real estate.”

“How powerful is he... or she?”

Conn shrugged. “I feel a masculine energy when I’m near him.”

“Him, then.” I blew out a breath. “Do I go in with my sword humming? Or do I try to get Mulan to cast the demons out first? I don’t want to step on her toes.”

“Her parents didn’t have any demons around when I visited. Her father was mostly a pleasant man. Of course, I was handing him a large sum of money. Most people are nice under those circumstances.”

“If ya got an opinion on how to handle this situation, now is the time to tell me.”

“All right... I think we need to let this play out.”

“Goddess, ya’re worse than the dragon mage. Do ya find this interesting, Conn? Because I find it alarming. There’s a strange demon on my property and I want him evicted as soon as possible.”

Connlander of the Fir Bolg is being influenced. He does not sense the genuine danger. He believes he has things under control.

I jerked at the male voice suddenly lecturing me in my head. He sounded like he’d sounded in the cave when I first sought the stone’s help, only bossier. Could Conn hear the voice too?

We shielded your thoughts from him.

Thank the Goddess for that, at least. Conn already knew the stone could communicate with me but didn't know it could exclude him. I didn't see him taking that well when he found out.

Was the Wu Shaman unaware of her family's demon problems? I needed to find out as soon as possible.

Your Wu Shaman knows. Her staff knows. She doubts her power to cast him out so she is pretending not to see the danger. The creature turned her family against her. She is not unhappy that she no longer has to serve them.

If everyone had figured out the problem, then why weren't we taking him down? I could practically see Zenos smirking about me being the last to learn the truth.

As soon as I thought the thought, an image of a fanged creature appeared in my head. He looked like a cross between a bipedal wolf and a gnome. Long brown animal hair covered his body, but he had a long white mustache that framed his mouth full of teeth and draped down to the floor.

In my vision, he tromped toward Mulan's whimpering sister, picked up her, and bit off her head to stop her screams. Blood flew everywhere. In the carnage's background, her traumatized parents cried out in horror. I stared in numb shock at the creature boldly chewing on Mulan's sister in front of me.

Then I remembered it was only a vision being shown to me. It hadn't happened in reality—or at least, not yet. Goddess, I hoped the stone was warning me it could happen and not that it would.

This is the creature inside him, the stone said. He is an ancient one who does not care

about humans any longer. He finds pleasure only in causing trouble and possesses them to create servants.

I nodded as I rubbed the shock from my face so Conn wouldn't see it.

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There was only one thing I could do about what I'd learned and that was to convince the Wu Shaman to do her job.

I found Mulan in her kitchen. She was humming as she wiped the already spotless counters. Conn had gone to see Henry about something. This was the first time she and I had been alone since her parents arrived.

I scratched like a cat on her screen door. The sound of my nails scraping on metal reminded me of her tiger cat and the destruction it had caused to the cat tree. Despite my warnings, Mulan only took them seriously after she experienced the animal's increased aggression firsthand.

Realizing they needed professional help, she and Conn had given their tiger cat over to Bo for obedience training. He promised to deliver it back to them as a docile pet. Well, that's what I thought he promised. Bo knew it was their personal tiger cat and that he couldn't keep it. That much I was sure about.

"Hello, stranger. Do ya have a few moments to chat?"

Mulan smiled at my appearance. "I always have time for you."

The staff still in vibrator form now lay in the middle of the kitchen table. I stared at it for too long before looking at her. "Why is that there? Aren't ya worried someone is going to come along and start messing with it? Lots of people have a dark sense of humor, ya know."

Mulan shrugged. "It is talisman to keep family away."

“Goddess, woman. That inappropriate thing could keep me away. I don’t want to be around it, either.” I sat down at the small table and pointed the business end of the vibrator away from me so I didn’t have to stare at it. “I need to talk to ya about yer family, Mulan. There’s a problem.”

Mulan nodded and frowned. “I know. They are terrible, ungrateful guests. I am sorry for that. You get free haircuts for life.”

I waved my hand. “They are terrible guests, but that’s not what I came to talk about. I think ya know the real problem already.”

Mulan tilted her head. “What is mystery? They are rude people. I admit it.”

“Mulan, ya have to know one of them hosts an ancient demon. What ya might not realize is that he’s infected the other three.”

Mulan shook her head. “No, my father only seems like demon, but he is not one. He gives tough love.”

“Mulan,” I said more sternly. “This is not about yer father and ya know it. An ancient demon possesses yer brother-in-law. I think he’s planning to completely take over yer sister and parents and make them his servants. Ya need to cast the demon out of yer sister’s husband before that happens. Why haven’t ya done that already?”

“You make a mistake,” she said. “There is no demon.”

“Yes, there is. It was that creature who set off our wards. Ya’re either being fooled, or ya’re choosing to ignore him. Which is it?”

“You work too much, Aran,” Mulan said softly. “You never rest. Let things go.”

“This is our home, Mulan—our sanctuary. Ya’re allowing it to be invaded by one of the creatures ya’ve sworn to fight.” I snatched up the vibrator and shook it at her. “And this is disgusting. Turning yer staff into a sex toy is disrespectful to the magickals who power it. Ya should be ashamed of yerself.”

Mulan froze her cleaning to stare wide-eyed at me. “How do you know that? It is shaman secret.”

Sighing, I gently set the vibrator back on the table and turned it away from me again. I looked at her as I patted my chest. “I know it because the dragon mage told me the truth about the Dagda stone I put inside me. He said many artifacts are powered by magickals who lost the Great War among the tribes of my homeland. That means my stone, yer staff, and probably Dylan’s animal relic all have druidic sentience because of a deal the early druids made to preserve their power forever. This is something I know ya know already because ya’ve made staffs for others. That means ya know how to call those beings into an inanimate object and bind their magick to it.”

She blinked at me in wide-eyed shock... or maybe it was shock about my ranting. I couldn’t tell.

I lifted my hands in surrender. “Look... ya need to snap out of whatever hold that creature put on ya and do what needs to be done. I can’t allow it to stay in my house with Ezra still there. It’s too dangerous. The Dagda stone said the ancient being had all of ya fooled. Even Conn is waving away my concerns and wanting to wait until it blows up on us. I’ll give ya until nightfall to get up yer nerve, Mulan. If ya don’t act by then, I’m going to get the guardians to help me deal with yer people.”

She continued to stare without responding. When she said nothing more, I left. Maybe she thought I was joking. But I wasn’t. I was deadly serious. The last thing I wanted to witness in real life was Mulan’s spoiled sister losing her head to a creature Mulan would never forgive herself for not killing.

I informed Henry of all I'd learned and asked him to quietly set up the blue house for the guardians. My other houseguests were innocent bystanders in this situation—the guardians and the far darrig.

Neither Rasmus nor Zara showed any resistance to my suggestion they move to the blue house until the fight was over. I think on some level, they both already knew what was happening. Their lack of shock about my alarm reminded me once more of why I had kicked Rasmus out of my bed. There was no time to deal with that now, though.

Henry said he'd felt something was off but hadn't been able to track down the reason for his feelings. I said some ugly things about Zenos being less than helpful but did credit him with issuing the warning. That was all Henry needed to prompt his people to act.

Rasmus and Zara busied themselves packing small duffle bags to take with them. Miracle that he was, Henry had found several to loan them. The guardians would be stuck on two cots for the night but I could see both appreciated being moved out of the line of fire.

While they finished, I blocked their rooms from the ones Mulan's family occupied with a spell. Henry and Gale had tucked the four of them into their rooms with snacks for their afternoon nap. The barricade spell would hold firm for another twenty minutes.

I packed and sent a handful of Dylan's things over to the blue house as well but had already suggested to Dylan that he find a place in town to stay. The far darrig had wanted to come back and help, but I talked him out of it. The truth was I couldn't watch out for him, monitor Ezra, and make sure Mulan did her Wu Shaman duty.

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There was only so much even a very determined warrior witch could do.

Conn strolled around the house with a smile on his face while I hustled the guardians out. It was like he was smoking or drinking something that made him un-normally happy. When Henry and Gale both got a good look at him, they nodded to me to let me know they would watch out for their weird-acting son for me.

I was pacing in front of Ezra's statue when Rasmus returned to the house without Zara. He might rethink returning if he knew how badly I wanted to pull an energy sword and bark a challenge to the deceitful creature up the stairs.

"Do you fear for the fairy's life or fear for your own if someone frees him?" Rasmus asked.

Since his question was sincere, I answered him back the same. "Zenos tells me Ezra has been working this whole time to free himself from the angel's hold on him. Who knows what would it take for him to break free? What will the ancient demon do once he realizes I'm onto his game? All I have are questions, Rasmus. I'm convinced he's done something to both Conn and Mulan. He's somehow fooled everyone into thinking he's not a danger to us. The Dagda stone showed me his true form and what he could do. It was too gruesome to allow to happen."

"You seem very stressed. What can I do to help you, Aran?"

"Can ya restrain the fairy for me if he frees himself? I need to focus on the fight with the creature."

Rasmus crossed his arms and thought about it. “I’m not sure what I could do to restrain him but I could try to keep him from killing you.”

Outside of interpreting the guardian’s words as yet another polite refusal to get involved, I remained grateful for his lame offer. I would think of Rasmus as my backup person in case the fighting got out of hand. He could at least contact Orlin in case of a major disaster, like my death at the hands of Mulan’s possessed family.

Chapter Twelve

An hour passed with no sign of them. I knew the barrier spell had worn off.

After disappearing again, Rasmus quickly returned a second time with a book in hand. He parked himself on one of the lobby couches and proceeded to ignore me while he read.

I made an effort not to feel too insulted by his lack of attention. The guardian didn’t get overly excited about much of anything—not even in the heat of battle. During his first appearance in true human form, Orlin made sure that he didn’t remember his true guardian self. A very human Rasmus had calmly punched a troll until he knocked him out. That was insane by Shadow Breaker standards because everyone knew that was like punching a stone wall. But a stoic Rasmus had seen nothing wrong with it.

Rasmus was always calm—annoyingly calm. If he was any calmer, I’d forget he was even around at all.

Why in bloody hell was he here anyway? He wasn’t paying attention to anyone, especially me. He might as well go back to the blue house and read his book in relative peace there. I had survived the fight with Hisser without him being around. I’d survive fighting Mulan’s demonic brother-in-law on my own.

Maybe Rasmus thought I was naïve for living so hyperaware of every situation. Despite my need to face situations head-on, and my constant anticipation of the worst, he had never openly criticized me.

But he also wasn't patting my back and telling me it would be okay.

Why did I even care about someone like him? Here I'd been thinking about inviting him to bed. If he brought that damn book to read, I'd kill him, though.

My hand itched to call a sword. But the moment I did Conn would know it and come to see what was going on. Then I'd have to convince him that confronting Mulan's parents was a good idea. I still wasn't sure I'd convinced the reluctant Wu Shaman.

My heart nearly stopped beating when Mulan's weird family finally appeared on the stairs. They saw me pacing in the lobby and started whispering to each other. I pretended to survey the lobby as if I intended to redecorate it. Rasmus reading in a composed manner lent some support to my flimsy ruse.

The four of them cautiously moved down the stairs, nodding to me when I glanced their way. I stared long and hard at the brother-in-law who used his cane to lower himself down every step. It made him the last person to arrive at the bottom. If ya looked in his angry eyes for too long, ya might even feel sorry for him.

Starting to panic, I put my hand out to call an energy sword. The brother-in-law chose that moment to wave at me and smile.

Mulan's sister and parents began to talk rapidly to each other in their own language. They turned to look at me every few words. It was both eerie and annoying not to understand what they were saying when it was clear they were talking about me. They did the same thing when Mulan wasn't present.

I hadn't dared ask Zenos to translate. Goddess only knew what kind of nonsense he'd tell me.

The chant to call a weapon froze on my lips as Mulan walked through the front door wearing a very old and dirty leather vest over her clothes. Complete surprise caused me to blink, and as my vision cleared, I spotted the staff in her hand. Even it looked normal.

As Mulan glanced at her family, she spoke to them in her language, and then forcefully thumped the end of her staff against the floor. Her sister screamed like someone had stabbed her and threw herself in front of her new—or rather old—husband.

Her parents clasped their hands together as they responded to her, obviously pleading with Mulan not to do anything to their new son-in-law. Doubt flickered in her eyes.

Leaving Ezra unguarded, I strode to her side. "What are they saying to ya?"

"Nothing," Mulan said with a frown, her voice tinged with disappointment. "I am here to do as you asked. I am here to do my job."

"Well, ya don't have to make it sound like I brought ya here without a good reason. He's yer brother-in-law. It's yer family that's in danger of being possessed. I could take him down myself but I figured I'd be stepping on yer Wu Shaman's toes."

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Her snort was loud. “Old man demon is hardly worth casting out.” She blew out a breath. “Plus, he is brother-in-law. Demon is probably keeping human side alive.”

“Are ya saying yer family knows what he is?”

Mulan hung her head and nodded. “He told them. This is more shame I must bear. My sister and I both sleep with demons now. We are failures.”

I rolled my eyes and lowered my voice. “Well, at least ya got the better deal.”

“That is rude to say but also correct,” she said sadly.

Now I blew out a breath. Good Goddess, this was a complicated task. “Look, Mulan, I had a vision of yer brother-in-law biting yer sister’s head off. Would you rather that happen in reality?”

Mulan sighed heavily. “That is hard question to answer about sister I loathe.”

My spine snapped straight. “Right. What was I thinking? Let me appeal to ya as a magickal who does good for the world. No one—no matter how awful they are—deserves to have their head bitten off by a demon.”

Mulan’s demonic brother-in-law grunted loudly. They must have understood that we were discussing what to do to them. Her sister and parents called out anxiously and ran behind him to hide. They huddled together a few steps up the stairs.

The brother-in-law glared openly at us. I ignored his glare to focus on Mulan.

She sighed so forlornly that I sighed too. Mine was in frustration. Mulan hated these people. Didn't she? I wondered if she cared about them more than she wanted to admit.

"Parents will disown me if I cast out demon. Sister will lose husband. Parents will lose wealthy business partner. I will be terrible child forever."

I glared at her parents for being cowards and not warning us about the demon. Not only did Mulan get hurt physically by their omission, but she was now in emotional agony. Her ethics warred with her desire to win their affection.

I snorted at the situation. "Are ya sure ya weren't adopted? Maybe they're not really yer parents. Maybe she's not really yer sister. They certainly don't deserve ya, Mulan. They don't deserve all the worry ya're feeling over this."

Her dismissive snort extinguished any hope I had of rationalizing this for her. "So, what do you want to do then? Staying here is not an option for him. If ya want, ya can send them all home to China and let them sort it out back there. I hold nothing against good demons—ya know that. But everything in me—and I'm including the Dagda stone—tells me that his intentions are not honorable."

Her nod was slow but there. "I know this is probably truth."

"If ya tell me ya can't because they're yer family, I'd understand that. Do ya want me to call an energy sword and take care of him myself? I'll not think badly of ya. If this was Fiona and Ma, I'm sure I'd be hesitating too."

"No. It is not for you to do," she said, wrapping both hands around the staff as she leaned on it.

She didn't look anywhere close to deciding. I chewed my lip and tried to think of a

compromise that might spare her from traumatizing her family. Nothing came to mind.

The Wu Shaman lifted her chin and her staff. The little turtle shells on the end of it clacked together with the movement. She drew in a breath and prepared to call her magick.

“No...wait,” I said, stopping her. “I have one more idea. Let me hold yer staff for a minute.”

Mulan turned and blinked in shock. I sighed before holding out my hand. “I’m not going to use it on them. Trust me in this. I’ll explain later.”

She considered my request for a moment before lowering her arms. “First, you say cast him out. Then you say wait. What is wrong with you, Aran?”

I sighed. “A great many things are wrong with me but I just need to check something.”

She pushed the staff into my outstretched hand. “Thank you,” I hissed between my teeth.

Instead of answering, she crossed her arms and walked away. I held the staff and closed my eyes. Hey—is anyone in there listening to me? I need yer help.

We are here, the female voice said.

I worked hard not to sigh again over how weird this was. Thanks for talking to me again. I need a second opinion on a situation. Mulan’s sister seems to have attached herself to an ancient being. My artifact warned me about him. Do ya agree that he’s dangerous?

What is dangerous for non-magickals is not dangerous for you or Wu Shaman.

I huffed at the staff's evasiveness. This creature invaded my home without revealing what he was. He knew about Mulan being a Wu Shaman and yet chose not to reveal himself to her. Worse, he made the Wu Shaman believe he was as harmless to her as Conn.

