



40 Ways to Catch a Bad Guy

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: In the future, I need to be careful about what I ask for...

I thought I wanted my old guardian back, but now that I have him, I'm thinking about using Orlin's white feather and crying uncle. Or rather, grandfather. At least the memory-challenged version of Rasmus that Orlin gave me hadn't questioned every bloody thing I said and did. Yesterday I warned the non-longer-memory-challenged Rasmus that his elitist guardian attitude needed adjusting and that no man was that great in bed.

How am I supposed to get any work done with all this chaos and change going on? A snake shifter from my past is out to get me. Fiona is staying in Ireland to study with the Shadow Breakers. And all Conn does these days is laugh at me.

Mulan understands my pain but she has her own problems. Her family is coming for a visit. At least we have room for them in the outdated monstrosity we bought for more money than my brain can handle knowing I spent.

The only good thing is that I like the ancient demon couple we hired to take care of us. They seem really nice. What isn't nice, though, is that I signed up to babysit the memory-wiped female guardian who recently tried to kill me. What was I thinking? Oh, right. I wasn't. But the worst thing is that my traitorous boss, Colonel Benjamin Benson, hired my ex-husband. Ya know what? I think I'm about to become Ben's worst employee.

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Chapter One

I woke up naked and shivering. Why wasn't I naked and warm? I spent most of the night wrapped around Rasmus and enjoying his heat.

What did he do with the bed covers? Uncovering me wasn't very gentlemanly of him.

Glaring up at the garage door opener reminded me of why the room was so chilly. This wasn't a real bedroom.

Memories of what Rasmus and I had done last night—all last night—were instantly validated by the effort it took to simply roll from my back to my side. My groans echoed off the metal and concrete walls but there was no Rasmus there to laugh and feel proud of himself.

Finally, I stopped trying to move and instead took stock of my many aches and pains. They'd been worth getting but every relaxed muscle in my body hurt this morning. Overworked muscles rebelled when I slid my knee a few inches up the cold sheets to bend one leg. Both Rasmus and I had gotten tossed across the yard and against the house during my stand-off with Zara.

Indulging in sex before I'd healed had been foolish, but I was fresh out of prison and deprived. My willpower had disappeared the moment he'd opened his eyes and asked me why I was fighting Zara. Rasmus claimed he had waited centuries for me. I felt like I'd waited an equally long amount of time for him.

Was I irritated this morning about unleashing my lust? No. I was only mad because

the man I'd wrestled with all night had left me again without even so much as saying goodbye. It made a woman feel used and not in a good way.

Fully awake now, I also could tell Rasmus was gone from the entire house. I couldn't explain how I was so certain but I was completely sure. The guardian who'd ravished me was no longer on the premises. When he was here, I felt him. I was pretty sure my normal awareness of him had grown after what we'd done last night.

Groaning and feeling sorry for myself, I grappled my way to the edge of the queen-sized bed. I peered over the side to see how far away the floor was and happily discovered a discarded blanket there. Sighing, I pulled it up and covered myself before struggling to stand.

The clothes I'd worn yesterday had to be somewhere in the room, but I was in no mood or physical shape to search for them. Thank the Goddess my daughter wasn't here to witness my state. My semi-nude walk of shame would only be down the hallway to the bedroom I usually shared with her.

I opened the door leading from the garage into the house and immediately encountered a demon-sized wall blocking my way.

Conn grinned as he raised his voice. "Mulan, you need to see this. Aran has a sex hangover and can barely walk."

My swearing was low and vicious. "Do not sneak up on me today, Conn, unless ya want yer arse zapped," I said, pointing a finger at him.

Conn looked around and laughed. "We're standing in a small hallway, Aran. There's no room for me to sneak up on you. I was innocently walking from my bedroom to the kitchen when you snuck out of the garage like a drunken frat girl."

“I was not sneaking. Keep yer freaking logic to yerself,” I grumbled before shoving past the chuckling troublemaker.

I trudged to my room with the loosened blanket trailing behind me like a hairy demon-wolf bridal train.

Conn chuckled at my griping. “Was the guardian that bad? Or that good?”

I stopped at my bedroom door. “Where is Rasmus anyway? I can tell he’s not in the house.”

Shrugging, Conn innocently blinked at my question. “I don’t know where he is today, but I know he was here last night. Either that or some incubus was giving you the workout of your dreams. Even Mulan and I laughing hysterically over the noises you two were making never slowed things down. You were never that vocal with Jack.”

Conn was right about me and Jack, but I didn’t want to hear it this morning. “Don’t be teasing me about my ex-husband. I’m still mad at ya for letting Jack through my wards.”

“Inattentive rats often lose their chance for cheese,” a loud voice chastised from the kitchen.

Conn smirked down at me. “We’re having grilled cheese sandwiches and Chinese proverbs for lunch. Come join us after you’re dressed.”

I closed my eyes and prayed to survive the next few minutes without releasing the rage I felt at Rasmus for not being here. “Keep yer teasing to a minimum until I’ve gotten hold of myself. I need a shower—and then food.”

“It’s nearly noon. Why are you wrapped in one of the blankets Fiona gave to the

demon wolves? Did the guardian rip the clothes off your quivering body and hide them from you?”

He had done exactly that. Honestly? I was working hard not to remember, thank you very much.

I glared at Conn. “Keep asking me questions about last night and ya’ll be spending the next three days regenerating body parts.”

Amused and very loud feminine laughter drifting from the kitchen made me sigh. But it also comforted me. I loved having my daughter around—I truly did. But it was nice having another mature woman in the house.

Grateful for once that I was short, I gripped my hairy demon-wolf blanket with one hand and the doorknob of my bedroom with the other. I had no idea where the original blankets for the bed were or where my clothes had gone. This was the least dignified I’d felt since I let the demon hunters take me off to prison in cuffs I could have easily gotten out of.

I grasped for sanity one more time. “Are ya going to tell me where the cowardly bastard ran off to or not?”

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Conn coughed to clear his throat of laughter. “Let’s get some coffee into you before we tackle the hard questions. While you’re showering, think of last night and all you would miss if you killed him.”

I gripped my blanket tighter. “If he’d tossed a couple hundred on the bed before leaving, I’d have at least understood his absence. This waking-up-alone shit has got to stop, Conn. I won’t be treated this way.”

Conn chuckled as he reached out to pat my shoulder. “It wasn’t his idea to leave you. Your guardian grandfather came for him. Trust me—Rasmus wasn’t any happier about it than you are. I believe he tried to make you sleep until he returned to avoid this situation. I warned him it wouldn’t work the way he hoped.”

“He was probably hoping I wouldn’t know he’d left me again.”

Chuckling, Conn shrugged. “Your power is flourishing, Aran. Soon, I don’t think even the guardians will affect you. The Dagda stone seems to finally be revealing itself, and it has its own opinions of the people in your life. Most of my keepers wore the stone like a piece of jewelry. You’re the first to internalize it. Anything can happen.”

I knew Conn and I needed to talk about the stone. My parents knew of its existence but not how it worked. It had hung among Ma’s other necklaces for two weeks after my grandmother passed with no one protecting it. They’d reluctantly handed it over the day they also reluctantly informed me I’d inherited Conn. Based on Jack stealing the stone from me, I suspected he knew more about it than I did. It wasn’t like I could ask him. No, I’d just have to learn about it on my own.

I gripped the door handle hard and kept my gaze on my hand. There was no way to keep the bitterness from my tone. “Orlin took Rasmus away again.”

“Well... sort of,” Conn said, snickering at my escalating anger. “I think your guardian was convinced to leave by the end of their debate. Your guardian grandfather did look rather stressed about something.”

“Do ya know why Orlin took him?”

“No, but I tried to find out. The sneaky guardians talked as far out in the yard as they could get. I think they dropped some sort of silencing field over themselves. Somehow, they kept Mulan and me from eavesdropping on their oh-so-important conversation. I’m guessing it had something to do with ensuring Zara’s memory loss took place but I can’t be sure.”

I snorted. Orlin could have needed help with restraining Zara but I doubted it. She’d run from him before. My grandfather seemed at the top of the guardian food chain.

“It was probably over the fact that Rasmus got his memories back when Zara threw him around. I should have known Rasmus couldn’t hide his awareness from them. The guardians function like a freaking BORG hive. Sometimes I even think they share a single brain.”

“They’re like a what?” Conn asked with another laugh.

I sneered at him. It was the first time in ages Conn had no reference. “BORG hive mind, Conn. It’s from that Star Trek show with Patrick Stewart as the captain. Jack was a Trekkie the whole time we were married. Look... I don’t have time to explain it. Ask Mulan. She’s up-to-speed on pop culture. I’m going to shower, and then I wouldn’t refuse if Mulan wanted to make me a sandwich.”

“I think what you need most is a pot of strong coffee,” Conn said with more laughter.

Usually, yes, that was what I needed. This morning, what I needed more than caffeine was a man who would wake up with me, but I refused to whine about what couldn’t be changed.

It was bad enough my body was protesting every movement I made.

How unfair was it that there was no one I could blame in person for it? Or celebrate with? Blaming Orlin would be redundant and I couldn’t blame Rasmus until I’d heard his side of things.

My bodily discomfort guaranteed that all I’d be doing for the next few hours was reliving and rehashing last night. It wasn’t fair, but I refused to sit around feeling abandoned.

I was forty, damn it. I wasn’t some young girl who regretted her choice of bed partner.

Rasmus didn’t understand yet that our bed-sharing was a tentative situation that could change—andwouldchange—if he kept up his disappearing act. Neither he nor Orlin would catch me crying over him not being around when I needed him.

My back stiffened with resolve as I turned back to Conn. “Let’s go look at that house Fiona found. Can you give the real estate agent a call and see if we can go by this afternoon?”

Conn grinned as he bowed his head. “Consider it already done.”

The property turnedout to be more enormous than Fiona had described.

Mulan sighed and shook her head while muttering to herself in Chinese. I didn't know what she was saying, but I agreed with her anyway. Her expression probably mirrored my own.

Upkeep on this place would cost us in utilities alone. I could see that the property had some advantages. There was a tall fence around the front with a security gate at the entrance. The real estate agent gave us a code. After tapping it in, the gates swung wide to let us drive down the tree-lined road through the property.

Conn argued that the two live-in caretakers he'd acquired were skilled enough not to need additional help with my giant colonial monstrosity. It boasted three fairly well-maintained porches held up by bulky fluted columns running from the ground to the third-story porch.

We both agreed it would take a lot of work to maintain the property but Conn sincerely felt it was doable. Fiona would get a cottage. Mulan and Conn would get one as well. Upkeep on the other small house would become the responsibility of whomever we let live in it. Conn's demon caretakers would monitor tidiness but I knew they would have to use the Wu Shaman's standards to keep the peace.

Still unconvinced that this sprawling location was the right place for us, I texted Fiona to ask which of the cottages was the one she preferred. She declared it was the yellow one with a paved patio out back containing a built-in pizza oven.

I looked up from the message and glared at the group. "Do ya know who would pay a million dollars for a patio with a pizza oven? Jack Derringer's frivolous child, that's who. Goddess bless, I'm thinking that buying this place would be a really stupid thing to do."

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Conn slung an arm across my shoulders. “The main house has a basement with an indoor heated pool and a canning kitchen. The caretakers may choose to live down there. There are two libraries on the main floor. I think there’s a greenhouse somewhere as well. You could make planters for all the porches and turn one of them into a meditation space.”

Memories of Zara calmly sitting on her porch lingered. I frowned and shook my head. Unlike my daughter, I didn’t need a pool or a pizza oven. What I needed was to figure out how to guide Zara’s talents once I inherited the job of babysitting her.

The Dagda would be returning the demon wolves soon. Where would they sleep here?

And where was Rasmus going to sleep if I stayed this angry? Was I seriously going to buy this mega-mansion without him bothering to offer his input?

I dropped my head and studied my feet so I wouldn’t glare at Conn and Mulan. “I think this place is too much.”

“It is good bargain,” Mulan declared.

Shrugging, I turned to her. “Money isn’t my only concern.” I sighed as I paced around in a circle, which allowed me a view of all four residences. Finally, I waved a hand. “This much property is too much for me, even if we have no debt on it. All I see is work here. I see no sanctuary and no relaxation.”

“Let’s see all of it before we decide,” Conn said, not criticizing my opinion yet.

Somehow I ended up walking through the main house alone while Conn and Mulan checked out a cottage with chocolate-colored siding and another with light blue. No one bothered looking inside the yellow one because Fiona had already claimed it.

Given how much of a stickler Mulan was about neatness, it was easy to see why the clean lines of the blue one held the most appeal to her. I suspected Conn wouldn't care which house she chose so long as the Wu Shaman shared her bed with him. If the cottage didn't suit his needs, he'd just fix it until it did.

He did that when we lived in Grandma Murieann's house, even though he'd spent most nights as a dog sleeping on Fiona's bed. I had refused to let Da fix my house problems and Jack plain out wouldn't take the time. Conn had feared Fiona falling on an uneven sidewalk or through a loose board on the porch so he simply fixed any issues he thought needed fixing.

I never had to lie about who did the work because Jack assumed Da had done it and I let him. Back then my father had been the owner on paper. Now, as his heir, I was. Since I lived too far away to take care of things, Ma handled the details of caring for it for me. Recently, Ma had let a young family move into the house while she leased the farmland to locals. I made her keep the money from renting it as a reward for her help.

Mulan and Conn talked in low voices as they looked toward the blue house. It was easy to imagine Mulan chopping vegetables on a freshly installed butcher block countertop in the small kitchen. I could see them maybe adding an outdoor hot tub and building a two-person sauna on the deck behind the cottage. Mulan and Conn both liked their amenities.

Eventually, I walked away to stroll through the cavernous main house. It contained many elegantly painted rooms with nearly no furniture in them. The space felt like a museum to me but no matter how often I said that, no one seemed to care. The house

expanded up three stories and outward in sheer area.

Its three floors were of equal size connected by a staircase that curved down on two sides into a grand foyer. There was elaborate millwork around all the doorways and the windows. The beautiful wainscoting in many of the rooms was milled to match.

I finally wandered outside again and over to the chocolate cottage. It was quaint and reasonable but as small as the rental house we currently lived in. The lack of space in the rental bothered me. Maybe that was an after-effect of seven years living alone and having such a big house all to myself. If we bought this space, I could only see living on the bottom floor of the main house. Each floor was over two thousand square feet, which made the mansion much larger than Fiona had described it being.

Eventually, we all wandered out of the houses and back to the paved area next to the main house where we'd parked our cars. Mulan's vehicle only fit two people. Since they hadn't wanted to ride with me in my old car, I'd driven alone.

Our tour of the property ended with all three of us agreeing that it was a lot of property to be priced for a fraction of its true worth. Even with our collective knowledge, we couldn't determine why it was such a good deal.

"I see amazing value here once it gets modernized," Mulan declared as she studied the outdoor spaces.

Conn's hands were tucked into his pants pockets. "Now that I've seen it, I can tell you it would easily finance for the price they're asking for it. That said... it's going to be a lot of work to renovate and the repairs won't come cheap. No one touched any of these residences in the last decade."

"There's a fancy barn and a paddock ring too," I said, staring at both of them. "What on earth are we going to do with those?"

“We could raise unicorns,” Conn said with a grin. “They’re great at protecting the spaces where they live. No one likes to deal with them—not even their owners.”

I rolled my eyes before glaring. “Do ya seriously fancy yerself shoveling unicorn poop for a living? They’re not the most pleasant of animals and ya know it.”