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All ancient ones like him seek power. He maintains mental control over his human wife and her parents, which means he has taken partial possession of them. If no one stops him, he will spread his full essence to their minds and gain the ability to jump between their bodies. His power is great.

Possession was against the demonic code of survival. Demons had many methods to prolong their existence, but absorbing someone else's life force was off-limits. Not even demon royals were above following that rule. Conn should have seen this situation for what it was. What had the creature done to Conn? Only another royal could cause so much chaos. The ancient demon must have been a leader among his kind.

The ancient one energetically mirrors the demons he interacts with. They feel a sense of unity with him that blinds them to danger. He fools Connlander of the Fir Bolg in this way.

So Conn wasn't getting the same vibe from him as I was. I nodded and kept my eyes closed. I didn't want anyone to suspect what I was learning. What will happen if Mulan casts the demon out of his brother-in-law?

Demon does not possess Wu Shaman's human brother-in-law. He is merely the human form of himself.

My eyes opened to glare at the creature. So he was passing himself off as some rich old man and had attached himself to Mulan's family. I handed the staff back to Mulan who'd moved close enough to reach for it when I was done.

“You were talking to staff. What did staff tell you?” she asked.

“Yer sister is married to an actual demon in his human form. And I learned he’s here to collect power.” I swept a hand between us. “Maybe he wants yers. Maybe mine. Or maybe both. Ya can bet he’s aware of Ezra too. If his game had been to lure Conn, he’d have played that card already.

Mulan glanced at the demon who was pretending to be human. “If I kill him, I lose family and become hypocrite.”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s not a regular demon, Mulan. He’s an ancient creature who has partially possessed your family. If ya don’t do something, he will take them over and hop between their bodies. Will casting him out kill him?”

“No. Chinese demons never die.”

A dark thought occurred to me. “He risked coming here because of yer relationship to Conn, didn’t he?”

She ducked her head to stare at the floor. “How can I know what demon thinks?”

I put a hand on my chest and wrapped the other around her hand on the staff. Her swearing let me know that she now heard both voices just as I did.

I stared hard at her. “He’s done nothing, but they both say he will do something. This may be our only chance to stop him.”

“How do you talk to them?”

I let go of the staff and dropped both my hands. “The dragon mage knows how it works but I haven’t figured it out yet. Yer staff hated hiding out as a sex toy.”

“No, it did not. I asked first. We speak in visions.”

I chuckled. “Okay, I made that up. I was the one who hated it.”

“Because you are prude,” Mulan said. “Conn sees no problem with demon.”

“He’s imitating Conn’s energy. The staff said it was his best demon talent.”

Mulan heaved out a great breath before turning to her family. She raised her voice and spoke to them in the language they shared. Whatever she said must have finally gotten through their programming because they gasped and stared down the stairs at the demon.

He growled as he glared at us. Had Mulan outed him?

“Did ya tell them?”

She nodded and frowned harder.

“Did they believe ya?”

“Yes, but they have not asked for my help.”

“Do ya honestly think they will?”

Mulan thought about it and shook her head. “No. They will want to keep him. Possession twists their will to his.”

The brother-in-law must have understood our conversation because he tossed aside his cane. His human body split like a guardian’s as he changed forms. It was like watching a horror movie. The ancient demon transformed from an old man to the

large, powerful creature of my vision.

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And he did it like a guardian. I might be fighting a creature stronger than me.

“Conn!” I yelled out. A now too-familiar panic set in when my demon did not appear. Something was wrong again.

I looked over at Rasmus who had lowered his book to stare at the transformed demon. Was I supposed to be grateful that he was finally watching? Shaking my head at his unhelpfulness, I turned back and saw the demon with an energy sword clutched in his hand.

The Dagda stone chose that moment to speak. He mirrors you this time.

I looked at my empty hand. Goddess, did that make him able to draw on Conn’s power?

Yes, the Dagda stone answered.

My mind scrambled to absorb the information but not for long. A blast of power from his free hand hit the middle of my chest and sent me flying into the wall behind me. The last thing I saw before my eyes closed was Rasmus jumping up from his seat to join the fight that I hadn’t been able to convince him was coming.

I woke sometime later on one of the fancy couches in the foyer. I could tell where I was from the feel of the leather against my aching back.

Gale sat beside me on a footstool with a cold cloth pressed to some painful spot on my forehead. I blinked until my eyes opened all the way and immediately saw the

demon frozen with an energy sword in his hand. Someone with a dark sense of humor had put him next to the sheet-covered statue of Ezra as if we were creating a museum display in the foyer.

“Where’s Rasmus?” I asked.

“Once the guardian saw you were okay, he left to take care of another matter.”

Of course he did. But there was no use complaining to Gale. She couldn’t influence my guardian’s priorities or move me to the top of the list.

“Where’s Mulan? Is she okay?”

Gale rolled her eyes. “Mulan is fine. But my son is not and neither are you. So lie still.”

My eyes grew wide. “Conn didn’t come when I called. That’s only happened twice in twenty years, Gale. I knew something was wrong again. What happened to him?”

“The demon had partially possessed him. It’s like a human getting the flu. Conn’s purging the other demon’s essence from his system. It’s painful and makes him very ill. He’s also extremely mad at himself for allowing it to happen. Henry is helping him get through it. He’ll be fine in a few hours.”

“If he wasn’t so concerned about Mulan, Conn wouldn’t have been fooled by that creature. She was trying so hard not to start any trouble with her wretched family and he was trying to go along because he loves her.”

Gale smiled. “Yes. Love hurts us in strange ways.”

I nodded. My love for Mulan had made my head hurt. My back wasn’t in much better

shape. I tried to laugh and that hurt too. “It especially hurts when ya end up face down on a marble floor because ya were trying to force yer best friend to do something she didn’t want to do.”

I pointed to the frozen creature. Someone had artfully arranged his long white mustache so that it draped away from his feet. There would be no more decorating my house with statues of bad guys.

“Who stopped the demon?”

Gale smiled. “Mulan and her weapon stopped the demon with a well-spoken chant. Afterward, the guardian did something to help keep him that way but said the effects would wear off in a day. He works very hard to not get involved in things, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. No one works harder at anything than Rasmus does at not involving himself in my real life.” I patted her hand and replaced it with mine on the washcloth. “The demon threw me into the wall.”

“Yes, he did, and everyone saw it. Mulan’s family was appalled at his transformation and more appalled by his actions. But they also begged Mulan not to end him completely. I don’t think they understand that demons can’t be killed or that he doesn’t truly care about them.”

“Because they’re a little possessed too. How can they not know about Mulan’s work? She’s been a Wu Shaman since she was a teenager. She went to school to be one. The hair thing was how she made a living but casting out demons was her calling.”

“I think seeing both of you hurt because she hesitated was too much guilt for Mulan. She fled the house without even checking on you. Henry said she burst into tears when she saw how sick Conn was. She blames herself for your injuries and rightly so.

It's her family causing all the trouble."

I sighed. "I know, but I can't be mad at her just for hesitating. Her family makes her as crazy as my ex-husband makes me. I'm feeling more awake now, Gale. Will ya help me sit up?"

Gale put one arm around me and lifted my back until I was upright. Under the washcloth on my head was a knot the size of my fist—or at least, that's how big it felt. Marble was not a soft surface to land on.

I gingerly swung my legs to the floor and breathed out a sigh when I discovered I wasn't dizzy. I looked at Gale. "Mulan did the right thing in the end. That's what matters."

Gale arched an eyebrow at my statement. "Not really, Aran. She should have destroyed him. That ancient one has never regenerated. You can tell by how he still sees humans as weak prey for his use. Regeneration teaches a demon that being strong is a fleeting state. Regeneration is a price to be paid. His human body's age and physical condition reveal that he never paid it. Demons are not like humans who learn by watching each other die."

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“Yes, I suppose we do,” I muttered. “But this wasn’t all Mulan’s fault. I need to be more decisive when I’m convinced of something. Conn has fussed at me for my hesitation since I’ve known him. He also thinks I’m too merciful and gloats when that tendency causes me all kinds of trouble. The middle ground is indeed the hardest road for me to walk. If I’d suspected about his possession, though, I promise ya I would not have hesitated.”

Gale smirked at me, took my washcloth, and dipped it into a pan of cold water to re-wet it. “Your other weakness is that you care more for others than for yourself. That’s foolish for someone with your powers. I’m sure it worries your mother daily.”

I shook my head at that one. She didn’t know Bridgette O’Malley the way I did. Ma was more of a risk-taker than I was. She would never have stayed in prison for all those years. I was a bloody coward compared to my mother.

“Isn’t caring for others supposed to be a good quality?” I asked.

Gale laughed but I think it was at my sorrowful expression and disappointed tone.

She smiled at me. “If you don’t mind your sympathetic tendencies causing you a concussion now and again, I suppose you could consider it a good quality.”

I cautiously stood and tested my legs. “I have to tell ya, Gale, your son sounds just like ya when he lectures me. Ya share the same dry wit and sarcasm too. It’s an effective combination. I feel nearly as guilty about what happened as the Wu Shaman does.”

“Then I’ve done my job,” Gale said. “I hope Henry is as successful with Conn.”

Chapter Thirteen

It took another hour and several cups of tea for me to feel strong enough to hunt Mulan down. Both vehicles were still in her driveway so I knew she hadn’t run far this time. Hopefully, I wouldn’t be chasing her all over the property, either.

I patted my chest on my walk to her house and thanked the Dagda stone for its help. It buzzed against my fingers instead of answering me in words. I was just fine with that. We were learning to communicate, which didn’t mean always having to speak to each other.

Goddess, I wish I’d talked to it twenty years ago. It might have warned me about Jack.

If my dragon mage teacher had been around to witness what had happened, I think Zenos would have approved of my new Zen-like acceptance of my artifact. But there had been no sign of the dragon mage during all the chaos. Like Rasmus, Zenos had a habit of simply disappearing when the mood struck. Being irritated about that tendency in one male was all I could manage. I refused to do it with any male I wasn’t sleeping with... and Zenos was definitely in the latter category.

One day soon, I was going to not do it with Rasmus, either. I was going to teach myself not to care if he read books while I fought a demon. Or that he watched me get thrown at a wall without bothering to stick around and check on me after it was all over.

Maybe I needed to face the fact that he would never be the romantic hero who rescued me from myself. No, he was going to be someone who stood by and watched me make mistake after mistake without saying one damn thing to stop me.

But he'd certainly grill me later about why I did what I did and what I thought it meant—the stoic alien bastard. And that was how I saw him. He was a little green guy but he wasn't human either. He wore a handsome human skin suit but repeatedly failed to convince me we were alike.

I found Mulan in her kitchen slumped over a cup of her calming tea. I let myself in and slid into a chair while I waited for her to acknowledge my presence.

“Do not look at me,” she ordered. “Look away from my shame.”

I rolled my eyes at the drama. “Cut it out. Ya stopped the demon, Mulan. I have a new statue in my foyer to prove it. So where's the shame in that? Gale told me yer family begged ya not to end his treacherous life. They're yer weak spot. Fiona and Ma are mine. I understand.”

Mulan shook her head. “I failed my family and failed you. I brought dangerous demon into your home.”

“Ya didn't fail me, so let that go. The demon was mirroring me and I couldn't make a fast enough decision about how to fight him. Ya need to stop talking about the past—we both do. Ya need to be thinking about what ya're going to do once yer demon brother-in-law unfreezes. And I have a bigger problem. Zenos gleefully warned me that Ezra was going to unfreeze soon as well. Goddess knows, I can't count on guardians or angels to freeze him back again. Rasmus barely put down his damn book when I got thrown at the wall.”

“I froze demon in place. Your guardian added his magick to mine. Rasmus said frozen state would last two days or maybe three. My family begs me to do nothing to harm old demon. I told them I was Wu Shaman. They say I am unfair and taunted me about Conn. I say at least Conn never tries to possess them. I say he bought back their property. Nothing I do ever pleases them.”

I paused arguing to nod. “Ya’re right. They’re unpleasable. I’ve seen that for myself.”

I leaned back in my chair and tried to see the situation from Mulan’s point of view. Ma and I often argued over things I did, but even when she disapproved, she was always there for me when I needed her. Love made ya tolerate things. I tolerated Jack because of love, even when I shouldn’t have. Similar to Mulan, I had been driven to be as good to my husband as possible.

But maybe Mulan’s parents didn’t actually love her. Or worse, maybe they loved that old demon more. I had a feeling they were using him just as much as the demon was using them.

Unfortunately, I had zero proof of my theory. I couldn’t understand a single word of what they said.

A cup of Mulan’s calming tea suddenly slid in front of me. I hadn’t even seen Mulan making it. Maybe I should have stayed on the couch in the foyer longer. Maybe I shouldn’t be here checking on her, but instead, resting up for the bigger fight that was coming.

Mulan was right. Any action she took about the old demon was going to seem like an action against her family’s wishes. Technically, no law said ya couldn’t allow yerself to be demon-possessed if ya wanted to be. The law only said that the demon had to restrain his inclinations to possess humans and make them slaves.

Any action I took toward the demon now was going to make Mulan’s family openly hate me but it might be worth it. I suspected they disliked me anyway. They whispered and glared whenever I was around. They had absolutely no awareness of their rudeness.

Goddess, they were the worst guests ever.

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I'd think twice before offering to host a family of strangers next time. For sure, I wouldn't be inviting Dylan's disloyal parents here. He could book them into a hotel in Salem if they ever got over themselves enough to make amends with him. Maybe I'd invite them to dinner. Maybe. It would depend on how much groveling they did.

I broke the silence between us with gratitude. "Thanks for the tea, Mulan."

"You are welcome."

I watched as she carried her own cup to the sink and poured the cold liquid down the drain. I felt better when Mulan made herself a fresh cup and brought it back to the table to sit across from me again.

"Before this, my life was calm and yours was chaos. Now I bring chaos," she said without meeting my gaze.

I grunted at her comment. "That's not true and ya know it. Ya bring amazing and unique skills to our work. Plus, ya entertain me with crazy things like yer foolish determination to be the first human with a pet tiger cat. And I still refuse to be responsible if the demon wolves end up eating it."

Mulan snorted at my warning, just as she always did. "I forgot to tell you. Troll sent note about tiger cat."

I chuckled because I didn't even know Bo could write. "Goddess, I love that troll. He's trying so hard to be a good business partner to us. What did Bo's note say?"

“Soon,” Mulan replied as she sipped her tea. “That was all. Just one word.”

I laughed at her dry response. “I doubt Bo knows either. It probably took him a whole day to come up with it. Bo is a live-only-in-the-moment kind of troll. But he always keeps his word. If he still has yer tiger cat, it’s because he wants it trained right before he returns it. He’s not very articulate in our language, but he really, really cares.”

“I know. Troll is like you,” Mulan said softly.

I nodded in agreement to her comment even if she thought the articulate part applied too. “Yes, I do care. Yer friendship fills a hole in me that was empty for many years. I wouldn’t trade having ya in my life for all the tea in China, Mulan.”

Mulan grunted. “That would be bad decision for you. China has best tea in world. It is worth many fortunes.”

I laughed. “I meant that I valued ya more than the money I could make selling the tea.”

Mulan grunted again. “I know. This is why I say you are bad businesswoman.”

I rubbed my temples. I loved the woman but sometimes she gave me a headache—or worsened the one I had. What I needed was to soak in a bath.

I wished Henry had gotten that sauna we talked about getting for the basement. A few minutes in a sauna and a nice soak in a hot tub sounded wonderful. Not that I could let down my guard to do those things right now, but it would have been nice to know they were available.

“I always forget how literal ya are. And I am not a bad businesswoman. I’m a

cautious one who values her friends above money.”

“Yes. I suppose that makes you good friend.”

“Ya suppose?” I repeated in my snootiest voice. “What does that mean?”

It was her burst of laughter that clued me in that she was teasing me back.

“Well, I’m glad to see yer family hasn’t stolen yer sense of humor. It’s bad enough they emotionally hammer at yer dignity and ethics all the time.”

“Their hammers hurt and cause dents in ego, but they do not break me.”

“Thank the Goddess for that,” I declared as I drank my tea. “By the way... Gale says yer family’s demon has never regenerated. She’s apparently seen this situation before. Regeneration teaches demons about mortality and helps them realize they’re just as fragile as humans. Can ya force the old demon to regenerate?”

Mulan pondered it for a moment. “I can cut off a limb and give him reason to do so.”

Conn was right. She was more bloodthirsty around me.

“I could do too. All it would take is removing that sword hand of his,” I said as I softly chuckled. “When Conn is well, the matter may get settled for us. Gale said he was very upset.”

Mulan nodded. “He is upset with me. I am weak female to him now.”

“Did he say that to you?”

Mulan shrugged. “No, and I prefer not to hear it. I just know.”

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No, no, no... I couldn't—make that wouldn't—do the whole brooding thing again. What kind of freaking animal form would Conn take on a property this size? That brooding nonsense she and Conn both did would not be happening again if I had any say.

“Don't make too many plans for yer pity party, Wu Shaman. Conn isn't mad at ya. He's mad at himself for not believing me when I warned him about the demon. The only thing ya did was make him promise to be extra kind to a bunch of people whodon't deserve it. No, we're all equally to blame for this mess. The moment Zenos told me that one of yer family was keeping a big secret I should have confronted all of ya with it.”

Mulan put her head in her hand. “I feel shame that refuses to go away. My family is selfish. I am weak for feeling sorry for them.”

“Shame goes away with the right action. Trust me, I've kicked myself enough for my mistakes to have learned that lesson. Yer demon situation is not over, Mulan. So please stop moping and start thinking instead about how we can force yer sister's demon husband to do the one thing that might reform him.”

“If he regenerates for long time, my sister will die before him.”

“I know. He needs the shortest, most effective version. Conn can probably tell us what that is. Ya think the bastard would want to throw away his cane badly enough to volunteer to do it.”

Mulan looked at me. “How would Conn know what is best? He does not regenerate.”

I shook my head. “Yes, he does. He regenerates every day. It’s a silent, painless process for him. All he needs is a couple of hours of sleep. Magick does the rest.”

“I did not understand that. I thought he was exempt from normal demon life.”

“No, but he looks no older or younger. He says he is the same physical age now that he was when he signed the contract with The Dagda. His parents look that age as well. Henry and Gale plan their regenerations to keep themselves in their current conditions.”

“Conn has good family.”

“Yes, he does. I’m getting more attached to them every day. It worries me a little.”

“They like spoiling you. They like how you open your arms to strangers.”

I rubbed my nose to hide my smile as I carried my now-empty teacup to the sink.

“Well, a woman has needs and Rasmus is about as strange as a lover gets.”

“I have demon lover. I make no joke about your man.”

I waved her statement away as I went to her door. “So does yer sister and look where that’s gotten her. Yer sister is close to being demon-possessed. But ya’re not. Conn’s method of possessing ya is far more ethical.”

Mulan giggled. “How do you know he possesses me?”

“Because Connlander loves to brag about being with ya.”

“About being with me?”Mulan asked with a squeak.

“Not like that. Conn likes you too much to tell tales. He just said it had been a very long time since he sincerely liked a woman as much as he did ya. He also mentioned that the two of ya were perfect in bed. I was jealous when he bragged about it, but now I understand. A perfect bed partner is a rare find. Liking someone outside the bedroom is a greater treasure.”

“Then I am rich woman,” Mulan said. “Thank you, Aran. You truly are good friend.”

I put a hand on my chest and sighed dramatically as I left a laughing Mulan.

Chapter Fourteen

In the short time I was gone, another large sheet had been made and was now draped over the demon. With two covered statues, the foyer looked more like a museum gallery than it had before. A young demon male running a floor buffer over the tiles only added to the ambiance.

I shook my head at how strange my life had gotten as I headed to my quarters. My big plan was to take a few pain pills and lie down for a while. Those plans got blown away when I crossed my threshold and felt a familiar presence. Rasmus sat in my sitting room, which now sported two comfortable armchairs, a larger side table between them, a matching coffee table, and a small sofa that faced the chairs. Henry had created a cozy sitting area for talking. It looked like the library.

Rasmus raised his gaze from the book he was reading. “Henry said to tell you this is temporary. The furniture is on loan to your quarters until you have time to choose your own.”

My sigh was one of defeat. “He probably knows I wouldn’t have picked anything better than this.”

Rasmus smiled at me. “How’s your head doing?”

I lifted my fingers and felt the knot. It wasn’t flat yet but it had gone down a lot. “It’s better. I still have a headache.”

He put a bookmark between the pages and set his book down. “I can fix that for you. Come sit on the couch with me.”

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Sharp words about his offer to help lay on my tongue, and I was more than ready to stab him with them. I had plenty of questions for him too. Like why hadn't he stuck around to fix me when it happened? But in the end, I knew fighting with Rasmus wouldn't help me.

"I was going to take some pain pills and lie down before dinner."

"The pills would dull your senses too much. If my help works, you won't need them. Gale is sending us dinner so we can talk."

"About what?" I demanded.

"Both of your statues."

Protecting my pride seemed foolish when the knot on my head proved I needed help to handle both. "Fine. I'll listen to yer ideas, but don't bother giving me yer forty thousand alibis. I don't care where ya keep running off to every time trouble starts."

"I didn't realize I needed even one alibi, much less forty thousand of them."

He grinned a little when I glared at him but still held out a hand to me. I rolled my eyes but still put my hand in his.

Rasmus tugged me until I stood in front of the new couch and then he let go. It would have been childish of me not to sit down so I lowered myself and got comfortable. Unlike the leather couches other areas had, this small sofa had a soft fabric covering that felt luxurious under my aching butt.

“This sofa smells new. Henry must have gotten tired of waiting on me to pick furniture.”

“My understanding is that the furniture was purchased for your new office area in the blue house. Henry had them brought over here because you put Mulan and Conn in your quarters lastnight. I think he enjoys moving things around from living area to living area. Maybe I should ask for a bigger bed while he’s in the swapping-out mood.”

I leaned back and sighed at the plushness. “I bet he’d let me keep all this if I asked.”

Rasmus nodded. “I imagine he would. All demons seem to adore you.”

“Not the one that attacked me.”

“Good point, but he’s not exactly a demon, though they used to call his kind that. When I saw him mirror your powers so perfectly, I suspected he was another kind of creature. As a scientist among my kind, I possess more knowledge than most about the many experiments from the early years of humanity.”

While Rasmus talked, he gently turned me away from him. His hands rose to massage my shoulders and neck. Relief came instantly and I nearly wept.

“Are ya sure he’s not a demon? Gale sure thought he was one. Plus, he partially possessed Mulan’s family and Conn. Gale said Conn was purging the creature’s essence from his system. She also said the process was painful.”

“I believe the Wu Shaman’s brother-in-law is a jiangshi. That’s an immortal Chinese vampire zombie. They drain energy from the people they align themselves with. It’s done mostly to survive, but they can also possess a person’s energy and jump bodies. The zombie theory concerning them is they were terrible people in their first life and

got punished by never dying. Over time, many Chinese creatures became classified as greater or lesser demons. But that was just a label to encompass many beings.”

“Jiangshi.”

“Yes. They’re called black ghosts as well.”

“I think he looks like a giant Ewok from the Star Wars movies, especially with that giant white mustache dragging the ground.”

It was hard to listen to Rasmus with his magickal hands working steadily on my muscles. My poor abused head kept wanting to find a pillow or lean back against him. Jack had not been the nurturing type. None of my lovers before him had been, either. Rasmus had offered me physical comfort even before he’d offered me himself.

I cleared my throat. “What do ya think he wants from Mulan’s sister and parents?”

“I don’t know. We would have to ask him.”

“Ya mean Mulan would have to ask. He doesn’t seem to speak any more English than her family does.”

When Rasmus moved his fingers to rub my temples, I slumped in relief. The headache fled from his touch. I felt like I could sleep for days. “Ya’re a miracle worker.” The compliment earned me a masculine chuckle, which brought a smile to my lips. “Thank ya for the massage.”

He moved his fingers away as he stood. Before I could protest the loss of his touch, the guardian scooped me up and carried me to one of the two new chairs. He sat down with me still hugged against his chest.

Goddess, I loved his strength.

I felt a slight movement before finding my face pitched forward into the side of his throat. The guardian's grateful sigh was loud when he relaxed in the seat. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. I could have stayed like that with him for the rest of my life.

“Both chairs are recliners. They're one of humanity's greatest inventions,” Rasmus said in a contented voice.

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It was such a human-male thing for him to say that I nearly laughed, but right then, I was too comfortable to challenge his other lack of emotions. Instead, I snuggled in closer and let my eyes drift shut. “Wake me in five minutes, will ya? I want to talk about the fairy too.”

“We’ve got a few more days with the fairy.”

“But not with the Chinese demon—I mean, the jiangshi?”

“No. He could wake up any time.”

“Then I don’t have time to be napping.”

Rasmus squeezed me. “You need to rest while the Wu Shaman is sitting in the foyer watching him. We’ll tell her what he is later. She’s trying to reconcile her feelings for her family with her dedication to her magickal work. They’ve ruled her decisions for too long already. This is something she needs to think through.”

“How do ya know all that? I just left her at her house. She was brooding and drinking tea.”

“Orlin gave me back my omniscience because of Zara. That way no matter where I am or what I’m doing, I can still observe her. Right now, she’s got the demon wolves in the blue house with her while she’s researching. They’re getting along now. I had Dylan explain the ruse to the demon wolves because they understand him best. They’re playing along with Zara just as we are.”

“Should I be grateful ya’re working behind the scenes and keeping our normal things going?”

Rasmus ran a hand down my back until it rested on my hip. “I could keep you going too if you’d stop being mad at me. All I want is to take care of you, Aran. I’ve done my best to show you I wouldn’t interfere with your work decisions. What else can I do to make things up to you? Watching you get hurt is not on my list of favorite things to do.”

I sighed against him. So he’d kept away from my problems on purpose and not gotten involved intentionally. Sometimes I was my own worst enemy. I still didn’t know how I felt about his damned guardian neutrality but I could see he meant well.

I lifted my face and kissed his jaw before dropping my tired head back down in the curve of his neck. “Will we need to put a camera in Zara’s room when ya move back to mine?”

“I don’t know what to do. We’ll figure something out that works for both of us,” he said in a husky whisper before brushing his mouth gently over mine.

Our nap didn’t last long because Gale arrived with dinner sooner than we expected. The new coffee table held everything with room to spare. We coaxed Mulan out of the foyer and into eating with us. I needed to run Rasmus’s theory by her and see if she agreed but was trying to wait until she got some food into her stomach.

Mulan only picked at her food but it wasn’t because it wasn’t delicious. Gale was a master chef and so were her kitchen crew. It was going to be quite an adjustment for me when we sold this place. Cooking for myself again held no appeal after getting to eat Henry and Gale’s offerings.

I told myself I was eating to heal and shoveled in another big bite while Mulan ate an

infant-sized morsel off her fork. A knock at the door to my quarters had us all pausing to see who was interrupting dinner.

“Conn!” Mulan exclaimed, dropping her plate on the coffee table to jump up and run to him.

He swept her up and hugged her tight. “I’m sorry I turned you away earlier. I thought you had enough on your mind without worrying about me.”

I smiled and kept on eating. Good thing I did too, because it didn’t look like Conn intended to turn loose of her anytime in the next century.

“I’m glad to see ya survived yer purging,” I said between bites. “Do ya want some dinner?”

For the first time since I had known him, Conn looked ill at the mention of food.

“Do you remember having morning sickness with Fiona?” he asked.

“Yes. All too well,” I said with a grin. “How long is yer nausea going to last?”

“According to Henry, it will last a day or two. If that creature is a demon, he’s a very powerful one. I felt completely drained after purging his essence. I strongly regret not paying more attention to your warnings.”

“He managed to fool a lot of people. The stone warned me.”

Conn raised an eyebrow. “How often do you talk to it?”

“As often as it feels inclined to get involved in my business,” I pointed to Mulan. “I can talk to her staff as well. I’ve learned they have a lot in common.”

Conn glanced down at Mulan and then back at me. It made me wonder how much of the truth he knew. I could see The Dagda holding back from both of us until he was good and ready to tell us. Zenos, on the other hand, didn't play by anyone's rules but his own.

As Conn studied me, I inclined my head to Rasmus who was eating the vegetarian version of my beef stew. "Rasmus thinks Mulan's creepy brother-in-law is a jiangshi and not a demon."

Mulan gasped. "A jiangshi?" She pulled out of Conn's arms and dashed back out into the foyer.

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Conn looked after her and sighed.

I moved to the second chair and motioned him to come sit on the couch. “Sit with us if ya can stand to watch us eat. I’m sure Mulan went to see if Rasmus was right.”

Conn’s chuckle was soft. “Did the two of you finally settle things between you?”

I rolled my eyes at a smirking Rasmus. “Let’s just say the guardian and I are adept at reaching truces.”

“What she means is that Aran and I have an understanding,” Rasmus said to the most important demon in my life.

“Is that the understanding that you both have needs that only the other can meet, which you finally decided was more important than your grievances?”

I rolled my eyes at Conn’s summary. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rasmus grin at Conn and nod.

Mulan rushed back into the room. She threw herself on Conn and kissed his face. When he kissed her back, I actually blushed.

Where was the reserved Wu Shaman today? Not in my sitting room. That was for sure.

She finally turned to look at me and Rasmus. “Guardian is right and I know many fixes. You can help me. We do more Wu Shaman training. This satisfi everyone.”

More fascinated with Mulan's excitement than my food, I set my plate down and stared. "So Rasmus is right?"

"Yes. Most jiangshi were hunted and killed. Chinese emperors paid magickals to destroy them for good. Our jiangshi was never captured. He possessed a demon, which is why he has a demon form now. It all makes sense. And seems right," she said, patting her chest.

Mulan didn't have an artifact there, but she used the energy of her heart in her work.

To my utter shock, Mulan jumped up again and ran to Rasmus. She took his plate away, set it aside, and slid onto his lap to hug him. "Thank you, guardian. Thank you. This solves all problems for me."

"Uh..." Rasmus uttered in shock as he awkwardly patted Mulan's back.

He stared at me over her shoulder with pleading in his gaze. Conn and I both dipped our heads to hide our smiles. Mulan was happy, which was a very rare sight. Rasmus would just have to suck up the embarrassment of hugging her.

Then, just as quickly, the happy Wu Shaman slid off his knees and nearly skipped back to the couch. She put a hand on Conn's shoulder. "I go tell family now."

"I'm going to be unhappy with them if they don't go along with your plan."

Conn gazed up at Mulan in adoration as he spoke. I was glad that I'd stopped eating because my throat closed up with emotion. I would have choked if I had tried to swallow.

Mulan squeezed his shoulder. "Rasmus and Aran trust me. You trust me. I am Wu Shaman. I will do what is right no matter what my family thinks. I bend to them no

more.”

Conn nodded. “Then that makes all this torment worth it.”

“When you feel better, I will apologize well for pain they caused you.”

Conn’s chuckle seemed to be all the response she needed to her coy offer. She reached into her bra and pulled out a decorative fan. Flicking it out while she smiled at me, it transformed into her staff. “Thank you for dinner, Aran.”

“Ya’re welcome, Mulan. If yer family business doesn’t take long, come back.”

“I will because I must take Conn home after. My demon needs pampering.”

“Good Goddess, Mulan. Neversound that eager. It goes straight to a man’s head.”

“I know, silly witch. It goes to other places too,” she said with a giggle before trotting out.

This...this was exactly why I’d made the stupidest deal of my life with these people and now lived in a stupid museum of a house. They provided me with both a family and fun.

The love they had for me equaled my own for them. It provided me with the most essential thing a person could ever discover in any lifetime.

I wiped away a tear before noticing Rasmus and Conn were both staring at me. I extended my finger and pointed it between the two of them. “If ya say one word to Mulan about me crying over her being happy, I’ll torture the two of ya until ya beg me to end yer lives.”

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Both men grunted and held up their hands. Powerful woman that I was, I grinned and accepted their total surrender.

Chapter Fifteen

Mulan's happiness had lost some of its shine after she spoke with her parents but her resolve was still in place. They didn't believe her story about the jiangshi—no big surprise there—but the Wu Shaman threatened not to release him at all if they didn't go along. After that threat, they came around.

She took Conn home and pampered him. I never asked a single question about what her pampering entailed but she returned a short thirty minutes later citing he'd fallen asleep.

Rasmus elected to sleep alone until both statues were gone from the foyer. He said he didn't want to be a distraction to me. We both knew he would have been, so I had to be a grown-up and appreciate his thoughtfulness. Of course, his decision frustrated me too, but it had been my decisions that caused the fight between us to go on for so long.