Conn gave me his most indignant look. “Silly woman, I would hire the poop shoveling done. We could recoup some of our renovation money if we provided lodging for the paranormals Ben’s going to hire. You already promised Rasmus he could rent a room in the main house. Have you changed your mind?”

I appreciated Conn not asking if Rasmus would sleep in my room for free, but I didn’t like the way he was looking at me. “What’s that pinched look for? Ya look like ya have gas, Conn.”

“Imperial Demons never have gas. My digestive system is flawless.”

Mulan lifted an eyebrow. “Why are we talking about bodily functions?”

I pointed at Conn. “Because he’s about to suggest I let Jack Derringer move into the chocolate house. If he says the words out loud, I’m going to zap him.”

Conn snorted. “I’m not his fan but he helped save your life, Aran. And if he’s going to work for Ben, he will need to be trained. Humanity’s most famous warlords recommended keeping your enemies close. Isn’t that what you’re planning with the female guardian?”

“Do ya think Jack’s going to halt all the evil stuff he’s doing and become some great guy, Conn? Have ya forgotten that being a demon hunter is his lifelong dream no matter how stupid we know that work to be? Jack’s a devious bastard and I’ll not be owing him for Ben’s lack of judgment. He tried to kill me in his monster form. I’m

sure Ben properly compensated Jack for his two minutes of work taking Zara down.”

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Mulan held up her hand. “I have add-on question. Where will female guardian live?”

Mulan was right to ask. My opinion was that Jack could die and rot in an alley, but Zara needed to be kept close by. Orlin said he could make her forget her true self but what if his memory binding came undone? The original memory blocks hadn’t lasted on her or the other female guardians. It hadn’t even lasted on Rasmus, who had fully cooperated with the entire process.

I turned and looked at the little chocolate cottage. It was located closest to the fancy barn, which was every bit as nice as any of the other buildings. Where would the demon wolves sleep? Should I give Zara the whole second floor of the main house and try to befriend her? Or stick her out here alone?

Thinking about my foolish offer to babysit her always gave me a headache. I rubbed my face again and groaned. When had my life turned into this complicated mess?

Conn chuckled as he grinned at me. I’m sure he enjoyed seeing me so overwhelmed. “You’re hungover from your sex fest, Aran. This property won’t seem nearly so daunting tomorrow, and Mulan is right about the increase in value when we finish updating. I’m sure a good meal and a solid eight hours of sleep will work wonders on your viewpoint.”

I shrugged. Maybe it would. Or maybe I’d spend a sleepless night wondering where Rasmus was and who he would be when he returned. But did Rasmus even matter in the long run?

It had never occurred to me I might keep the guardian—not really. He would stay

until he was done with me and then he'd leave. Maybe that had already happened. His normal guardian life was too big and too complicated to limit his human interference to merely harassing me.

I frowned as I looked around. This place would never be my actual home. It was a business investment. Real estate was supposed to be a safe bet and we had five years to make this worth more than we paid for it.

I blew out a breath. "So, are we doing this?"

Mulan raised a hand. "I see much profit here, so I vote yes."

Conn lifted a hand. "Your vote is my vote, Aran. We're always going to be a team."

I grunted as I pointed between him and Mulan. "Mulan and ya are also a team. Checks and balances are what will make this work. Truthfully, the idea of taking on this place scares me. But it has all the space we need. Five years from now, when my contract with Ben is done, anything we have put into it will undoubtedly make it vastly appealing for the next buyer. We'll probably make our money back, which means we lived five years for free. I'm not a math person but I get how it works."

Conn looked at Mulan. "That's as close to saying yes as Aran ever gets when it involves spending money. Once you meet Bridget, you'll understand why. Her mother's middle name is frugal."

Mulan wrinkled her brows as she frowned. "Irish names are very odd."

Conn snickered and never even attempted to correct her. I glared at him before looking at Mulan. "Frugal is not her middle name, Mulan. Conn's yanking yer chain. When Conn says my Ma is frugal, he means Bridget O'Malley hates spending money."

Mulan shrugged. “I too hate spending money. It is necessary evil, though.”

“Agreed,” I said, turning to glare at Conn who now hid a smile. “I can see I’m the only one with reservations about this place. So, who’s going to make the deal?”

“Conn and I make deal together,” Mulan said. “You two pay your half—I pay other half. We get clear deed on date of sale. Then we fix things.”

I nodded and felt my phone buzz with a text message. It was Fiona asking if we were going to buy the house. I wrote back that we were going to think about it until tomorrow.

Hopefully, by then, the deal would be done, and I could tell my daughter to come home.

Chapter Two

When we returned to our rental home, there was a notice from the neighborhood HOA saying we needed to re-sod our backyard or otherwise repair the grass. I ripped the notice off the door and stomped inside with it gripped in my hand.

Complaining neighbors were nearly enough to convince me that buying a million-dollar property with some privacy was the smartest thing in the world.

I tacked it to the refrigerator with a magnet so I wouldn’t forget.

Conn stood in the kitchen with his hands in his pockets. “We have another bit of news to deal with. I’ve been charged with telling you.”

“They erased Rasmus again and he has no memory of last night.”

Conn laughed before wincing. Mulan watched us like she had a front-row seat at a tennis match. Her head swung to whoever spoke.

“Goddess forbid that ever happen again,” he said with a growl.

I knew it was bad when my familiar evoked the one deity we both equally respected. The fight left me completely. I needed a shot of Jamieson’s and a nap.

“Just tell me, Conn. I’m no longer at risk of blowing up the house. I shared magick with Rasmus.”

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Conn's smile was wide. "Now I know why you were so tired this morning. The first time is both exhilarating and exhausting. Congratulations—to both of you."

When I nodded at his smirking summary instead of snapping back, Mulan giggled. Did she know how much worry my celibacy had caused my familiar? I could easily imagine Conn telling her all my secrets just so they could laugh.

"I need tea."

My statement about needing tea addressed no one in particular, but Mulan grabbed the teapot and filled it at the sink. I watched tiredly as she reached into a cabinet and pulled out her own blend.

"This is tea I gave your daughter to recover from demon sleep. It rejuvenates total body energy."

I nodded when I saw her waiting for me to respond.

Mulan shook her head and muttered in Chinese as she spooned the loose tea into a large mug. My head swiveled to my familiar when Conn quietly responded to her in the same language. She shrugged in reply without looking at him.

His grin was wide when he looked at me. "The Wu Shaman is upset that a man could do this to you."

I grunted. "I'm upset too. I've been working on how to never let it happen again."

Conn snickered again. “Was he seriously that good?”

I narrowed my eyes. “If ya want details, ya’re going to have to find out for yerself. If Mulan killed both of ya for cheating, she’d solve most of my problems.”

Mulan delivered the steeping tea to the table. I curled my hands around its fragrant warmth and sighed in gratitude. I needed pampering today. It was hard not to whine about Rasmus not being here to take care of me.

“I took a call while you were looking at the blue house. Fiona isn’t coming home.”

“What?” My head snapped up and I glared at Conn. “She leaves Dublin tomorrow evening and gets to Boston the next morning. She sent me the details in a text message.”

Conn rubbed his nose. “Her situation has changed since she made the original arrangements. She says she’s staying to train with the Shadow Breakers. She said to tell you she found the right teacher. She was afraid you’d be mad at her for not coming home so she called me instead of you.”

I shook my head. My daughter might have known what she needed more than I did, but I had yet to see evidence of that in her decision-making. I leaned on the table and rubbed my eyes.

“I’ll call her later. If she wants to stay, that’s fine, but I want to hear about this teacher of hers. Not that I’d know anyone after all these years. Ben can look them up for me.”

Conn chuckled. “Fiona said not to bother calling because her phone didn’t work in most places there. She promised to call you in a few days from Bridget’s phone.”

I thought of the many times Jack said his phone wasn't working when he'd been hanging out here in Salem with his demon-hunter side-piece woman. If I found out it was a case of like father—like daughter when it came to lying, I'd spell Fiona's hair to fall out. I was tired of blatant liars like Jack and those like Orlin who considered me too naïve to hear the truth. My daughter's behavior better not be moving into that same shady category.