I also was a big enough person to admit that we might have handled Zara differently if I had not gotten my feelings hurt. I might have inserted myself more strongly into his and Orlin's plans for the female guardian. Not that I was blaming myself for my current crisis.

Sure, Ma would have blamed me, and Fiona might have as well. Both would have caved on the issues between me and Rasmus sooner than I had. Did that make me

more stubborn than them? Or did it simply mean I trusted my judgment over even his?

I had never encountered a man as powerful as Rasmus, even in his human state. Admittedly, Zenos was a close second.

The dragon mage returned late that evening. He strode into the foyer like a conquering king arriving home from a war. It was a shock when he didn't immediately rail over the absence of willing wenches and bowing servants not there to greet him, but I saw the desire to do so in his haughty gaze.

While the guardians were reserved and secretive, Zenos displayed his power proudly. He also seemed completely unconcerned about the opinions of others. Since some would say that about me, so I could only admire him for it.

In terms of being annoying, he went beyond Rasmus, who annoyed me daily. Zenos managed to annoy me every time he opened his mouth.

But my dragon mage teacher told me truths that no one else bothered to share. He wasn't trying to shield me from my power or myself. He simply told me what I didn't know and let me deal with it as best I could. I had no words for how liberating it felt. He treated me more like an equal than any other magickal I'd ever met. Zenos earned my tolerance and gratitude by valuing my opinion and sharing information with me.

A questioning gaze that came ever closer warily shifted between Mulan and me sitting on a couch plotting and the now sheetless creature we had mostly concluded wasn't a demon. There was still a little room for doubt but I was completely ready to make the call that we truly were dealing with a jiangshi.

Zenos grinned when he saw Mulan's shaman staff back in its natural form. My face heated with memories of what it had been that day Zenos had flirted with me, but I

wasn't bringing up its previous disguise if he didn't. The last thing that dragon mage needed was more embarrassing ammunition to use against me.

"I see things are finally normalizing. Did ya lasses figure out the big secret yet?"

Mulan glanced at Zenos and then at me. "Does he speak to us? What is lass? Is it same thing as ass? Should I zap him?"

Communications suffered when global translations didn't work out well. Translating Zenos into something palatable was an even harder task. Also, the idea of Mulan zapping Zenos highly appealed to me, and I felt highly tempted to goad her into it. Mulan was definitely in a zapping mood. Luckily for the dragon mage, my maturity won out.

I kept my eyes firmly locked on Mulan's serious gaze instead of looking into the dragon mage's laughing one. "Zenos is very old-school in his English. Men are lads and women are lasses. He's not trying to offend anyone. It sort of happens naturally for him in every conversation."

"Fine. I will ignore odd speech then." She turned to speak to the dragon mage again. "Greetings, Zenos of the One. I hope you are well today."

The dragon mage's smile was all kinds of wicked. "Greetings to ya as well, Mighty Wu. Ya're certainly looking much better than the last time I saw ya. Have ya recovered from banging yer head?"

"Yes. Head is healed now."

"And I appreciate yer polite greeting."

"You are welcome. Aran taught me how to address you properly."

I narrowed my gaze at his polite conversation with Mulan. He owed me one as well. “Tell me something, Zenos. Do ya always leave without telling anyone where ya’re going? I could have been worried about ya today, ya know. Ya are a guest in my home.”

“Well, now, I have a grand alibi for my time away but I fear it would be wasted on ya in yer current mood. If ya weren’t willing to accept the guardian’s excuses, ya for sure won’t be accepting mine. Yer Rasmus and I are not the kind of men who sit around with our thumbs up our arse. We’re men of action and that’s what we do.”

I grunted in disbelief. “Ya’re right, Zenos. I really don’t want to hear yer excuses, and I still don’t want to hear the guardian’s. But I’m extremely curious about how ya overheard the private conversation I had with Rasmus because that’s the only way ya could have known we discussed those things.”

“And I’m curious if ya told the Wu Shaman what ya did with her staff while she was wounded.”

Mulan snorted. “What wicked, disrespectful thing did the descendent of brash Irish god do with my shaman tool?”

I glared at her for playing along with his dirty joking. Conn was corrupting her. That had to be why she was acting like this. “I didnothing, ya traitorous twat. I would never touch yer tool without yer permission.”

Zenos smirked. “Don’t be fooled, Mulan. Aran turned yer massive cock on and pointed the bloody thing at me. I thought she was making a pass and asking how my manhood compared to it. But then she turned me down when I agreed to bed her. I think they call that sending mixed messages these days. Ya’d think I’d understand women, being immortal and all, but I don’t think it’s possible to understand females. Yer kind are a perpetual mystery.”

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Mulan turned to me and raised both eyebrows. I blew out a breath. “It did not happen the way he says. I dug the vibrator out of yer purse to make sure it wasthe staff. Then Zenos slammed his face against the van window trying to scare me and he startled me into dropping it. The stupid thing turned on when it hit the floor and I had to chase it down to turn it off.The blasted thing nearly vibrated its way under the seat. It was embarrassing and Idid notproposition him.”

The Wu Shaman crossed her arms and looked at Zenos to see if my denial was true. He chuckled and shrugged.

I turned and smacked her arm. “Why are ya checking my story with him? He’s the one lying—notme.”

Zenos roared with laughter at my offended tone. “The truth always riles Aran up. I’ve never met a woman with less deceit in her. She’s so much fun that I might need to extend my stay.”

I narrowed my eyes until I was glaring at the dragon mage through slits. “Even yer compliments sound like insults. I can’t believe I was starting to think kindly of ya.”

Mulan laid a hand on my arm to soothe me but she looked at Zenos when she spoke. “Aran and guardian boy toy have not been together in long while. Forgive her, Zenos. She ignores her needs and is testy.”

“Listen now...” I began but Mulan’s fist tightening in the air shut me right up. I clawed at my throat while I stared wide-eyed at her for having the nerve to spell me.

She smiled at Zenos. “When Aran sleeps with boy-toy, I cannot do that to her. He makes her very powerful.”

“Ya don’t say. It must be serious between them if they’re sharing magick.”

Mulan nodded. “Yes. I think it is. He grovels at her feet begging to return to her bed. Her guardian also says my demon brother-in-law is not demon. He says he is a jiangshi who stole life force of demon.”

Zenos slapped his gigantic hands together and clapped in approval. “The guardian is right. The jiangshi were created as a way of imprisoning humans who needed more than one lifetime to give up their trouble-making tendencies. Very few of his kind are left in this world. I think yer brother-in-law survived this long by stealing the energy of an immortal demon. That’s definitely a demon suit he’s wearing. I bet it belongs to the demon royal who needs it back to complete his regeneration.”

My throat finally released enough for me to comment. “By having the royal demon’s life force, he’s stopping the true demon from returning. What a brilliant strategy.” It was almost as brilliant as Zara stealing the life force from young women to keep her alive and young.

Zenos nodded at our findings. “I’m sure he hates his old man with a cane human form. I know I’d hate looking like that. I bet he parades around as a demon more than anything else.”

“We seek to make him young again yet still erase his ability to jump bodies,” Mulan said.

Zenos grunted. “Why don’t ya just end the bastard, Mighty Wu? Ya’d be doing a good deed for the demon he stole his form from and getting rid of a problem for yer family. A jiangshi can die for good if ya know how to kill him. Ya just got to find the

right way.”

Mulan shrugged. “Killing him would be worse decision. Spoiled sister loves him.”

“Well, good luck to yer attempts to reform him then. If I’m awake tomorrow, I’ll come watch.”

Mulan shook her head. “No, we must do it tonight. We cannot trust our magick to hold him until morning.”

“Let me see if I can help with that.” Zenos walked over and poked at the hairy creature’s cheek. “No, he’s good until tomorrow. The guardian will have to release him before ya can work yer plan on him. Those snooty bastards can stop time, ya know. That’s what he did here for yer jiangshi.”

Zenos glanced at the sheet-covered Ezra and pointed at him. “The fairy’s good for another couple of weeks but he won’t last that long. Yer answer to that problem is on its way. I had a vision of him getting free.”

“Is that yer omniscience talking?” I asked with all the snark I possessed.

The dragon mage never even dignified it with a frown, which was highly disappointing.

Zenos smiled at me instead. “No, not omniscience this time. I have a gift for predicting as well. But in this case, it’s a matter of connecting the dots. Ya got to get the angel energy off of him or ya’ll never be able to send him beyond the veil. Didn’t yer guardian tell that, either?”

Mulan and I exchanged glances. Why would Rasmus not tell me there was no need to worry about Ezra and the jiangshi? Was it more of his determination to not get overly

involved? Our squabbles were no reason for him to withhold valuable information from me. And I would tell him so the first chance I got.

“Well, night all. I’m one very tuckered dragon this evening,” Zenos said with a wave as he started up the stairs.

I hissed out my frustration after he was gone. “Now ya see why I want to kill Rasmus as much as I want to sleep with him. This is the guardian’s bloody way of making sure he has to be involved even if he only chooses to watch. I swear if he brings a book tomorrow, I’m going to seriously hurt him.”

Mulan burst out laughing. “I’m going home to sleep, witch. Maybe I have sex if I get lucky. You should have sex too.”

“I’m not in the mood.”

“You are funny woman. Lie. Lie. Lie.”

She was right, of course, but I wasn’t admitting it. Not after learning Rasmus had once again withheld secrets from me.

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“If Conn doesn’t keep ya in bed too long, come to breakfast in the morning. We’ll work out the details then,” I yelled at her back.

Her head bobbed as she let herself out and thoughtfully locked the front door behind her.

I stood seething in the foyer for a few minutes more. Sometimes my life was great and sometimes it sucked. At twenty, I’d found that variety exciting. At forty, all I wanted was a soothing nightly ritual before I went to sleep. Well, that and a warm, welcoming set of masculine arms to sink into.

Hating the chaos I lived with, I yanked the giant sheet from the floor and tossed it into the air. As it fell, I chanted, shoved some magick into the fabric, and then motioned for it to spread out like a blanket until it felt gently over the jiangshi.

It was an OCD moment for me. I found it unsettling that Ezra was the only bad guy who successfully remained hidden. I had no choice except to fix it.

After that task was completed, I needed to decide what to do about my sleeping arrangements. My room was mine again and so was the bed. The problem was that I didn’t want to be in it alone. What was a tired, grumpy warrior witch supposed to do when she needed some sleep? My eyelids were heavy and my headache had returned. I’d be no use to Mulan tomorrow if I frowned at the ceiling all night.

Muttering under my breath and calling myself a fool, I climbed the stupid stairs of my stupid mansion to once again sleep next to the stupid guardian who was driving me insane. Giving up my independence for comfort was so weak of me. But after

napping with Rasmus today, I knew I needed the guardian's company to get to sleep.

Maybe I needed to tell Henry and Gale I was finally ready to eat my pride for dinner. They could serve it up with all the I-told-ya-so comments they felt I deserved. Every cell in my needy, womanly body said the humiliation would be worth being able to wrap my legs around the naked male who wanted me next to him.

Except I'd forgotten that Rasmus was sleeping in the blue house with Zara.

Since I'd already climbed the freaking stairs, I wasn't trudging back down like a rejected lover. So I climbed into the guardian's bed that at least smelled like him.

Chapter Sixteen

Even though I didn't sleep well without Rasmus by my side, I still managed to get some rest.

While I was making my way down the stairs the next morning, Rasmus and Zara walked through the front door. I walked by and waved as I went to my room to change.

Later, the guardian wrinkled his forehead at me over breakfast. I'd shaken my head to ward off any public discussion. We were acting like some old married couple talking with our eyes. If he started finishing my sentences, I would be in real trouble.

The breakfast conversation mainly focused on the jiangshi. Mulan was still on the fence about the best way to fix him. Of all people, it was Zara who chimed in with some truly helpful info. The female guardian gave us her best teacher-of-an-inferior-species look as she arrogantly explained.

"Traditionally, someone magickal creates a paper talisman with symbols which gets

affixed to the jiangshi's forehead. The symbols serve to hinder the creature's ability to possess others, body hop, or otherwise abandon in their human form."

Sipping his tea, Rasmus also contributed to the discussion. "Talismans also were the reason that many of the jiangshi got destroyed. Everyone knew who they were."

I nodded at both of their comments. "I imagine their actual form was fragile with human death despite it also being magickly immortal. Mulan's brother-in-law is an old man with a cane in his human form. Even someone ancient wouldn't be hard to kill if they didn't have some kind of powerful magick sustaining them."

Conn's head lifted from his phone. "I heard someone say kill. Are we killing him, after all? I'm ready to end this."

My demon familiar picked at his soft scrambled eggs and nibbled dry toast this morning. I felt sorry for his loss of appetite but not enough to override Mulan's decision not to kill her brother-in-law.

"No, Conn. We're not killing him. Didn't ya hear anything Zara said? Her idea is good. I can see a talisman working."

And I was being sincere.

The guardians had nullified Zara's negative motivations toward humanity but left the profound intellect that the female guardian had cultivated during her time alone on Earth. If I thought too long about how easily the guardians reprogrammed people, I might have killed both of them in their sleep and laid out a plan to get rid of all the others, including Orlin.

Ya'd think the female guardian might be a little grateful for me championing her idea. Instead, Zara shrugged off my compliment as if it meant nothing to her.

It was becoming clear that her innate resentment of me had evolved into a strong disdain, even if she didn't remember the details of why she hated me. Did she instinctually know I was her jailer? Or had Rasmus and his cover story about me sparing her life thinned? She rebelled nearly daily. I currently doubted her reformation would last five weeks much less five years. But I was keeping that to myself for now.

Zara's disgusted snort was loud. "What was done to them originally won't work anymore. No one can walk around with a piece of paper stuck to their head in this century without being treated for mental problems. You need to adapt the solution to the current culture."

"Maybe we use tattoos for symbols," Mulan offered as a suggestion.

Zara nodded and smiled. "Yes. Tattoos would work well. The best would be to draw them in ink, and then magically transfer them onto the creature's human form. The only problem is that tattoos can be lasered off human skin—even dead skin."

Then the female guardian pointed at me with her fork. "Aran knows a spell to drive the talisman beneath his human flesh. She did it to her family's heirloom. Putting the talisman inside him would force it to remain a permanent part of him."

"Are ya finding many spells of that sort in yer research?" I asked, pretending to be more interested in my food than in her answer.

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Did Rasmus tell her about the Dagda stone? Or did she know because she sensed it? I watched as Zara paused while she thought about it. Then she finally nodded.

“Nearly every mythology talks about the original human-to-animal shifters receiving talismans from their alleged gods. It was those talismans that gave them the ability to shift. Powerful spells resided in those talismans which were usually made of wood. I’ve found one or two spells for talismans that have merit.”

Mulan frowned. “But we hoped to do opposite. We want him never to shift again.”

Zara looked at Mulan like she’d just failed a major test. “Spells work forward and backward. What happens is controlled by holding the proper intention. Ink on paper is the easiest to infuse. Wooden objects are the second easiest. Inscribing that much magick on a metal object or a stone would require significant power, but you have enough, Wu Shaman. All of them would work for you.”

Mulan nodded. “I see the wisdom of what you say. Paper would easily dissolve inside human body and become part of cells. Wood also would break down and be absorbed like plants are when eaten. Metal would stay metal and never become part of his true form. It could be removed.”

Zara arched an eyebrow at me when she answered. “Yes. It could.”

So that’s how she knew. Rasmus must have told her about Ezra.

I looked at them over my coffee. “Mulan’s specialty is wood. She made her own staff. I think that would be a good format for her magick.”

Mulan looked my way and smiled. “I see your wisdom too, Aran.”

I drank and then set down my cup. “It seems we potentially need two spells. The first will take away his jiangshi abilities and make him permanently human. The second spell is needed to restore him physically.”

Conn raised his hand. I laughed as everyone looked his way. “Are we raising hands to talk now?” I teased.

Conn ignored me to speak to Mulan. “Getting jiangshi to give up access to his demon form may not go as well as you think. Not to brag here, but being a demon is pretty awesome. I think he will be reluctant to let that state go.”

I smirked at him. “What are ya hinting at, Conn? Are ya saying being human isn’t equally wonderful?”

His grin said everything for him so I rolled my eyes. “Ya do understand that Mulan is human, don’t ya?”

“Oh, yes,” Conn said. “But I would never trade her places. She has suffered far more in her human life than I ever have in my demon one. The emotional abuse from her family is enough to fill me with gratitude for the species I was born to be.”