I leaned harder on the table and rubbed my forehead. "Is Fiona okay?"

Conn hung his head and nodded. I felt sure he did that simply to cover his smile. It amused him that my daughter had picked the worst time to assert herself. I couldn't play tough mother with my absent child. Didn't I have enough shit going on anyway?

"Fiona sounded excited about staying longer. There was something else about not returning to school this fall, but I decided to not question that random comment until her Irish adventure ends."

"What are ya calling her Irish adventure?"

"Your daughter is working with the Shadow Breakers."

All I could do was grunt again because she'd done exactly what I asked her to do. If they helped Fiona find her magick, it would be good for everyone. The thought of her being completely helpless around magickals chilled my blood.

It was probably for the best she not be here until I figured out how to deal with Zara. I hope she told Jack she was staying because I didn't want to be arguing with him about it. Her father had her convinced that she had no magick. Maybe the ring was guiding her. All I could do was pray it protected her.

"She may be safer over there," I admitted as I picked up my tea to sip. "Thank you

for the tea, Mulan. It's delicious."

Mulan's narrowed gaze swung to Conn as she pointed at me. "She is too nice. Did sexy guardian break her soul?"

"No. He slightly dented her ego, but she'll survive. Jack left her alone with Fiona the week after she was born. She lethemlive," Conn said with a broad smirk.

Mulan nodded at his answer as she crossed her arms. Conn stood in the middle of the floor while Mulan leaned against the counter. The room seemed too small for the three of us so I stood and picked up my cup.

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“I’m going to take my tea to my bedroom, which I happily won’t have to share for a while. If I’m lucky, I might get to grab a nap.”

Looking resigned, Conn sighed and held up a hand to stop me. I opened my mouth to yell at him to move but the words died on my tongue when the doorbell rang.

I shook my head. “I’m not answering it. If a new version of Rasmus shows up, someone is going to die.”

Conn looked over at Mulan. “See? She’s fine.”

The back door slid open. The demon wolves trotted inside. They came over to sit in front of Conn and me. There was no sign of The Dagda.

I sipped my tea and glared at the door when the bell rang again. My head shook from side to side. No way was I checking it. If it was one of my neighbors, I’d let the wards fry them. If it was Jack, I’d call an energy sword and lop off his head. If it was a new Rasmus, no one would be safe from my wrath.

Conn snickered, which turned to full-out laughter when I kept shaking my head in denial.

The back door slid open again. The demon wolves turned their heads to watch Rasmus enter, but they remained near Conn. He looked the same, except for maybe looking guiltier than usual.

The doorbell in front of the house rang multiple times. Whoever was there was

determined to get us to answer.

I handed my tea to a confused Conn and called an energy sword. With it blazing in my hand, I turned and headed toward the door. Rasmus gripped my shoulder and pulled me backward, which caused Conn to laugh until tears streamed.

With wide eyes, Mulan eased around my sword and made her way to the door. She cupped both hands around her mouth before yelling at the door. “We have no time for company. Come back later.”

The bell ringing instantly stopped. Mulan turned around, smiled brilliantly, and waved to my weapon. “Problem fixed now. Put away sword.”

My mouth quirked at the edges. The woman was incorrigible. I loved her to death.

A still laughing Conn set my tea on the table when his phone loudly dinged with a message. Whatever he read made him laugh even harder. His chuckles were getting on my nerves. He was laughing too hard to talk. It took him a full thirty seconds before he could calm himself enough to speak.

“Ben says it’s really important that he see you today. He has a Shadow Breaker rep from Europe with him. They need our help.”

My sigh was loud and morphed into an unhappy growl. I reached up and pried Rasmus’s fingers free of my shoulder. He blinked in surprise at my action... or maybe because he hadn’t released me yet.

The guardian seemed dazed by the chaos he’d walked into. Bully for him because I resented how much humor Conn enjoyed at my expense but I could never do much about it.

I glared up at my hit-and-run guardian while letting my sword fade away. Since it for sure wasn't a new version of him at the door, I stomped over and opened it. Ben looked at me and then beyond me to where Conn sat and burst out laughing again.

Since fair was fair, I looked beyond Ben to the man standing behind him. His pointed ears were on full display. He seemed not to care, much less notice. The male fairy didn't look a day older than he had when Ezra and I had trapped a bunch of trouble-making trolls in a cave.

"Hello, Aran O'Malley. Ya're as charming as ever, I see. I could smell the energy from yer sword from outside. Were ya planning on taking off yer employer's head?"

"Ezra." His one name was all I could utter. I reached up automatically and smoothed my hair into place. "I'm sorry that I never had time to say goodbye before I left. Two weeks didn't allow me much time for anything but packing."

Shrugging, Ezra grinned at my apology. "Someone I cared about once explained to me that married women followed their husbands. It made me grateful I didn't have a female in my life who wanted to tag after me every bloody place I went."

"Aran and Jack are divorced now," Ben announced, waving a hand in front of Ezra to stop him from asking questions. "Let's talk about that some other time. Aran gets testy with people who don't acknowledge her non-marital status."

"That's enough, Benjamin. Ezra isn't interested in my status. Why are the two of ya here?"

Ezra's wicked smile bloomed. "Well, I could make both of us interested if ya would give me another chance."

"Another chance?" Ben repeated, turning Ezra's simple comment into a shocked

question with his tone.

I glared at Ben. “Ezra and I didn’t end our relationship because of my marriage to Jack. I wed someone else because Ezra and I were done and over. The why of it is none of yer business.”

Ezra chuckled. “But I recall ya told me we weren’t done. I figured that was the true reason ya gave up on me. Make up yer mind, woman. Males are easily confused. Goddess, I’m happy to see ya.”

I frowned when my neighbors peeked out of their windows. I was already in enough trouble with the neighbors. Buying demon compulsions would eat into the money I needed to buy the house.

I stepped away from the entrance and waved my hand. “Come inside if ya must. I’m in the middle of something important, but it would be more embarrassing talking to ya on the street until ya went away.”

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“Aran... your... uh... friend from Ireland is the liaison between our branch of the Shadow Breakers and the one you served.”

I grunted as I held back the wards until a grinning Ezra walked inside. “Is that a promotion or a demotion, Ezra?”

Ezra chuckled. “That answer depends on what day it is. Today is falling into the demotion column.”

The three of us stood in the tiny living room. Ben looked into the kitchen and waved at Conn.

“Is that the rest of yer family, Aran? Yer daughter is a delight.”

I glared at Ezra. “My magick skills have improved with my age, fairy. If ya touch my daughter, she’ll be the last female ya touch.”

“Are ya seriously envious of where my talented fingers roam?” Ezra asked.

Ben cleared his throat. “Ezra, you didn’t tell me you knew Aran so well.”

Ezra snickered as he looked guiltily away. “ I was afraid Aran might not help ya if I said too much about the matter. She doesn’t take kindly to lies, brags, or being kept in the dark.”

When both men went quiet, I looked for the reason. It turned out to be seven feet tall and looked confused by everything. I raised to my toes and snapped my fingers in

front of Rasmus's face. "I'm in the middle of a butt load of chaos. Deal with it or go back to where ya came from. We can talk about where ya ran off to later. I never fight in front of company."

"No, she just fights in front of family," Conn supplied, his voice wafting to us from the kitchen.

"Make yerself useful, Conn, and warm my tea. This won't take long."

Mulan's soft giggle over my command made my mouth twitch again, but I couldn't let it soften me. Whatever Ezra wanted, the answer would be no. He knew my story well but was letting Ben think he didn't. Why had Ezra come to see me in person? He could have sent the assignment electronically. I was sure Ben had a fax. Or did people use email for such things these days?