I looked across the table to Mulan. “How do ya put up with him, Mulan? No man is that good in bed.”

Mulan shrugged. “I often wish that were true but demon is magnificent lover.”

No one at the table laughed openly, but I saw Rasmus and Conn exchanging grins.

I was grateful Zenos had slept in this morning. It had spared us—or at least, me—his

commentary during the testosterone-filled celebration. That would have been too much.

A short time later, Zenos tracked me down in the library.

I was sitting in the chair by the fireplace while going through my favorite spell books. After ruling out the possibility of Rasmus altering the creature's genes without the use of a proper laboratory, I'd sent him off to check on Zara. I now sat alone researching potential spells.

No one except Conn knew that I kept my sacred books in the storage that he maintained for us. I'd sent him there with a list after breakfast and now I sat going through the ones he'd brought back to me.

Zenos barged in, his heavy footsteps echoing through the room, before flopping down unceremoniously in the second chair. My chair had sized itself to fit me with my feet firmly planted on the floor. His chair immediately enlarged itself to fit his greater height and size.

He smiled and widened his eyes. "Is this yer work?" he asked in awe.

The wonder in his tone softened me. "I'd love to tell ya it was, but no. Henry knows a talented witch with wood magick specialty. Maybe I should ask him for suggestions about fixing the jiangshi. He might know someone who can help."

"That's why I came here. How can I help ya, lass?"

My ego still stung from his teasing last night. I wanted to keep my distance from my so-called teacher but this was no time to be petty. If what Mulan tried with the jiangshi failed to restore him completely, we would need a Plan B to revive him.

The immortal dragon mage had more magickal knowledge in his little finger than I would ever possess in my entire body. I'd be a fool to turn down his help.

“Do ya know any spells that might restore real human life to a jiangshi?”

Zenos pondered it for a moment. “They call them ghosts because even their souls are undead. Their bodies do hang around, but their souls are driving them like a vehicle, rather than living within it. Some say it’s that very division that makes them so angry and insane.”

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My mind raced with questions. “So how would they get anything from being in a physical relationship with someone? The jiangshi married Mulan’s sister and had to know she’d expect the relationship to be consummated.”

Zenos stopped explaining to stare. “Ya have the oddest mind, Aran.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, I’ve been told that before.”

“No wonder ya’re a guardian’s wet dream. Ya have beauty and a unique mind.”

My lips flattened into a line. “Why do yer compliments never sound like compliments? Can we just stick to talking about the problem?”

Zenos grinned and shook his head. “Okay. I can see ya need some sexual education this morning.”

“If that’s yer idea of flirting, cut it out, Zenos. Ya know I’m not interested.”

The dragon mage rolled his eyes at me. “By the Ancients, ya’re a testy woman. The physical is rarely all physical, right? I’ve never asked yer nosy question of a jiangshi but I’m guessing they would enjoy the spiritual energy and the magick that comes with the sex even if they no longer feel the sensations in their own form. His body might function mechanically—like yer Wu Shaman’s vibrator—but ya’d have to check with them to see exactly what they get from having relations.”

I blew out a breath. “Sorry. I just...” I stopped talking before I dug the hole I was in any deeper. “So, okay. Back to the spell. Do ya know any that would give the

physical sensations back to him? Maybe expecting to return his full humanity is too much.”

Zenos lifted both hands and spread them as he talked. “The only spell I know would require that we put a wandering soul within his body to join with his condemned one. The wandering soul would create a bridge over which sensations could pass.”

“That sounds creepy and too much like a three-way.”

Zenos stopped explaining to laugh. “We might manage to call a roaming soul to us, but if this jiangshi hates humans as much as ya say, giving him the power of two souls would be unwise. Ya could be creating a bloody supervillain who could possess anyone.”

Given my experiences with the magickal souls inhabiting the Dagda stone, more power was the last thing I wanted to give to the jiangshi who Rasmus had said craved power above all else.

“I’ll pass on that solution. I don’t want to make a supervillain.”

Zenos nodded. “No, I didn’t think so.”

“All I want is for him to have the semblance of a human life for as long as he lives. Mulan’s talisman should fix his vampiric tendencies to steal energy and possess others. But that leaves me fixing the zombie part of him. The power he’s leeches from others is all that’s keeping that dead body alive. Since we plan to take that power away, that leaves us the problem of what to use to help him stay alive.”

“Without his ability to leech off others, he will most certainly revert to the dead human he was when he became a jiangshi. His body would return to its decaying zombie-like form.”

“That makes sense, I guess.” I sighed as I looked down at my book. “He needs some sort of regenerative spell.”

Zenos rose from his chair to pace. “Aye. Or he needs to permanently possess a different body that’s not dead.”

There was a time in my life when I would have considered that sort of comment to be a joke. Rasmus had changed my views of what was possible. “Ya know, guardians make bodies all the time and can move souls around. I think they use a combination of science and magick. Science creates the organic matter but it’s the magick of multiple light beings that fuses the soul to it. I’m not sure how they handle the human programming part. It creeps me out sometimes to see how much they can dink with a person’s memories.”

Zenos snapped his fingers. “That’s it. It’s not regeneration, lass. Resurrection—we need a resurrection spell and one that can be repeated over and over. It would work like demon regeneration, only faster. If we got it right, his body would never go zombie on him again.”

I rubbed my forehead. What we were talking about sounded more like a movie plot than anything we could pull off in reality. “What kind of magick is strong enough to resurrect a person? That’s not what the guardians do. I think they start from scratch and grow their own.”

Zenos stopped pacing to stare at me. He blinked for a few moments and then laughed. “Guardians are irrelevant to this task. Still... ya’re not going to like what I’m about to tell ya.”

I chuckled. “Well, that’s nothing new.”

His grin was wide. “Yes, well, resurrection requires bending a few holier-than-thou

rules about the life and death cycle on this planet.”

My face crinkled in confusion. How would our magicks bend holy rules? None of us were of that faith. Then it came to me and I smacked my forehead. “Good Goddess, Zenos. Ya’re not talking about using angel magick to restore him, are ya?”

“Aye—I am. The best part of this plan is ya already have all the angel power we need without us having to bargain with one of the sneaky winged buggers for some. My solution resolves yer fairy problem too. Ya can thank me later for that bonus.”

“What bonus? My fairy problem is not with the angel magick holding Ezra in place. It’s the fact that he wants to kill me.” Damn the dragon mage and his twitching lips. “Do ya seriously find it funny that someone wants to murder me?”

“Yes, I actually do. The only threat that bloated fairy poses to ya is in invalidating yer past with him. If ya cared less, ya would have taken his head instead of making him a decoration in yer home. All that power he’s carrying could become yers if ya killed him properly. Ya’re a woman of power. Use it for yerself now and again. It would be a good thing for people not to count on yer mercy.”

“But I don’t want the power Ezra stole from Goddess only knows who. I want him to leave this plane of existence so I never have to think about him again. I’ll be dead long before Ezra of Airingdale will be allowed on this side of the veil.”

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Zenos made a humming sound as he scratched the beard that had grown overnight. “Do ya want the fairy out of yer life as badly as ya wanted the other bastard who betrayed ya out? Yaspared yer ex-husband because of the child ya shared between ya. Ya spared the fairy’s life because ya shared a past. The fairy folk will consider the fairy to be the hero for retaining yer loyalty even after he attempted to kill ya. They will consider ya a fool, Aran.”

I threw up my hands. “If this is a lecture about being too merciful, I get enough of that from Conn.

“Because ya’re a passionate extremist. Revenge doesn’t always have to come from swiping yer sword through the air. Sometimes it can come from a well-placed spell of the proper magnitude and good threat.”

“But ya’re talking about spellin’ a fairy. They’re mostly immune to witch magick.”

“They aren’t immune to druid magick and that’s what ya carry inside ya. Druid magick is the closest to dragon magick. The Dagda wasn’t supposed to allow it to continue in the world but he wasn’t exactly a rule follower. His mother created the druids and The Dagda spared their lives the only way he could. Now then... how much of a rule breaker are ya willing to be?”

I put a hand to my chest. The stone vibrated under my fingers. Goddess, was I really thinking about this? “Are ya saying my stone might know a resurrection spell?”

“No, Aran. Ya’re getting ahead of yourself. I’m suggesting we drain the angel magick from the fairy and put it into yer anti-zombie talisman with the resurrection spell I’ll

do for ya. But ya'll have to put a binding spell on the fairy to keep him constrained until his people can collect him. This is yer best answer."

I blew out a breath. Why did the idea of spelling Ezra bother me so much?

Zenos clapped his hands together and smiled. "Ya know... thinking this hard makes me hungry. I'm going to search out the lovely Gale and see if she'll feed me. I'm sorry I missed breakfast earlier but I needed the rest. If I thought I could steal that demoness from Henry, I would. That woman can cook like no other. She's easy on the eyes too."

"Stop that. Gale has been Henry's mate forever. Have ya no shame, dragon?"

"None that would make me pass up being with a beautiful woman," Zenos said with a grin.

"Ya're incorrigible."

"Aye... that's how I stay worthy of a woman's walk on the dark side."

"Henry would destroy ya over her."

Zenos laughed. "Oh, aye, he would, but what a way to go. And I'd eventually regenerate. Everything I do is a win-win scenario for me. The demons and I have many immortal life perks in common."

I blinked at his audacity. "Yer arrogance is worse than a guardian's and that's saying a lot."

Snickering, Zenos walked to the door. "I might be arrogant in yer eyes, lass, but I call that confidence. And I know my idea will work. It will cost me but I can move the

angel energy into the talisman ya create. The one it belongs to won't like me doing that, which will be the best part for me. But don't ya worry about it because we'll be using angel magick for some genuine good instead of creating chaos like they usually do."

And with that parting remark, the dragon mage left.

I chewed my lip and wondered whether or not I should warn Tony of what we were about to do. Then I remembered his wicked side—the one I'd clearly seen when he froze my daughter to shut her up. He'd seemed genuinely disappointed not to turn me loose on Hisser so he could watch me kill the snake. Something told me he'd pretend to be upset by our plans for using his magick to power a resurrection talisman but also might secretly admire our nerve.

Zenos and his big idea had given me a lot to think about. Plus, every plan this risky needed a failsafe.

My chest vibrated to get my attention. It was like a phone I couldn't shut off.

We need to talk, Aran of The Dagda. We have an idea about how we can help you with your task.

I closed the spell book. Not only had the stone gotten in touch, but the magickals powering it had listened and heard every conversation I'd had with people about it.

I didn't know whether to be shocked or happy. I chose the latter out of curiosity.

"I'm listening. What did have in mind?"

Instead of speaking words, I got shown a mini-movie featuring myself as the star performer. It was a little gruesome to find myself starring in a horror vision of a

potential future, but it was also illuminating.

It made me wary to learn that the stone had its own motivations for getting in touch with me but no one ever got something for nothing. When this was over, I was calling The Dagda for a long talk about the druidic relic he'd passed down through his descendants. I didn't want them taking me over. It was too late to remove it from my person so the only choice I had was learning to control it.

Yet I instinctively knew what they had shown me would work. It would also do what the dragon mage had suggested.

I picked up my notebook and jotted down the spell they'd provided before it slipped away.

Chapter Seventeen

The day had been long—too long.

We'd made the unanimous decision to push off our plans until tomorrow. I'd walked by the two sheet-covered statues in the foyer on the way to my quarters and never glanced at them.

Whatever happened tomorrow, they'd both be gone and the space would once again be empty. Henry was already making plans to put a big grand piano there. If the house hadn't screamed hotel to everyone already, it surely would after the piano got installed. One of Henry's people played. All we needed was a bar nearby and someone making drinks.

I felt tempted to buy a rusted suit of medieval armor to stand next to it just to mess with Henry. Maybe I'd stick a cigar in the mouth hole and light it up once in a while. That would at least make me chuckle when I headed to bed.

I wandered into the sitting room with its new furniture. Today, they added another beautiful piece. It took a moment to notice it wasn't a bookcase like I thought at first glance. It had shelves that held a wide assortment of glassware. That could only mean Henry had fulfilled yet another of my wishes.

I opened the lower set of doors and found a lovely assortment of alcohol waiting. This was great. Now I could dig my emergency bottle of Jamieson's out of the storage tub because it finally had a home.

I needed a drink but I was too tired to go storage tub diving tonight. So instead I picked out a nice bottle of cognac and found a suitable glass. I guessed my way to a

double pour, put the cognac back, and carried the drink to a chair. It took me a full moment to find the remote for the fireplace, but I finally did.

Now I had everything a tired woman could want—a drink, a fire, and a few minutes of peace. My contentment lasted for nearly two minutes this time. Then I had to rouse myself to answer the door.

I knew who it was but not what he wanted. I knew what I wanted but he'd already declined to give it to me. So why was the guardian here this late?

“Evening,” I said.

Rasmus smiled. “Would you like some company for a while?”

“What would do if I said no?”

His smile widened. “Talk my way in, anyway. I missed you too much to sleep.”

I stepped back and held the door open. “I’m having a drink. I know you don’t imbibe so I won’t bother offering ya one. I may have a bottle of water. Come to the sitting room and I’ll look.”

“Water will be fine if you have it.”

I turned back to the sitting room and heard the door click shut behind me. Then I heard the lock being thrown. An urge to laugh at the finality of it hit me but I bravely fought it off. Did he think I’d try to escape? Or had he locked himself in here on purpose?

I found a few bottles of regular water and several mineral ones next to the booze. Maybe I’d look into getting one of those tiny refrigerators. Then I could have ice and

cool drinks because I wasn't already spoiled enough.

I carried the bottle of water to him and handed it over. His gaze remained on me the whole time I sat and picked up my drink.

"Are ya sizing me up to kill me? Yer gaze is very intense."

"Sorry," he muttered, looking away.

I returned to sipping my drink. "Are Zara and ya okay upstairs? Since we know nothing's going to happen until we make it happen, I figured there was no reason for the two of ya to spend another night on cots."

"We're fine. Zara was in her room reading when I left."

"Were ya too restless to sleep?"

"It wasn't a problem of restlessness. I couldn't sleep in my bed because it smelled like you."

My sigh echoed into my glass. "I forgot ya were in the blue house last night. Since I'd climbed the stairs already, I stripped and slept in yer bed."

"I'm really sorry I missed that."

I lowered my glass and softly laughed. "I suppose the polite thing would be to offer to share my bed with ya tonight."

"Yes, and that would keep me from having to beg."

I did laugh then because Rasmus sounded so humble. I knew that wouldn't last but I

could make the most of it while it did.

I smiled at him. “The idea of ya begging has a certain appeal, guardian. But I won’t make ya work that hard for the privilege. I’m happy if ya want to sleep with me tonight. I missed ya too.”

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Rasmus reached across the small distance between our chairs and slid the now empty glass out of my fingers. I guess I'd guzzled it when he arrived.

He carefully set it on the side table before dropping to his knees in front of me.

I leaned forward and ran my fingers through his hair, releasing it from the band that had kept it constrained in a ponytail all day. I pulled it over his shoulders, barely conscious of what I was doing. "I often wish I understood ya better but I'm still glad ya're in my life, Rasmus."

His solemn gaze met mine. "I want to be someone who never angers you."

To a woman my age, a handsome man kneeling at her feet whispering promises was the stuff of fantasies. My laughter as I cupped his jaw was light as a girl's.

Best of all, I knew Rasmus meant his words and that they were not just romantic drivel being uttered to get me into bed with him. That was going to happen the moment he'd smelled me on his bedsheets. I'd had a hard time not going to the blue house last night and making him return with me.

"Yer wishes are less likely to come true than mine, guardian, but I'm not angry with anyone tonight. Let's just go with that, shall we? Tomorrow will bring its own challenges. It always does. I appreciate ya saying such nice words. Women like to hear them and I'm no exception."

His hand came up between us and cupped my jaw too. "I've never felt attracted to any female like I am to you. It's important to me that we bond in every way, not just the

physical.”

“Ya’re such a sweet talker,” I teased.

When his mouth closed eagerly over mine, it opened under his with profound relief that we hadn’t lost this. He slid me out of the chair until he could wrap my legs around his waist. He stood up with both of us, momentarily stopping to press me into the chair and kiss me even harder.

Rasmus always knew when to unleash his masculinity. And his timing was always perfect. It was a rare and wonderful skill for a man to possess. I felt lucky all over again that this male—whatever manner of being he was—wanted me so desperately.

He finally let go of my mouth and summoned enough restraint to get to his feet. I clung to him, refusing to let go of my python hold. Using his wide shoulders for leverage, I hoisted myself higher. The guardian was a tall male to climb.

Once I was where I wanted to be, I kissed under his jaw and down his throat.

He stopped and stared down at me. The bed was still several steps away. His hold tightened to where I thought for sure he would take us both to the bare, hardwood floor. I would have paid for that tomorrow and not have cared one whit.

“Bed,” I whispered. “I’ll try to be patient until ya get us there.”

His head shook as he began walking again. “I don’t want your patience. I want to know how hungry you are for me so I can satisfy you.”

“Well, I’m starving,” I said in a low whisper.

He turned and fell on the bed with me on top of him. His hands were tight clamps on

my waist as he pressed my hips down tightly on the evidence of his need.

I worked hard to free myself until I was on my knees over him. Then I attacked his jaw again with my lips... and his throat. I kissed and nipped and moaned against him until he shook under me.

This time I didn't stop what I was doing, not even when Rasmus whispered my name in a choked, hoarse growl. I pressed my hips to his again and pushed his shirt up to kiss more of him. My hands worked deftly between us as I did my best to free him from his clothes.

Desire for Rasmus ruled me, and I soon forgot to be civilized. I nipped at the muscles above his waist when the clothes I hadn't removed stopped me from going any further.

Rasmus sat up with me and tore at my clothes to remove them. I don't know how we managed, but eventually, we were both naked and wrapped around each other.

We gripped and pulled in a desperate need to mate like we had the first time we'd joined this way. I think I called his name more often than he called mine. But who was counting?

In golden moments afterward, it was Goddess Danu's name I called. I thanked her profusely for sending me a lover who was a genuine match for the fire that had always burned so hotly inside me. I needed a man's passion like blooming flowers needed sun.

I still had no idea how the guardian and I could ever co-exist peacefully outside of bed. Yet there wasn't a single doubt in my mind that keeping him with me was worth the trouble of trying.

Rasmus had knocked on the door around nine-thirty last night and now it was nearly two. It had taken several bouts of lovemaking to sate us both enough to have normal conversation again.

“When Zara and I went to say goodnight to the demon wolves, we saw Mulan working on her tiny patio. She was chanting over a tool and seemed to be writing on something. It had a cord and was plugged into a longer one. I think the tool was electrical.”

My chuckle was soft. “Do ya remember when we first met that I took ya to Mulan to see if she could cast out the demons in ya? We thought ya were demon-possessed because Conn and I discovered Lilith’s compulsions. That was before we knew the truth of what ya really were and what had happened to ya.”

“No, I don’t recall that. My memories of being held prisoner were only partially recovered after I could transform back. I know Jack was kind to me and I recalled your determination to restore me. I also remembered thinking you were the most beautiful woman I’d ever met. I remembered wanting to kiss you but holding back because of Jack.”

Of course, he remembered Jack. Even after seeing Jack turn into a monster of biblical proportions, Rasmus still acted like my ex-husband’s biggest fan. I would never understand how the guardian’s mind worked but I refused to torture myself with that shortcoming tonight.

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“Well, I took ya to Mulan to see if she could break yer compulsions. She directed her magick by inscribing the request on a turtle shell. We put the turtle shell over yer manhood and she sent magick into it that collected information about the compulsions. Then she used the inscribing tool to command them to break. Unfortunately, the magick refused her request. Her failure set her Wu Shaman ego back a bit. No one in Mulan’s life taught her how to try again when things didn’t work.”

Rasmus chuckled as he rolled to put an arm across my waist. “I’m sorry I caused her to doubt herself.”

I rolled my head to look at him. “It wasn’t yer fault. Ya weren’t possessed and she hadn’t practiced her magick in years. I broke some yer compulsions accidentally just by touching them. Conn broke a few others. Then Lilith removed the rest and that’s what allowed ya to transform into yer guardian self again. Seeing ya as a naked birdman was a sight none of us will ever forget.”

I turned my head back to stare at the ceiling. His chuckle in my ear made me smile. Then I remembered I’d be facing Ezra again tomorrow and frowned.

“Anyway... to answer your question, I’m sure Mulan was inscribing the talisman she’s making for her jiangshi brother-in-law. I taught her the spell to put it inside his body, but she wants me to do that part. Her talisman will do all the things Zara mentioned.”

Rasmus rose to one elbow to look down at me. “Weren’t you creating a talisman as well?”

I blew out a breath. “Yes. Zenos and I are also made a wooden talisman. Ours will help fix the zombie part of his problem. We settled on using a repetitive resurrection spell. The problem is not the jiangshi. It’s the fairy Zenos insists has to be released first. The dragon mage says it will take a lot of power for that spell to be done once, much less make it repeatable. He wants to use the angel energy surrounding Ezra.”

Rasmus snickered.

“Why is that funny?”

“Angel energy is some of the most powerful energy in all of creation. It’s also very unpredictable. Your talisman might end up being a bomb and blowing up the jiangshi from the inside out.”

I grunted at the news. “Well, that’s not good. The dragon mage could have warned me.”

“Zenos of the One is as unique as you are. If he says it can be done, he’s probably right.”

“Probably?”

Rasmus chuckled again and tugged my body closer to his. “Magick is never a hundred percent accurate, but if you want odds, I think Zenos and his plan are above ninety percent.”

“That’s not a good enough number for me.”

Rasmus pulled me to his chest and chuckled harder. “Your spells are only eighty-five percent accurate. You trust those to work all the time.”

I pushed out of his arms but it was hard to look mean when ya were naked. “My spells are more than eighty-five percent.”

“You think that because your belief covers the other fifteen percent. The unknown element of all spells lies in the spellcaster's intention. The magick alone is somewhat effective, but it's the magick wielder that makes it work the way it should.”

I promptly decided that talking to an advanced being was not very helpful in times like these. I was worried enough about tomorrow. I didn't need to quantify that worry with statistics about my potential to fail.

I sighed heavily before complaining, “I don't want to talk about work anymore. I'll never get to sleep as it is.”

“Yes, you will. I'll help you.”

My snort was soft. “Ya've already helped me several times tonight and I'm still awake.”

Rasmus smiled and I could feel his lips curving against my forehead. “I adore your matter-of-fact bravery. I also adore how you'd rather use your sword on a problem than to have to rely on casting spells and faith. Yet you are strong in both.”

I breathed out my concerns and breathed him in afterward. Who was I kidding? It would have been worse to be alone tonight. “Ya know I'd kill to protect my family and Conn, but helping friends is my biggest weakness. Well, it was before I knew ya. I've had to move ya onto my weakness list as well. Look at me now. I'm weak as a kitten after being with ya.”

“Weak like Mulan's tiger cat maybe, which as you well know is not weak at all,” Rasmus said with a laugh.

“After the way I attacked ya earlier, I can see why ya’d make that unflattering comparison. Since I’m feeling well-sexed and mellow, I believe I’ll let that insult go unchallenged.”

“Being with me always will make you stronger and never weaker. You can trust that, Aran of The Dagda. I share all I am with you.”

If my eyes hadn't closed, I might have challenged that outrageous and very human brag about his manly powers. And I might have lost that argument the hard way.

I giggled at my strange thoughts just before the world went dark.

Chapter Eighteen

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Conn and Henry used the demon strength they possessed even in human form to slide the jiangshi in his massive demon form over by the stairs. Ezra would come out of being frozen with his sword primed and ready. I'd made peace over what I might have to do to him. Our power would not be as unevenly matched as it was last time. I would greet him with one of my own swords drawn and ready.

Claiming a seat on one of the leather couches in the foyer, Rasmus and Zara stared at us with unwavering focus. I thought about offering them popcorn as a joke, but guardians were so literal that they might expect the demons to make it for them.

Henry and Gale were also there. I'm sure they were worried about what damage Ezra and I might do to the foyer if we started swinging energy swords around. Maybe we should have taken Ezra outside. I turned to suggest it but Zenos charged over to me.

"I don't have much time to use my power. Give me the talisman," he ordered.

I pulled the polished and blessed wooden circle from the pocket of my jeans and handed it to him.

He rolled his eyes at me once he held it. "Why did ya waste the energy to bless it?"

"Because I felt like it," I said just as testily.

Zenos grunted. "I thought ya'd be a little friendlier after getting yer field plowed last night."

I called an energy sword and pointed it at Zenos. "Leave off me, dragon. I'm primed

to kill a fairy. Keep fussing at me and I'll add yer complaining carcass to my dead body pile."

Zenos looked back at the guardian and shook his head. "Did she fall asleep on ya before ya could do the deed? She's very cranky today."

Conn and Mulan covered their mouths to stifle their laughter and walked several steps away from my humming sword. I didn't give Rasmus time to brag about all the hours he'd devoted to me or the quickie he'd talked me into this morning.

I growled at the dragon mage. "We're essentially creating an angel relic without an angel being directly involved. The Dagda stone helped me put a sacred protection on it so no one could extract the wood from the remains of the jiangshi and use it for some terrible purpose after he dies for good."

"What if the angel power doesn't like yer sacred protection?"

"Then we'll have to do something else. I took a Goddess damn precaution because I'm going to be responsible for creating a body bomb like ya warned me could happen. Deal with it."

Zenos blinked at my yelling. "Okay. I guess we have an understanding of why ya did what ya did. We'll just keep the faith then, shall we?"

I motioned to Ezra with my sword. "Do yer part, dragon mage, and I'll do mine. Let's get this done. Our work's just getting started."

"Mine will be over if this works. I'll need to go shift and renew myself."

"Understood," I said. "Come back and watch the rest if ya can. A giant dragon won't fit in this room but I'm sure ya could shift into some creature that will. I think yer

phoenix form would fit.”

Snickering at my bossiness, the dragon mage turned one of his hands into a dragon’s claw and held it up palm-out facing Ezra while holding the wooden disk in his other, still human, hand.

I’d never seen a being able to control themselves the way Zenos could. Too bad that control didn’t extend to his libido or mouth.

“Before ya get going, thank you for helping. I’d have been days coming up with something and it wouldn’t have been this. Working with ya has expanded my imagination. Ya’ve been an excellent teacher.”

Zenos snickered. “I’m surprised ya didn’t choke on the words as ya said them.”

“I am too,” I admitted. “And I’m done.”

“Are ya sure ya’re ready for this, lass?” Zenos grinned at me.

I blew out a breath. “No, but we have to do it.” I waved the sword at Ezra again.

As Zenos began the chant, I took up a battle stance, preparing myself to fight. Whatever happened now, there was no turning back.

Slowly, the magick residue coating Ezra pulled away from him and entered the talisman disk Zenos held. I saw Ezra blink as he came out of whatever hold the angel had set upon him. He continued to blink as it peeled away from the rest of his body. Zenos started walking backward with the disk when it got to the sword. I don’t know how he’d manage to leave it for last, but I appreciated the effort.

When it was all done, Zenos snapped his fingers around the disk and sort of sagged.

That it had taken so much out of him surprised me. I hadn't really believed him about the toll it would take. Henry rushed to his side and caught him before he fell.

I had to let someone else look after the dragon mage because I had a problem that still needed clearing up.

“Hello, fairy. Did ya have a pleasant sleep?”

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“Ya filthy harpy,” Ezra exclaimed. “Ya let that angel poison me.”

“Ya went after my daughter with yer sword, ya pointy-eared bastard. I wanted to kill ya, but the angel made his own decision about yer fate. I only wish I could have left ya like that forever, but people have other plans for ya.”

Ezra lifted his sword and smiled to see that it was still working. “Yer power is no match for mine, Aran of The Dagda. I’ve become more powerful than ya could ever dream of being.”

“I’m not trying to match ya in power,” I said, blocking Ezra’s sword swing when it came down and clashed against mine. “Matching ya wouldn’t do any good. I need ya to know once and for all that I’ll not tolerate another minute of yer betraying ways. It’s time for ya to pay for yer faithlessness.”

Ezra glanced around, saw everyone watching, and grinned. “Are ya willing to risk yer friends to my sword? I could easily run away while ya attend to their wounds. Ya went soft in prison, Aran.”

“Is that right?” I asked, inching a bit closer. “Why don’t we see about that?”

Instead of heading for me, Ezra moved sideways and headed for Rasmus and Zara. I could have let them fight for themselves, but there was more than stopping Ezra at stake. I wanted to send him back to his people with enough fear of me that other fairies would think twice.

I let the sword go and pulled a charged dagger from the weapons belt I’d worn.

“Siste in loco!” I yelled as I threw it at him.

The dagger was meant to stop him from getting away. It hit Ezra in the back, right between his shoulder blades. His knees buckled and he hit the floor of the foyer on them. His energy sword faded away.

I walked to him, and then around him, until I could look into his eyes once more. Ezra was trying to speak but the magick in the dagger made that nearly impossible for him.

“Don’t bother trying to talk, fairy. I couldn’t leave ya able to speak a spell, now could I?”

His gaze was full of shock. For a moment, I saw the fairy I used to know—the less evil one. Then his gaze changed until he glared at me for daring to do what I’d done. Somehow I had missed knowing the second Ezra. Maybe I’d never looked close enough.

I smiled at him. “I know. Ya never thought I’d hit ya from behind because I’m not that kind of fighter, but ya see, that actually was something I learned after being in prison. I’m unwilling to let anyone hurt me again and walk away unscathed. For the record, though, I tried to send ya back as ya were but yer kind wouldn’t take ya. So it’s come to this, Ezra. This is the inevitable moment ya never saw coming.”

I pulled a sharpie from my pocket and stepped closer. He tried to bring his arms up to block me but they wouldn’t obey him.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’m not going to kill ya. When I pull out the dagger, ya’ll heal up good as new. But I’m taking half yer accumulated power first, especially anything ya stole from me or mine. Consider it recompense for trying to kill me and Fiona.”

I drew the symbol from the spell I'd rehearsed early this morning. I'd been still on the fence about what to do about Ezra despite the lecture from Zenos. Hurting people, even those who deserved it, was not something I relished.

But even I knew Ezra needed to be an exception. I had to set a precedent about crossing any child of The Dagda.

Once the symbol was drawn on Ezra's forehead, I pulled the bloody dagger from his back and cut my palm with it. I slapped our mingled blood over the symbol and quoted the spell. The Dagda stone heated in my chest as it absorbed the power I was pulling from the fairy.

Conn leisurely walked to my side. "How much do you intend to take from him?"

"Half," I said, gritting my teeth at some of what was coming into me. "Can ya tell how much I've taken?"

"Take a little more," Conn said, looking between Ezra and my chest. "Okay. Stop."

I used one hand to pull the other away. I panted like an out-of-breath runner.

Ezra sank back on his ankles. His hands came around to hug his knees. The wound in his back must have closed over because he could speak again. "What have ya done to me?"

"I made ya pay for yer treachery to the people on this side of the veil. I'll make every fairy pay if I hear of any other who crosses a human the way ya have me."

"Ya took my power from me."

"Yes, and I'd do it again, Ezra. Be lucky I'm not sending ya back empty-handed. I let

ya keep some so they won't toss ya back here right away. This is my way of putting all the Fairy Folk on notice. Kin or not, I won't tolerate what ya did here. Ya're going to serve as my example."

"Ya had no right to violate me in that manner."

"Ya had no right to try and steal mine from me. The moment ya pointed a sword ya become my enemy. Not a creature in any realm would blame me for taking yer life. Be grateful I'm sparing ya. I know for sure ya won't have spared me or mine."

I looked at Conn. "I'll be needing the cage now."

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Morphing into his demon self, Conn disappeared. A few seconds later, he reappeared and let the cage drop against the foyer tiles.

“Easy on the tiles, you two,” Henry yelled.

I winced as I looked at Conn. “If the tiles break, ya’re the one who’ll have to replace them. I’m not paying for them.”

Grinning with a mouth full of sharp fangs, Conn grabbed the fairy by the back of the shirt and threw him into the cage. I winced a bit as a weakened Ezra bounced off the bars. Once the lock and the magick to hold him were in place, Conn morphed back to his human self.

“Now what?” he asked.

“Call Ben and get him to send the collection van. Ezra needs to be shipped back to Ireland as soon as it can be arranged. He’ll need an escort capable of making sure he doesn’t break free. The Shadows Breakers will have to handle his delivery to his people. I’m done playing nice with him. Let Murray know he’s off the hook. We removed the poison from him.”

Ezra glared at me from the cage. “I’ll be back to make ya regret this.”