The Shadow Breakers knew Jack put me in prison and that I had allowed the situation. I'd sent word through Fiona that I was staying. I had no doubts that Ma told them all the gory details because the Irish loved a good story. Whatever prompted the fairy to come to Salem, I couldn't imagine working with Ezra again any more than I could imagine working alongside Jack. Infidelity was not something I could forgive, no matter the reason.

I kept my gaze on Ben. "I'm not yet recovered from the fight with Zara. Why did ya need to see me today?"

"Ezra says he followed one of your old enemies here. He said he feared for your life enough that he felt it necessary to come in person."

Reluctantly, I moved my gaze to Ezra's. Gone was the charming fairy and a grimmer one now stared at me. His expression revealed who it was, but I wanted confirmation. "Which enemy?" I asked.

“Hisser,” Ezra said.

I winced at the name. “Did yer people let him out of his nest?”

Ezra shook his head. “No, he broke out. Someone took yer daughter to visit the Shadow Breakers prison. Hisser smelled you in her blood and went after her. The ring yer daughter wore did something that forced him back into his nest. Two days later, though, guards found his nest empty. The guard on duty found a snake hole beneath it. Hisser broke through a crack in the cement floor until he reached the soil beneath.”

“I warded his cell against shifting magick. I sealed the wards from all sides. It would have taken a very talented mage to break what I put in place. I don’t understand how Hisser escaped.”

“Given the amount of dirt they found sprinkled in the nest, Hisser had been working on that crack in the floor for years and years. In the last month, he’d been complaining about it needing it fixed. Eventually, they let a human maintenance man in to fix it. We think the man became one of Hisser’s followers because he committed suicide the day of the escape.”

I reached up and rubbed my forehead. Two sips of Mulan’s tea had not been enough to keep a fierce headache from taking me over.

“What’s the bad guy’s backstory?” Ben asked.

I made myself look at Ben. “Hisser is a snake shifter. He pretends to be the serpent mentioned in the Garden of Eden story.”

“Are you saying he’s the actual serpent who deceived Eve?”

“No,” I said patiently. “Hisser is a con man who uses that story to collect followers.

They're typically people mad at their deities for a loved one dying. Hisser is quite charming when he wants to be. He's also a giant Cobra with four-inch fangs. He hates me because I destroyed his ability to make poison."

Ben's mouth tightened. "I grew up on a farm with rattlers in residence. Next time, make sure you cut his head off. That's the best way to stop a snake."

Ezra shook his head. "Killing outright is not Aran's style. She's never met a bad guy she didn't want to rehabilitate."

I turned to glare at Ezra. "No, I just married one. But ya'll find I've gotten over the worst of my save-the-world tendencies. Prison does that to a woman."

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“Have ya killed any bad guys lately, Aran?” Ezra asked with a grin. “Because I’m guessing the answer is no.”

I turned to Ben and ignored Ezra. As I faced him, I lifted my chin. “Shifter criminals often suffer from psychological issues like human criminals. Hisser is a sociopathic narcissist who comes across as perfectly harmless until he coils up in his shifted form and strikes. His poison stops yer heart, which is why I took that completely away. He’s still dangerous, though, so we need to catch him quickly. Ezra’s right about him coming after me. Since I’m already bait, ya might as well assign the job of finding him to me.”

Ben nodded but frowned at the news. “Don’t you think assigning a separate unit of people to watch your back might be a better solution?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say no to that support but they’re risking their lives. If Hisser shifted to escape, he also might have restored his poison.”

Ben’s hand went to his own throat. Eventually, it dropped, and his gaze fixed on me. “Your ex-husband is asking me to hire him.”

“It’s him or me, Ben. Ya can’t have both of us. No matter his parentage, his skillset is primarily human. Jack’s going to run into the wrong being one day and they will end him quickly. I nearly killed him for screwing up his genetics beyond repair.”

Ben shrugged. “Those are good points but keeping him working might be more helpful. Isn’t he paying child support?”

“I went to prison when Fiona was a teenager, Ben. She’s twenty now. Alimony and child support never applied to me.”

Ben snorted. “I keep forgetting that he was the one responsible for your incarceration.”

My mouth twisted. “And I will never forget... or forgive.”

“Jack Derringer is a crack shot and damn clever. Maybe if he got away from his previous employers, things might look different to him. Your ex-husband got recruited straight out of college.”

I grunted. “Tell me something I don’t know. Jack married me because controlling my power was a freaking assignment. Do ya know what he used for justification? His employers wanted to kill me before I discovered my true purpose in life, but he convinced his military employers that marrying me was a better way to throttle my magick. He could save me a hundred times over and it would never give me back even a fraction of the twenty years I did my best to love him. He’s a loathsome man and I’m done with him. Don’t bring this debate up again.”

Ben’s sigh was loud and filled the silence that had fallen during my rant. I looked at Rasmus who stared at the ceiling as he waited his turn to browbeat me with excuses for his behavior.

Today was one of those days where I hated men. Last night’s golden sparkles had metaphorically faded into me picking dead glitter pieces from my hair.

I looked back at Ben and glared at him for making my day more miserable than it already was. “Ya aren’t the first to defend Jack’s miserable existence to me. I have to deal with it from my daughter because she loves the bastard that helped create her, but with Goddess Danu as my witness, I swear I will kill him if he double-crosses me

or mine again. And no... I won't train him. His recently found father can do that for him. If ya want to see how ruthless I've become, keep shoving Jack under my nose and see what happens."

Rasmus sighed and joined the sighing of the other men.

Ezra now watched me with wide eyes. I'm sure he recalled the optimistic girl I once was—the one who'd bragged about how Jack's lovemaking was everything wonderful in the world. Well, I wasn't that girl any longer. Jack had killed that part of me with his blind ambitions and had used my child to blackmail me.

Silence fell again. This was normal after I stopped ranting about Jack.

But every time I thought I was free of him, someone came along and defended him like I had been the bad guy for divorcing him.

Conn's stifled laughter and Mulan's stifled giggling eventually penetrated the awkwardness I'd caused in the living room. Their amusement defused my rage. I was tired of entertaining them with my Jack rants. I was tired of talking about Jack like he was still part of my life.

I rubbed my forehead again. "Write up the paperwork for Hisser. If ya have any more bad guys to catch, send those assignments over as well. I'll sign and return the ones I think we can do."

"Are you needing money that badly?" Ben asked.

"I'm buying a house. I will need as much work as I can get to pay the bills once we move into it."

Ben nodded as he opened the door.

Ezra paused before leaving to look at me. “No matter our species, Aran, we males share some common flaws. The worst one is that we rarely see how good a woman is until she’s no longer part of our life. It was good to see ya again. May the goddess guard yer back against Hisser.”

I nodded and did my best to smile. “Thanks for warning me of the danger, Ezra of Airing Dale.”

Ezra stepped close to me and smiled. “If yer heart ever softens enough to give me another chance, I swear on my ancestors that I would not leave ya hanging. Ya’ll be happy to hear that I took yer advice to heart and made it a point never to leave a lady wanting. Yer an excellent teacher.”

“Stop it,” I ordered, dropping my head to hide my blush. His knuckle lifted my chin as he chuckled. “I’m all about second chances, Ezra, but not the kind ya’re hinting at. I have better things to do.”

His gaze lifted to look behind me where Rasmus hovered. “So I see,” he said, grinning before he walked away.

I ignored the door closing behind them and turned toward the kitchen. I also ignored Rasmus following me quietly without saying a word.

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A smiling Mulan placed a hot cup of fresh tea in my hand. She patted my cheek. “You take nap now. I deal with men.”

I nearly wept in gratitude. Mulan must have known I was close to crying because she pinched my arm to make sure I didn’t. Goddess, why couldn’t Mulan have been a man? She was nearly perfect in every other way.

“Conn will feed demon wolves and I will feed boy toy. Go before neighbors knock to complain about pointy-eared strangers flirting with you. High Demon and I will take care of them if they try.”

I nodded, hugged my hot tea close, and slunk tiredly down the hallway before my wobbly limbs gave out.