“Come back if ya want,” I said, weary of his bravado. “Just know that next time, I’ll kill ya before ya get a chance to raise yer hand to me. If ya ever get near any of my family or friends again, I’ll cut ya up into pieces and feed ya to my demon wolves. I’m sure they’ll find yer magick very tasty. Then it will be as if ya never existed at

all. Ya best shut yer mouth now before ya make me mad enough to see killing ya as a better idea than sending ya home.”

“What demon wolves?” Ezra asked.

I snorted and rolled my eyes. “None of yer business, fairy. They never were.” I looked at Conn. “Part one is done. I need a break before we deal with jiangshi. Is Zenos alright?”

Conn snickered, picked me up, and swung me around. “I’m so damn proud of you. Yes, the dragon mage is fine. He changed into his full dragon form and went for a swim in our lake.”

My mouth dropped open. “Where do we have a lake?”

“We own seven acres outside what’s fenced in. There’s a body of water that’s quite large. Maybe it’s more of a pond. I’m not an expert.”

I laughed. “If ya hadn’t stopped me, I’d have done the same thing to Jack that I did to Ezra.”

“Ezra was a fling. Jack fathered your child.”

“Goddess, let’s not argue about Jack today. Get that fairy out of my sight. I don’t like the way he’s glaring at me.”

Conn turned and whistled. Several of Henry’s people came running with custom moving rollers. They tilted the fairy’s cage left and right before getting enough wheels under it to roll it out the front door. It barely fit. I chuckled and rubbed my forehead with my bleeding hand.

“Shit. I just rubbed blood all over my face. Now I need to go wash up.”

Conn laughed as he pulled his phone out to call Ben.

I looked at the bloody dagger still in my hand. Then I noticed that the tiles around my feet were stained red. Blood had also dripped on my pants and onto my shoes. I had blood from the fairy and myself all over my body. Normally, I would have burned it off with magickal flames, but I needed to conserve what magick I had left for the jiangshi work later.

I sighed as I looked at my house’s caretakers. “I’m sorry, Henry. I told ya I tend to make a mess when I work. I hope you can get up the blood.”

“If not, we’ll just put a rug over it until Conn pays to have the floor replaced,” Henry said dryly, fighting his smirk. “And yes, you did warn me about your penchant for being messy.”

I grinned at him. “Did ya enjoy the show?”

“Immensely,” Henry said with a grin. “Zenos said to give this to you.”

Using my least bloodiest fingers, I plucked the wooden disk filled with angel magick from Henry’s hand. I slipped it in my cleanest jeans pocket to avoid smearing it with blood.

“Come back for the encore later. Ya’ll really see something then.”

“Will part two also take place in the foyer? Perhaps I should find some sheets to put on the floor to catch body fluids. In my experience, dead bodies are nearly as messy as you are. I can only imagine what will happen when you and the Wu Shaman attempt to bring such an old dead man back to life. When this is over, I think you and

I need to talk about several better and less messy ways for you to spend your vacation time.”

I hung my head at Henry’s lecture and laughed until tears streamed down my bloody face.

Chapter Nineteen

Rasmus might not be good at jumping into fights to help, but he hustled me into the shower and picked out a decent set of clothes for me to wear. I came out of the bathroom wrapped in a giant bath towel the size of a blanket to find my bloody clothes and shoes stuffed into a spare trash bag for Henry’s people to try to save.

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He'd laid out a fresh set of clothing nearly identical to what I'd gotten bloody on the bed. The vibrating angel relic patiently waited beside them. The only thing Rasmus hadn't found were my extra shoes. That was understandable since I had stashed them in the car Dylan was still driving. I figured if I ever needed an extra pair it would be while working out in the field.

"Where can I find shoes for you?" he asked.

"They're in the car Dylan is driving. All I have here is a pair of sturdy boots. They'll have to do."

Now that I was working again, I obviously needed to invest in a few more pairs of sneakers, but I had yet to make it plant shopping, much less to a shoe store. I hated shopping on the best of days but sometimes it had to be done. Usually, I talked Fiona into going with me. I guess I'd have to ask Mulan to go. First, I'd have to lay some ground rules about stripper heels and too much bling. I hated both and Mulan loved them.

I watched the guardian's mouth tilt up at both corners. "Do you find my lack of shoes funny? I could conjure a pair but the cost of that sort of magick is dear for a witch. I'd rather make do with what I have. Especially given what I have to do today."

"No, I swear I wasn't laughing. I was thinking that if you ruined your boots this afternoon, you'll be shoeless and have to borrow some from Mulan."

"Borrowing shoes wouldn't work. Mulan wears a whole two sizes smaller. She has unbelievably tiny feet."

“Really?” Rasmus asked as he glanced at my toes peeking out from under the giant bath towel. “Are your feet considered abnormally large for your size? How is that genetically possible?”

“I wouldn’t use the word abnormal to describe my feet. And I’d appreciate it if ya wouldn’t use it, either. Anytime ya talk about my body or one of its parts, ya better be using the same poetic language ya used last night.”

Rasmus laughed at my rant and I grinned at him for it. Laughter was still too rare for him, but I was grateful to occasionally amuse him enough to make him forget to be his serious self.

I was about to drop my towel to dress when someone knocked on the door. “It’s Conn,” I said to him, still ready to let the fabric drop. Conn had seen me naked plenty of times.

Rasmus grabbed at the cloth and held it in place. “Come in,” he called.

I rolled my eyes when Conn walked in and grinned at a stubborn Rasmus holding onto my towel.

“Lunch delivery,” Conn said, brandishing the tray. “Henry told me to put it in your sitting room. Are we all having lunch together?”

Entertaining people wasn’t high on my list at the moment, but it seemed only fair to invite them. “Sure. Why not? Invite Zara as well. I don’t want her to feel left out. If Zenos is around, he can come too. We’ll make it a party. Some people might have to sit on the floor, though.”

“Zara is still sitting on the couch. She’s reading a book while she waits.”

“That’s her research,” Rasmus said. “Hold on to your towel while I close the bedroom door.”

A snickering Conn carried the tray into the sitting room. I’d hear about this later. He’d tell Mulan and I’d get twice the teasing. I glared at Rasmus. “Conn’s seen me naked more than you have.”

“Yes, but I don’t want him to see you naked today. That’s what counts.”

I heard Conn’s laughter from the other room and glared at Rasmus.

“Fine, Guardian. Shut the damn door. I could have been dressed by now.”

“I’ll just pop out into the foyer and invite Zara to lunch.”

“Sure. Do that,” I said with an eye roll.

The moment Rasmus opened the door, I threw off my giant towel and waved my arms to anyone who might be passing by. If they’d seen me, I’d have looked like a naked idiot.

Rasmus glared before clicking the door shut behind him.

“Prude,” I said under my breath. I guess it was flattering that he cared that much.

I ended up having to hunt for my boots and they were in the last storage tub I checked. I was ready to admit Henry’s iron-fisted right to rule the choices of our furnishings. What would it hurt to let him find me a bedroom set that came with drawers I could use instead of plastic tubs?

Henry’s impeccable taste in furnishings usually suited me. I doubt he’d put

something I hated in here.

I picked up the angel relic and studied it. The wood looked freshly cut from a tree after only a couple of hours. I felt sure this was why Zenos thought the resurrection spell would work.

I emerged from the bedroom to find everyone already present in the sitting room except for Zenos. Even Zara had come in. She sat on the small couch with Mulan and Conn. Rasmus was in the chair he used last night. The remaining chair, a magickal one still sized for me, waited for my rear end to grace it.

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“Come eat,” Mulan ordered. “You need energy after fighting with fairy.”

“I’m fine. It wasn’t that bad,” I said, frowning at the group.

I was lying. This whole situation was bad, but the last thing I wanted was to rehash what I’d done to Ezra. It’s not like I’d truly expected the fairy to apologize or show some remorse. Maybe I’d secretly hoped for that but I hadn’t let that fantasy get in the way of what I had to do.

I sat in the chair and picked up a sandwich from the plate someone had prepared for me.

Zara stopped eating to stare. It was the first time I saw admiration in her gaze. Her stare made me wary of what she might be thinking. She didn’t make me wait long to find out.

“I have a question, Aran. Was what you did to the fairy an example of your normal work?”

I shrugged as I chewed. Then I opened a bottle of water to drink. After I’d stalled all I could, I finally had to respond to be polite.

Rasmus, Mulan, and Conn were practically holding their breath over what I was going to say.

“We do all kinds of things in our work. The last job was one we were doing for Dylan.”

“Dylan is your shy far darrig friend.”

“Yes,” I said, amazed at how nice the female guardian could sound. Where had the bitter woman gone? “His family relic was stolen and we helped him find it. While doing that, we had three jobs that dealt with trolls who’d committed various crimes. The worst was when we fought a giant snake and had to free a large number of animals from a shamanic troll breeder. Our work varies. We work for the Shadow Breakers. They provide the jobs.”

Why did her sudden friendliness worry me so much? The absence of her arrogant sarcasm should elate me. But it didn’t. Zara was the kind of person who’d stick a knife in yer back after bringing ya coffee. Her niceness likely wasn’t real. It was probably an act.

“I found what you did with the fairy to be both exhilarating and merciful. You could have ended his life but you didn’t. I’m not sure I would have had that kind of control in your circumstances. We all saw him try to kill you.”

I smiled at the rock star status Zara had granted me. “My deal with the fairy was both personal and professional. We were business partners once. Plus, I consider us friends. His betrayal was hard for me to believe at first.”

“And you were lovers,” Conn added.

“Yes, but that was before I married,” I said, clarifying what Conn said. “And I hadn’t seen him in ages. He betrayed the people we work for as well as me. He took out Conn and Mulan before he tried to kill me. The worst thing was when Ezra tried to kill my daughter. I survived due to the divine intervention of a wicked angel named Tony.”

Henry appeared in the doorway with drink refills and cookies. “His name is not Tony.

That's not an angelic name."

I shook my head. "It's what he told me to call him, Henry. If I find out differently, you'll be the first person I tell."

Henry rolled his eyes as he set down the tray on the dry bar. "Mulan's family is napping. They asked me to let you know that you'll need to wait another hour so they can rest."

I blinked in surprise. "All this trouble is for their benefit and they want us to wait for them to finish their naps? Who Danu's name do they think they are?"

"I am very sorry, Aran," Mulan said with a sigh. "They say they must nap to avoid jet lag."

"They arrived over a week ago, Mulan. Hello. Jet lag doesn't last that long."

Henry gave me a stern look. "Eat your sandwich. Have another drink. Enjoy a damn cookie, Aran. You're supposed to be on vacation. You could at least try not to take things so personally."

I leaned back and stared at him. "Fine. You're right, Henry. The jiangshi is not a job—not really. Even if I have devoted all my time to it for days and days, I'll just sit here with my thumb up my butt until they finish their naptimes like all the other toddlers in the world."

I glanced at Mulan. "No offense."

Her sigh was long. "None taken. I know my parents are rude."

An even louder sighing Henry walked out without speaking to me again. Conn

covered his mouth and fought not to laugh. “You sounded just like the dragon mage when you were complaining. What kind of lessons did Zenos give you, Aran?”

I nearly choked on my food. It took guzzling half a bottle of water to clear it out of my throat. Damn that dragon mage. His attitude had gotten under my skin in more ways than one.

I took a few deep breaths until I felt more myself again. “Zenos of the One is a brilliant teacher and an insufferable companion. Apparently, his rebellious attitude is also contagious. I apologize. I’ll apologize to Henry later.”

It was the shock of Zara laughing that had us staring open-mouthed at her. “I’m sorry. Weren’t you trying to amuse us with that confession?”

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I recovered enough to grin at her. “If ya didn’t laugh at the chaos Zeno causes, ya’d go mad from it.”

Zara looked around. “Rasmus tried to explain what you did and how you worked together. I couldn’t imagine it until I saw it for myself. If I can fix the demon wolves, would you consider letting me join your team while I’m here?”

I chewed and almost choked again. If I didn’t stop eating, someone would have to perform the Heimlich maneuver on me. I set down the rest of the sandwich and gave the female guardian my full attention.

“Each member of our team brings a unique skill set to our work. Sometimes the work is mundane. Sometimes it’s exciting and dangerous. The main point is that we get paid for doing what we’re sent to do. The best part is we get to help save people. We don’t kill any creature if we don’t have to and we don’t hurt them unless it’s in self-defense. Bad guys are collected and turned over to our boss. The Shadow Breakers get to decide what to do with them.”

Her head moved up and down. “I assume you are the leader of your team.”

“Only because I have seniority in the work,” I said. “We collectively decide which jobs to take and then we work out who is doing what. Conn and I did this work for years, just the two of us. So did the fairy and I. It’s not fun to have to do what I just did to a former co-worker.”

My gaze drifted over to Mulan. “What we’re doing this afternoon is a freebie. Mulan’s family is more incorrigible than Zenos. The Wu Shaman has to fix their

situation to keep them from being completely possessed by the jiangshi. It's her sacred duty to honor her powerful gifts and use them to rescue her family. But most importantly, we want them to leave and never come back."

"Are you going to all this trouble simply to get the Wu Shaman's parents to leave? Couldn't you turn them into small animals and set them loose in some field? It would be less trouble."

I chuckled. "Do you seriously think forcing them to shift into animals is an answer?"

Zara shrugged. "I would think being possessed might provide a good reason not to let them stay in their human forms."

Mulan turned and lifted an eyebrow. "Would you do that to your brother?"

Zara looked at Rasmus. "I'm not sure how to answer that."

"She means yes she would," Rasmus said.

Zara chuckled again. "What do you get out of the work, Aran?"

I leaned back in my seat to study her. She was serious about not understanding. That was what she hadn't understood the first time they'd talked.

"Let me see if I clarify it for you. I get the satisfaction of helping a friend. Mulan hopefully gets the gratitude of her family, not to mention peace and quiet after they're gone. Conn gets a less broody girlfriend. And your brother gets to sleep with a happier version of me. And if you eventually help us with our work, you will get a chance to see how amazing humans are because I know you think we're not worth our free will."

Zara's mouth twisted into a smirk. "I knew my remarks hurt your feelings. Rasmus told me they didn't, but I could tell."

I waved that away. "Don't make too much of it. All guardians bother me. It's not just yer brother and ya. I don't feel all warm and fuzzy about any of yer kind."

I got lucky then that Conn brought up the need for us to make a communal gathering spot. We had talked about the blue house being turned into a meeting space before. I again suggested we build a spot behind it to gather socially. It already had a gardening space. We just needed to add some outdoor furniture, a fire pit, and perhaps a place to grill.

"All I ask of whoever ends up buying the furniture is that ya buy some to fit Mulan and me. We don't want to have to sit in giant chairs with our legs sticking out like a child's."

"I'll buy the furniture," Conn said. "I'm the most motivated to keep the shorties among us happy."

How could I argue with that when he was right?

Chapter Twenty

Rasmus quickly removed his magickal hold on the jiangshi before returning to sit by Zara. I used Conn's energy to create my normal armor for fighting demons. I called an energy sword as well.

I'd had a brilliant idea at the last minute for Conn in large high demon king form—crown and all—to be the first thing the jiangshi saw when released.

Mulan's family huddled on the stairs watching what we did. They refused our offer

for them to sit on one of the leather couches near what was happening. A terse Mulan barked at them whenever they started complaining.

All noise stopped the moment Conn called his crown. They stared at him and then looked at her. Mulan glared back and shook her staff until they cringed away. I had no idea what they all said to each other, but all of us noticed when her family finally shut up.

“Are ya ready, Mulan?” I asked.

The last magick holding him was hers.

Conn looked the Wu Shaman’s way and smiled at her with all his pointed teeth. The Wu Shaman stared back for a moment before rolling her eyes at his show of both prowess and support.

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Then she muttered something in her native language and rapped the staff twice on the jiangshi's demon head. He snapped out of his stupor with a growl. Rebellion lit his gaze until he saw Conn. Then both arms came up to cover his face as he screamed.

That was a good call on my part. Even a fake demon knew to fear the demon king.

“Time to tell him how it is,” I said.

Mulan lifted her staff and held it while she spoke to her brother-in-law. His arms gradually fell away from his demon body.

Mulan paused and waited for his answer to a question she asked.

He answered her without words. His demon form disappeared and he changed back into his old man human form. To say he appeared fragile was an understatement. Ya could tell he was fairly skeletal under his robes.

Once the jiangshi gave up his demon form, so did Conn. Thankfully, Conn fetched the jiangshi's cane and handed it over. It seemed to be all that was keeping the jiangshi from falling.

Mulan's sister chose that moment to start wailing as she pleaded with Mulan to let them all go. I was proud of the Wu Shaman for being strong enough to refuse them. I was even prouder of the jiangshi saying something stern enough to shut his wife up, which it promptly did.

He and Mulan exchanged more words. Both were calmer, but her language sounded

like yelling to me even when voices weren't raised.

Finally, Mulan turned to face me. "He accepts our plan is necessary to save his life but fears my sister will no longer want him once his power is gone. I do not understand what any man sees in spoiled child like her. Love is truly blind."

I put my hand in my pocket and fingered the disk I'd made. Zenos and I had no way of knowing what the angel power would do to him. But I think it was a safe bet that he'd learn to control it.

"Why would his power be gone? He'll have some power. Right?"

Mulan thought about it and then shrugged. "I do not know what he will have. Do you?"

"No clue," I said, blowing out a breath. "But if I had to make a guess, I think he'll have more power than ever before. However, the power he has will only allow itself to be used for good. The power Zenos collected is power enough to turn a supervillain into a superhero."

We both turned to look at him. His gaze bounced between us but he didn't seem terribly afraid. Maybe Conn posed a worse threat than we did.

Mulan shrugged again. "I cannot let him stay like this. I cannot let him possess them. Hateful or not, they are my family."

I reached out to her and put a hand on her arm. "Ya're the best of daughters, Mulan. Never let them tell ya differently. What ya're doing will save them all."

"Or kill them," she said.

“Well, no plan is perfect,” I said with a small, wicked smile.

“Conn is right. You sound like Zenos now.”

“If ya don’t like how I talk, try to keep it to yerself. Ya don’t have to openly insult me in front of the guardians. I have feelings, ya know.”

I could have sworn I heard Zenos laughing in my head. I definitely heard Mulan giggle at my outrage. My grin was small. “So are we doing this?”

Mulan nodded. “No matter what happens, I am grateful for your help.”

“Good. We’ll hug later,” I said, smiling now. “Activate the talisman. Let’s get this shit show over with.”

Mulan handed me the disk she’d made. I put it in my hand and held it out. She chanted until all her tiny turtle shells hung suspended in the air around her staff. Even the symbols on it glowed. The louder Mulan chanted the more the disk twitched in my hand.

When her eyes changed from chocolate brown to blood red like Conn’s demon ones, I admit I got a little freaked out. My reaction was nothing compared to Mulan’s sister screaming. But that ended as quickly as it began. Someone encased her family in a magick bubble.

After Mulan’s eyes returned to normal, the disk vibrated in my palm. I walked to the jiangshi and showed it to him. He swallowed hard and ripped open his robe with one ancient hand. I nodded to him and used my palm to hold Mulan’s talisman against his skin.

Then I chanted to add my power to Mulan’s. I kept my hand on his flesh no matter

how many Chinese swear words he spat at me. The talisman sank beneath his skin.

When I stepped away from the jiangshi, he transformed into an even more skeletal version of himself as I watched. He was the epitome of death and represented every fear a human could have about it.

“His jiangshi power is gone. My sister is no longer possessed,” Mulan said.

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The jiangshi—too beaten down to fight anyone—let Conn bring him a chair so he wouldn't fall. Dejected by his shriveling humanity that he could no longer change for himself, he leaned on the cane and mourned what we'd done to him.

Mulan's father—angrier than ever—spoke slowly to her, pronouncing each sentence with a glaring finality. I watched Mulan straighten as she glared back at him. Hurt oozed from every pore. But she answered her father with a swipe of her staff in the air in front of us and a guttural utterance of a single word. Her gaze moved from her father to her mother to her sister. Then she turned away from them.

“What did they say to ya?” I asked.

“I am disowned,” Mulan said. “It is official.”

“So it won't matter what happens to him now? We can do what we like with him.”

“It matters only to him and us. I will never forgive them even if they beg. I have no family now.”

I fished the coin from my pocket. “Then let's create a superhero. I bet he'll be yer fan.”

Mulan walked to the jiangshi. I trailed a step or two after. She talked low to him, using her hands to illustrate. I didn't need the words to know she was outlining the risks to him. He'd been living with death for so long that it amazed me he might still fear the real thing.

He looked at me with hope in his eyes. Then he nodded. I nodded back. I pulled the talisman from my pocket and showed it to him.

Mulan backed away from me to give me room for the spell.

“Ya might want to warn him this could hurt.”

“I already did,” Mulan said.

I patted my chest. “Showtime, guys. I need ya boost my power.”

We agree with your intention. We will do as you ask.

I hadn’t known I needed their agreement. I’d have to ask them about that later.

I chanted quietly and sent my magick into the talisman to let it know I was there. The jiangshi struggled until he got to his feet. He held his torn robe aside for me to put the talisman and my palm against his decayed flesh.

I gathered the power rising inside me and sent it flowing through my hand. “Per vim facinnt huius te resurrecturus!”

His body failed to hold him up so my power did the job. “Per vim facinnt huius te resurrecturus! Per vim facinnt huius te resurrecturus!”

My voice echoed in the foyer like a god’s as I commanded the talisman to resurrect the man’s true human form.

His screams of pain moved through both of us. I held on as the talisman burned its way through dead flesh and into the part of the jiangshi that was still alive.

Finally, he fell away from me to back up. Still screaming, he clutched at his chest. But it was too late to halt what had been done. The change was happening.

The jiangshi crumpled to the floor as we watched and then slowly rose to his feet. He walked around the chair Conn had brought him. He rubbed his chest that was filling out. His whole body began to glow.

There was a burst of light and before us stood a stranger. Mulan glanced at me with her “check-him-out” look in her eyes. I ducked my head to hide my smile. The talisman had worked.

“Tell him it might or might not last. Or it might happen spontaneously now and again. We don’t know how it will work long term.”

She turned to the jiangshi and did as I asked. He walked forward to us then, no longer afraid. I stepped back when he dropped to his knees at my feet. The effect he produced in me was radically different than when the guardian did it. This man at my feet made my lips curl.

“What is he doing?”

Mulan covered her mouth to stifle her giggle. “He thinks you are goddess. He worships you.”

“Well, tell him I’m not one.”

Her shrug was large. “You are child of god with guardian blood. Maybe you are goddess. I will not lie for you.”

“Mulan, that’s not funny.”

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Her giggle was loud. Everyone heard.

The jiangshi knee crawled closer, grabbed my ankles, and kissed both my boots. He muttered something again.

“He says you may command him. He is your servant.”

“Tell him I said he is to use his power to do good to everyone that needs help. Outside of that, he is to live a happy and peaceful life for as long as he has left.”

Maybe that would prevent Tony from trying to repossess his magick one day. I wasn't sure he could do it since by then the talisman would be a permanent part of the jiangshi's bones. But I had seen him pull power from Ezra and return it to Dylan's stone. It was best not to underestimate the angel.

There was no need to worry about that today, though, now was there? Tony could have popped here if he'd felt what we were doing, but he didn't. I truly wished Zenos had been here to see how far I had bent the rules. He'd have been very proud.

I reached down and pulled one of the jiangshi's newly restored hands off my boot. I tugged on it to pull him to his feet. When he stood again, I patted his chest to remind him of what he'd suffered.

He bowed his head to show his understanding. Then he turned to Mulan's family and held open his arms. He said one word to them—I assume it was the sister's name because she ran to him. Then they were both weeping and talking over each other as she checked out his resurrected form. He was handsome and I wondered what he'd

done in his time to deserve being turned into a walking dead person.

“Wow,” I said, staring at the emotional reunion. “I guess he did love her.”

Mulan shrugged. “So it seems. At least he is not old man anymore.”

Her parents eventually rose and walked to check him out as well. They looked him over and inspected the talisman burns on his chest.

Mulan watched the happenings with an emotionless expression. They were a happy family without her being part of it. I wondered how badly that hurt her. I simply couldn't imagine Ma ever disowning me over my powers unless I used them wrong. If I abused my magick, she would try to kill me to stop me from doing it. I guess my family was just... well, I supposed different was a good word.

The last thing I expected was to have her parents and sister come and kneel at my feet. Mulan raised an eyebrow as she glared down on their bowed heads.

“What in Danu's name is going on now?” I asked. “I'm so damn tired of yer people, Mulan.”

She barked something at them. They answered her quietly without meeting her gaze. She covered her mouth and for a tense few seconds, I thought she was going to cry. I wanted to kill the three of them for traumatizing her over and over.

Then to my utter surprise, Mulan burst out laughing. She laughed and laughed, bending forward to hold her stomach. She laughed every time she looked at them... or me.

“Are ya going to tell me what's going on? I'm ready to kill them for upsetting ya again.”

“Oh, Aran,” Mulan said, wiping at her eyes. “My father wants to adopt you.”

I uttered a swear word I don’t normally use and held up my hand to stop her from saying anything more. When that only sent Mulan into another round of hysterical laughter, I rolled my eyes and walked away from all of them. It was so ridiculous—they were ridiculous.

Both guardians looked me over as I walked by. I saw something in their eyes I didn’t recognize. It looked a little like fear at first, but it also could have been their arrogant belief that they could have handled the jiangshi better than I did.

“Now what,” Zara asked.

I looked at Zara. “Mulan’s family moves into a hotel and we get to enjoy the rest of our vacation.”

“So nothing more today then. I’m going back to my research.” She rose and headed to the door.

I called out to her. “We’ll have Ben out next week to meet ya.”

She stopped and turned. “Who is Ben?”

“He’s our boss,” I said, watching her smile bloom. “If he’s agreeable, we’ll find something for ya to do.”

“Thank you, Aran. Or should I say Goddess Aran? No wonder Mulan was laughing so hard.”

“Don’t go there,” I said, pointing at her. “Really. Just don’t.”

I turned to Rasmus. “Am I going to hear something from you about this?”

“About this from me? No. I’m quite proud of you. The angel might have something to say about it later.”

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“Yeah, I know. But I used his magick for a good purpose.”

“To create a superhero?” Rasmus asked.

I glanced back at the jiangshi. He smiled and waved when he caught me. Then he and Mulan’s family were all bowing to me. Good Goddess, their approval annoyed me more than all the whispering had.

“I still say those people are not Mulan’s real parents. She’s completely different from them.”

“She merely outgrew them. That happens sometimes.”

“Those petty divas disowned her and wanted to adopt me.”

Rasmus laughed. “Did they honestly say that?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Is that why Mulan was laughing so hard?”

“Yes. It makes me want to kill them. All she wants from the selfish bastards is to be acknowledged and appreciated. It would cost them nothing to give that to her.”

“Command them to treat her well. They’d probably comply with their goddess.”

“Very funny, Rasmus. And the Wu Shaman would know they were faking. She has

second sight. Even I would know they were faking. So why bother?”

“So what now?” Rasmus asked.

I looked down at my boots. “I need new shoes and new boots. These have jiangshi kisses on them. He has dead guy cooties. I don’t know if Henry can get that off.”

Rasmus chuckled and rolled his eyes. I grinned at his action because Zenos wasn’t the only contagious person. I was oddly proud of his show of disdain.

That made me wonder if I’d ever see the dragon mage again. Then I wondered why I cared. He was nothing but trouble and too immortal to change. I still owed him for the resurrection spell and I’m sure he would come back to collect on that magick debt one day. I never believed his story about only being here for the entertainment.

“Want to go shopping with me tomorrow?”

“Is it a date?” he asked.

I thought about it for a moment. “Do ya want it to be?”

Rasmus nodded. “Yes. I want it to be.”

“Okay. I guess we could call it that. How about we make a day of it and go plant shopping as well? I’ll buy ya lunch. We can get the plants delivered so we don’t have to pack them around. Maybe Henry can give us a ride downtown.”

“Sounds great. I’m going to go talk to Zara. I’m still on the fence about her sincerity. She went from sullen to friendly in a very short time.”

I nodded. “Yes, I thought the same. It happened after she watched me take some of

Ezra's power away. I think her inclination to collect power didn't get completely programmed out of her. Maybe we need Mulan to make a talisman for her."

"I can see why you'd suspect her motives," Rasmus said as he leaned into me and kissed my cheek. "I'll see you later."

My eyes stayed glued to him until he disappeared out the front door.

Mulan came to my side and replaced him. "I'm glad you made up with boy toy."

I turned to smirk at my friend. "We're going on a date tomorrow."

"That is miracle for you. Rasmus should talk to Conn. Conn knows very romantic places."

I chuckled at her dreamy expression. "Rasmus and I are going shoe shopping, and then to buy some plants."

Mulan made a face. "That is not date. That is errand."

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“I’ll fix my hair and wear mascara. That’s the best I can do. It’s been a tough week.”

Mulan sighed. “You do not female well.”

“Rasmus thinks I female well and he has the bite marks to prove it.”

“Good. There may be hope for you yet,” Mulan said, giggling as she pulled me in for another tight hug that nearly took my breath away. “Thank you.”

“Helping is what friends do.”

“I wish you were my sister.”

I hadn’t seen that comment coming but I felt the same. If I’d had a sister, I could only hope she would have been as cool and fun as Mulan.

I smiled at her. “We’ll have to be unofficial siblings because I’m never letting yer family adopt me. I’m not as nice as you are, Mulan. Ya know I’d kill them all in their sleep if they nattered away at me the way they do with ya.”

When Mulan hugged me tightly again, we collapsed into each other giggling.

Henry’s throat clearing had us breaking apart. “Excuse me, Goddess Aran.”

“Ya just had to get that jibe in, didn’t ya, Henry?”

His grin was wide. “Yes, but I have an important message for you. Your boss has

been trying to reach you all day. He finally got hold of Dylan who messaged me. He says the matter is urgent and you need to get in touch as soon as possible.”

I sighed as I untangled myself from Mulan. I couldn’t seem to get more than two minutes of happiness for myself. “Will ya drive Mulan’s family to a hotel tomorrow, Henry? I’m officially kicking them out of the house since they officially kicked her out of their family. They’re strangers to us now.”

Henry chuckled. “It would be my pleasure to get rid of them—I mean, to drivethem.”

I smiled. “Can ya have someone drop me and Rasmus off downtown tomorrow before ya do that? We’re going on a date and Dylan still has my car.”

“Of course. Or you could go car shopping tomorrow and get a decent one. The one Dylan is driving could be our loaner to friends.”

“And where would I get enough money for a new car? This place isn’t cheap to run.”

Henry smiled. “Conn tells me his investments have done quite well lately. He said he put enough money for a car into your account but that you’d not see it unless he told you about it. I didn’t believe him yet now I can tell it’s true. You need a full-time keeper, Aran. You’re far busier than any CEO I’ve ever served.”

“I have one. Conn is my keeper.”

“Because he has no choice. You need more than just him. He has Mulan to worry about as well.”

I grinned at Henry. He used to only refer to her as the Wu Shaman. Now he was using Mulan’s name. That was good progress because the woman needed to revise who she considered to be her family.

“Are ya hinting about me asking the guardian to take me on? I don’t think he has the right stuff.”

Henry smiled. “It’s not really a hint. It’s more like a recommendation for your own good.”

Dylan burst through the front door, saw me, and ran my way. “Did you call Ben yet? He said there was a gorilla loose in downtown Salem. I bet he wants us to catch it. Can I go on this one? Animals are my specialty.”

I shook my head. “Why do I have to go after it? Does the word vacation not mean what it used to mean?”

Henry chuckled. “Not when it applies to you. I’ve given up as well.”

Pointing my finger at him in warning, Henry’s laugh followed me as I went to find my phone.

The joke was on my demon caretaker because I no longer thought of Conn as my keeper. Nor did I see Rasmus taking the job since Zara was so high maintenance.

The truth was that I thought of Henry and Gale as my keepers now. It was their fault for feeding me so well. They also did my laundry, changed my bed, and brought me coffee in the sitting room every morning. Conn had done none of that. He just nagged me to make my own coffee and wouldn’t let me speak to people until I’d had a sufficient amount.

I finally found my phone hiding in the bedcovers of my unmade bed. It was in shambles after spending the night with the guardian. I’d been too late getting up to bother with trying to sort it out.

Sure enough, there was a typed message from Fiona and a gazillion more from Ben.

Or maybe he'd sent ten. I didn't count them but the notifications filled up my entire phone screen. That was simply too many to read so I didn't bother. I preferred a more direct approach.

Hating myself for giving up my time so easily, I sat on the bed, said a quick prayer of thanks for today working out, and returned his call.

Ben's phone rang and rang, but he never picked up.

With no other choice now, I went to the messages and started reading.

—THE END?—