There were a thousand questions I wanted to ask Rasmus about last night, but I was too mentally exhausted to talk to anyone else. He could sleep in the garage with the demon wolves until I had the time and energy to deal with him.

I wished him luck finding the pillows and covers because I hadn’t taken the time to locate them.

I had something more important to worry about now than the mysterious disappearance of his bedclothes. If Ezra was right, Hisser would want my death. I couldn’t take that lightly.

I sat on the edge of my tiny twin bed and sipped my tea until only a few tea leaves were left. I couldn’t help wondering whether Mulan could tell my fortune from them.

Would she get mad at me if I asked? It would be fun to try... but maybe tomorrow.

Giggling at my thoughts, I crawled under the covers fully dressed. Seconds later, I let the weight of the day disappear into the soothing darkness.

Chapter Three

Noise coming from somewhere in the house woke me. My eyelids refused to open, but that didn't bother me since I didn't want to wake up anyway. Adjusting myself to get more comfortable, I smiled at my naked body being kept toasty warm by the male lying beside me. I moaned in gratitude when he pulled the covers tighter around us.

Why couldn't I stay here all day?

Completely contented with the situation, I rolled more into him. When his hand pulled me closer, I lifted a knee to slide my leg up his body and around his waist. It was quite a challenge for my petite limbs because the naked man holding me was a lot taller and larger than I was.

I cuddled into his chest and kissed him good morning. My eyelids fluttered as they tried to open enough to at least see the skin that my lips were exploring.

But then I suddenly remembered how tired I'd been yesterday... and where I'd fallen asleep last night. I untangled myself from him quickly and rolled away before Rasmus had time to grab my leg and hold me in place. Our single night together had proved his ability to seduce me repeatedly. Putting a safe distance between us was critical to keep the guardian out of me.

I furiously blinked sleep away, moved to the other side of the bed to sit up, and then glared at him. "Did ya undress me and bring me out here with ya?"

Rasmus smiled. “The demon dared me to do it.”

I rolled my eyes and the movement hurt. I was bloody tired still. “Are ya a twelve-year-old boy, Rasmus? I thought ya said ya were older than that.”

He raised the bedcovers and peered under them. “Orlin said he made me a human male of approximately thirty. Would you like to inspect my body to verify my age yourself?”

My surprise at his flirting pulled a squeak of alarm out of me. “Ya’re just trying to distract me. I’ve played this game before.”

“We played it once,” he said, putting some regret into his tone.

He knew how I weakened when he begged—the sexy bastard. “Well, I hope ya know our one night together does not entitle ya to instant access to me.”

“I took you wrapping your leg around my waist as an invitation for us to share pleasure again. I’m a few centuries out of practice, Aran of The Dagda, but I didn’t forget that much.”

It wasn’t like I wanted to laugh at his argument, but the guardian was pulling out all his tricks to charm me out of being mad at him. If I hadn’t moved quickly moments ago, he’d have physically won this debate without suffering a single consequence for running out on me.

And worst of all, I wouldn’t have even cared.

If Rasmus knew how badly I wanted him, he’d use sex against me every chance he could. If this had been yesterday morning, I doubt we would have gotten out of bed until starvation threatened to hit. My body still felt the impact of being under his for

so long and so often.

A high-pitched giggle escaped my traitorous throat. Goddess, I sounded giddier than Mulan to have an enthusiastic lover.

Since yesterday's righteous anger seemed to be finally fading, I made my point while I still could. "I hear Orlin fetched ya yesterday. What was that about? And why did ya use yer magick to make me sleep my life away? Conn accused me of having a sex hangover."

Sighing heavily, Rasmus tossed off the covers and rose from the bed. I fought not to sigh at the sight of his aroused body. Masculinity rolled off him in waves and drew everything feminine in me. The snoozing demon wolves both snapped awake to watch him as well. No one but me seemed to realize that they were human females on the inside still.

"Are ya trying to impress me with yer virile nakedness—or them?" I asked pointing to the demon wolves.

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“You,” Rasmus said with a sigh. He retrieved a pair of jeans from the floor and stepped into them. His gaze remained on mine as I watched him carefully zip them up.

The guardian had a beautiful body and I was flattered he liked mine so much. But vanity never lasted long in me. What tightened my throat with emotion was how much I loved the intimacy of waking beside him and watching him dress.

“Sorry,” Rasmus said. “I forget about them because they’re so quiet.”

I blinked in confusion. Who was quiet? Because no one had ever accused me of that—in bed or out. Eventually, I realized Rasmus was talking about the demon wolves. What could I say to his admission of forgetting about them? Their captive situation had fallen lower on my to-do list too.

Rubbing sleep from my eyes, I made myself look away from him. He looked so appealing with his pants on but still unfastened. I wanted to ask him to come back to bed but my pride wouldn’t let me.

Cursing the relationship baggage that kept me feeling as vulnerable as Rasmus looked, I uttered a sound that most would have called a growl. “I need clothes and coffee.”

Rasmus retrieved the clothes he’d taken off me last night. He dropped them in a pile on the bed next to me. Keeping a careful watch in case he pounced on his own, I wiggled into yesterday’s clothes under the covers without exposing my nudity to him. It was a talent many women developed in their lives. For me this morning, dressing

under the covers was an act of desperation.

I feared what Rasmus might do to avoid talking about the things we needed to talk about.

“Are we getting coffee before we talk?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” I said softly, sliding from the bed fully clothed.

Cursing my need to clear the air before I got more sexually entangled with him, I snuck past a still shirtless Rasmus to use the bathroom in the master suite I shared with Fiona.

Freshly brewed coffee was truly the nectar of gods.

Gratitude oozed from me as I sipped. Once I’d finished a cup and started on a refill, the caffeine jumpstarted my human system and got my motor running.

The man sitting near me drinking tea with honey instead of coffee also got my motor running. I feared it would take all my tricks to keep him from using it against me.

Rasmus and his intensive study forced me to an uncomfortable realization. Despite what his fellow guardians had done to make him more human and less supernatural, his mind constantly collected data he used to form his arrogant, but not superior, opinions.

Since I also used reason on good days when I wasn’t angry at the world, it wouldn’t have been fair for me to hold his current rational thinking against him. The original guardian was back and he was not the inexperienced boy that Version 3 had been. Oh, Rasmus still looked like Version 3, which I imagine was shocking to him as well.

After spending two nights in his arms, the younger body his soul currently wore inspired my lust and sparked a lot of fantasies. Our age difference was visually obvious to everyone with eyes, or at least, I thought it was.

Listening to him ask Conn and Mulan his deep questions made me look beyond his youthful appearance, though. His more mature approach to reasoning things out only added to his appeal to me. The only reason I could give myself for feeling that way was that in conversations he now felt like our equal.

It pleased me that the four of us seemed to fit together. We wouldn't be living together at the new property, but I could see many more shared meals where the conversations would be thoughtful as well as entertaining.

Rasmus was asking us all questions about his favorite subject this morning—the one Orlin and I battled over still. Discussion about the million influences on human decision-making gave me a bit of an epiphany. Throughout my marriage, I'd hidden as many things from Jack as he had hidden from me. Keeping secrets from my husband was a defense mechanism to combat his disapproval of me doing magickal work.

Jack also believed the complicated truths he hid from me were far more important than any I might be keeping from him. To be fair to myself, in the beginning, I wanted to tell Jack about my magickal heritage. It took a lot of talking for my parents and The Dagda to convince me not to do so. Sadly, rationalizing my need not to be truthful with Jack got easier the longer we were together. Lies of omissions break trust just as fast as direct ones. I never confronted him about the random lipstick stains he came home wearing. I didn't want to get into the fight that would come with being honest.

Was that emotional laziness? Some would call it that. I might be doing the same with Rasmus. Or perhaps I was putting off the hard questions because they might chase

him from my life.

Despite appearing like a human male, Rasmus was not one. He was a guardian—one who left constantly for mysterious reasons he never shared with me. When he was present in my life, I frequently felt like a bug trapped under his microscope. Though I refused to allow him to make me feel that way, his sense of superiority never waned. A perfect example was that I should have been the one demanding answers about things this morning. Instead, Rasmus was the one firing off questions.

“Was the man with Ben an elf?”

“He’s paranormally classified as a male fairy. Both elves and fairies are descendants of the Tuatha de Danann and are often seen as the same species. They’re called Aoi Si or Mound people. The mounds are portals to a place in the veil. Goddess Danu created an entire world for them there. Since they’re very long-lived, they have very different rules than us. Ezra is serving his people by working with humans. I believe he’s in the last century of his service.”

“Are you part of their species?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m a humandescendant of The Dagda. You might say the fairy folk are distant cousins of mine through other members of the Tuatha de Danann. I grew up as a witch because the women in my family on both sides embraced the craft. That made me a magick wielder from birth. On the Earthly plane, though, humans rarely know their magickal heritage unless their ancestor makes it a point to inform them.”

Rasmus tilted his head. “Are you saying there are other magickals like you?”

I shrugged. “There could be, I suppose. Humans not in touch with their magick would probably rationalize themselves as being luckier than average. Ya find those sorts of

situations in healers, herbalists, and potion makers who excel at what they do. They're nearly always closeted magickals."

Conn grinned. "Other humans have been called to serve The Dagda, but Aran is one of a kind."

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“Flatterer—and ya know I love ya for it,” I said as a smile bloomed across my mouth. “The Dagda chose my family lineage for a specific purpose. We partner with Conn to keep the balance between demonkind and humans. In return, the King of All Demons supplies us with the power required to not get killed doing the work. We are an inseparable team.”

Rasmus looked at Conn. “Do you have any choice about the human chosen to work with you?”

Conn shook his head. “No, but I don’t mind because I know the person is worthy whether or not I think so. None are to me what The Dagda himself was, even though Aran comes very close. With Aran, I get to fully live my life. I appreciate and enjoy the amount of liberty she grants me. Aran uses the word ‘partner’ to describe our arrangement. Others before Aran called themselves my ‘master’ because I was contractually obligated to do as they commanded—within reason.”

I snorted as I looked at Conn. “The guardian,” I said with unmasked sarcasm since Rasmus now knew what he was, “is stuck on the idea that one or both of us are interfering daily with the other’s free will. He also thinks we’re an unnatural pairing and that we’re interfering with the free will of the bad guys when we catch and stop them. And others of his kind shared his opinion. The females dared to disagree and got stripped of their human bodies for it.”

Conn snorted at my rant. “Free will does not exist except as a brief and fleeting glimpse of having some measure of freedom of choice. You do not interfere with my free will because we are united in our purpose. Mulan, though, interferes with my free will by just existing. My love for her binds me to do whatever will keep her at

my side and sharing my bed. True love thwarts free will for all beings on this plane. I've often thought falling in love was like a disease with no cure."

"Well, I wouldn't say there was no cure," I mused, thinking of how my feelings for Jack had transformed over the years. "The same happens as a mother. Ya do a lot for yer child even when yer brain warns ya of the stupidity of going along with their plans and schemes. Most of my discussions with Fiona these days end up as a battle of wills between us. Rarely do I think of my interactions with Conn that way."

Conn nodded to me. "Peer pressure from friends can thwart free will as well. The Dagda could ask nearly anything of me and I'd do it for him without question. His reciprocity has kept that aspect of our friendship in place. Our love and respect for each other is greater than the bargain we struck to save my kind. Acting for his benefit improves me."

Mulan frowned at the discussion. "Jealous siblings and weak-willed parents can also guilt you into taking unwanted actions."

I laughed at her contribution until I saw her worried expression. "What is yer family doing to ya now?"

Mulan threw up both her hands. "They wish to visit me so they can witness the evil of my life choices. They think my high demon has corrupted me. My sister insists on her old man husband coming as well."

Conn looked at Mulan and smiled wickedly. "They're right, you know. I am trying very hard to corrupt you. The impossible challenge your goodness presents keeps me vastly entertained."

Mulan blew out a breath as she glared at him. "Your flowery words and original compliments are not helpful to my problem. You restored the family herb farm to

them, Connlander. They just want free vacation and for me to fund their trip. Where is free will for me in their manipulation? I have no money to buy family love.”

I smiled into my cup as I finished my coffee. “There’s yer first lesson about humans and free will, Rasmus. We gladly give it up for carnal pleasures and emotional debts to each other. Such concessions keep babies being born. Some would say they also keep us from killing each other. If everyone insisted on exercising their free will at the same time, the chaos would create an apocalyptic event.”

When the doorbell rang, I swore. A chuckling Conn rose to answer it. While he was gone, I glared into my nearly empty cup.

Conn returned shortly with an envelope. “I believe Ben sent that list of jobs you asked for.”

He pulled a pile of forms out and started reading.

I said nothing as I waited to hear the details.

“There have been reports of a leprechaun dressed all in red. He’s breaking into homes and stealing food. Humans are calling him Bad Santa because he takes their food and leaves them a gift.”

I stood and took my coffee cup to the sink. “That’s a far darrig, not a leprechaun. Leprechauns wear only green. Far darrigs wear red and are not as sneaky.”

“He’s leaving a few coins behind.”

My mouth twisted in irony as I looked at Conn. “Why would anyone see that as a big enough problem to report it to Ben? A far darrig never goes to the same house twice.”

“The coins are genuine gold and may be part of a Roman museum collection missing from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston for two decades. People who received them without notifying the police started pawning them for money. Once museum authorities got involved, the story ended up released to the world.”

I shook my head. “Two decades, Conn. He could have been in Salem as long as we’ve been.”

“You were in prison and I was in Ireland for seven years. I doubt human authorities would have put together the details without the Shadow Breakers getting involved. We’ll be cleaning up old cases for a good long while.”

I nodded in agreement. The thought did not appeal, but we’d get paid for the work. Like Mulan, we would need a little extra cash after we bought the house.

“What else is there?”

Conn read through a couple more reports. “Some of these won’t work. We can’t travel to other states right now because of the house. I think Ben sent over everything he has regardless of where the work was located.”

Grinning, I shrugged. “Ben interrupts my requests in the most literal way.”

“There are reports of several trolls. One is destroying someone’s crops. One is raising vicious animals who appear to be eating domestic pets. One is running naked through downtown Salem. People think he’s wearing a costume despite the animation of his manly parts.”

Mulan snorted. “Trolls do not have manly parts. They have ugly troll parts.”

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Conn grinned as he kept reading. “Those interviewed reported that his troll manhood hung to just above his knee and danced around when he laughed.”

Like every other male, Rasmus chuckled at the idea of someone with a bigger part than he possessed. It figured that the one subject he found amusing was the same thing that would set a twelve-year-old laughing.

I looked away from Rasmus to Mulan. “The report probably says penis, but ya’ll never hear Conn using the term. He tells me it does not do justice to his impressive male appendage. I paid no proper attention to any of his appendages, but you might understand why he feels that way.”

Mulan grunted and crossed her arms. “Massive troll penis only impressive to troll females. Perhaps naked troll is seeking mate. Maybe he use dancing penis like fishermen use lure.”

I blinked at her. That was quite the analogy. “Ya could be right, Mulan. If there’s a video of his dancing penis, maybe we could upload it to a paranormal dating site and see if anyone swipes on him. We’d be doing him a favor. Right?”

Mulan giggled at my teasing and Conn grinned at us for acting silly. He never got offended by my teasing. Whatever manly skills he possessed as a lover provided him with rock-solid confidence. I could respect that kind of arrogance in males I liked. I had a healthy amount of it myself. Aging had shaved a bit of mine off, but I still could hold my own with haughty baristas who assumed I was too short to attract good-looking men.

Wait until the barista got a look at my new boy toy. She hadn't seen Rasmus in this incarnation. She might spit in my coffee when I preened but it would be worth it to me. At my age, I needed the ego boost of knowing other women envied me for the man sharing my bed.

Unfortunately, my new lover didn't laugh at my dating joke. Moments like this were going to make me miss the forgetful, more human version of Rasmus, but I could never admit that without Orlin saying he told me so. Rasmus had a better sense of humor back when he hadn't remembered his goal of treating our relationship as a science experiment.

Mulan was right—no male was perfect. None of the Rasmus versions had been. I'd have to deal with him as he was now because I'd kept him up all night as well. Neither of us had gotten all we wanted from the other. Learning what it was like to share magick with another magickal had ruined sex with human males forever.

Ezra's vow that he'd learned how to pleasure a woman without failing her hadn't even tempted me. It might have before I'd slept with Rasmus, but now the fairy would never get a second chance.

My mouth quirked at my hedonistic reasoning. The best thing about being older was that I felt no guilt at all for thinking that way. I still didn't know why he'd disappeared the morning after we'd been together... or if he would do it again. Given Orlin being a fixture in both our lives, I expected it inevitable that he would.

I also didn't know if Rasmus could change back to his original guardian form now. All I knew was that Rasmus didn't want to leave me because both of us were anticipating a repeat.

Making me sleep with him last night had told me more than any words would have about how much he wanted to be part of my life. Celibacy had been hard on both of

us. Arrogance was his default setting and maybe mine as well. His neediness made us even where lust was concerned.

Even understanding him better after our intimacy, I still braced myself to hear something ridiculous when Rasmus made a thoughtful sound in his throat. Conn and Mulan gave him full attention too. The guardian bored none of us with his serious concerns, but it was beyond me not to tease him about being that way.

“I didn’t know dating organizations existed for supernatural species. Plus, trolls don’t strike me as bright enough to use technology. Do you honestly think posting a naked video of him would work to interest potential troll females?”

Unable to control myself, I sighed in great disappointment. Mulan and Conn laughed openly and loudly at Rasmus and his question. This sort of scenario was going to be a dynamic of our relationship. His lack of humor left the moment he remembered who he was. But mine had gone nowhere—except maybe down the toilet.

“Ya’re right as usual, Rasmus. A dating app probably wouldn’t work for trolls. I guess we’ll just have to take out an ad in the newspaper like humans sometimes do to meet each other. Will ya help me with the wording of it?”

Rasmus blinked at my request. He looked at Conn and Mulan who were laughing even harder now. He watched them for a couple of minutes before finally putting it together. “You’re joking about the troll using a dating site,” he concluded.

I rolled my eyes. How could I be lusting for this humorless man? It had to be the challenge he presented to me. Or maybe it was the way he kept waking me up all night. Great sex had to be why I put up with him.

My sigh was louder than the laughter in the room, but I didn’t berate him. “Mulan’s probably right but troll females are in short supply. Only one in seven troll children is

born female. Females grow up to be polyamorous so males have to work hard to prove themselves. The first male that a female mates with keeps his primary position in the group for the duration of their relationship...oruntil he has an unfortunate accident at her hands.”

“Why would she kill him?”

I shrugged. “For the usual reasons a female ousts a male from her life, I imagine. Female trolls create harems of three to five males. From centuries of studies, we’ve discovered a female will have at least one child with each male in the group. Trolls may seem unintelligent but they’re not. They just take a simpler approach to life.”

Rasmus looked very interested in how much I knew. “I haven’t worked closely with trolls but brethren assigned to them have shared stories. Trolls descended from other branches of the human species.”

I shrugged. “I wish I could say the same about not working closely with trolls. The one Orlin or one of yer brethren paid to harass us when ya first returned is typical of his kind. Trolls yell as loudly as they can, wield giant clubs, and can break a human in two with brutal strength alone. I wasn’t joking about how impressive it was that ya could knock one into submission with yer fists, Rasmus. Brute force rarely works on them.”

I ignored his grin and moved my gaze to Conn.

“So let’s recap. We have to catch three trolls, a far darrig, and return Hisser to jail before he kills me. All that work ought to keep the lights on at the compound for a couple of months.”

“Hisser needs to die, Aran. There can be no more mercy for him. That snake shifter has lost complete touch with his humanity. Hisser is a perfect example of what

happens when a shifter doesn't shift to human enough. It's why demons don't fight staying human most of the time. They value the mental health of both forms. Hisser values nothing except controlling his delusional followers. Rehabilitation is not possible for a creature who sees himself as a god."

Nodding, because I knew Conn was right, I thought about how I would feel about ending the rogue snake shifter's life. If death was the only way to stop him, then I wouldn't hesitate to take his life. Hisser would think nothing of ending mine.

Conn spread the assignments we talked about taking on the table. "Sign the ones we want to do, and I'll send photos of them to Ben. We can deliver the originals with the first troll we catch and get copies for our records then. I'll add the jobs to our accounting once the fees get contracted."

"Tell Ben to split the payments into fourths. It's only fair."

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Rasmus grunted. “You can take my share, Aran. I do not need money to survive.”

“You have money already and an account for storing it,” Mulan said, giving Rasmus a hard stare. “Set up transfer to move wealth. You can use money to help pay for new house.”

“What new house?” Rasmus asked.

I turned to look at the guardian. I wanted to say something funny about losing what he didn’t use, but this discussion was serious. Why did Rasmus need no money? How did he get by?

“The new house ya would have had a say in if ya hadn’t run off yesterday. Conn and Mulan are already negotiating the deal.”

“Oh,thatnew house,” Rasmus said, scratching his bristly jaw. “Do I have a room in this house?”

I grinned at Rasmus. “Ya already have a bed ya’re welcome to sleep in. If ya want an entire room to yerself, well, that’s going to cost ya more than a few nights of your time.”

It took Rasmus far less time to figure out what I was implying about our sleeping arrangements than whether or not I could hook up a troll with a potential mate. His pleased smile at his cleverness made me hopeful that he’d get used to my teasing.

I took the pen a grinning Conn held out to me and signed the forms. I passed the pen

back to him and pointed at my signature. “I’m not promising to do this work alone with a killer coming after me. Everybody signs.”

Snickering, Conn scrawled his signature under mine. Muttering in Chinese, Mulan signed hers under Conn’s. Because there wasn’t much room left, Rasmus wrote the fake name he’d been given off the side.

We were a family, a company, and now a team. From now on, everyone would have to agree to the work we did.

In a few short months, I’d gotten out of demon hunter prison, rescued my child from her father, jointly invested in a giant house I didn’t want to buy, and taken the most powerful being I’d ever met as a lover.

Chapter Four

The four of us voted unanimously to go after the troll animal breeder whose creatures were eating domestic cats and dogs. It was cruel of him to let it happen, but it was also dangerous. Once magically enhanced to become hunters, tiger cats could escalate to seeing small humans as prey. Human children and their pets were at risk. Someone my size might also seem a possibility.

I had my way of stopping them but Conn loved chasing them down in one of his canine forms. Rasmus seemed to be content to tag along and wait to see how he could be helpful. I figured with his wings he could swoop down on them like a giant eagle. Did his control of them return with his memories? Or had he tried them since our fight with Zara? I’d guess we find out soon enough.

The demon wolves weren’t safe staying at the rental house alone, which is why we brought them along with us. If they could use their wolf senses to sniff out the troll’s lair, it would save me from having to scry for him.

We ended up driving in two cars again. Rasmus and I rode up front in mine with the demon wolves filling the whole back seat. Each stared silently out of a window. Maybe they weren't happy with our intention to use them like search and rescue dogs. I had learned no way to communicate with them. Conn could pick up their bigger thoughts and had to power to control their actions. How we'd shift their loyalties back to Zara was something to worry about another day.

Mulan and Conn got to the location in her two-seater car. Mulan drove, which I doubted was a problem since Conn preferred being chauffeured around like he was our king as well. The next stupidly large purchase likely was going to be a vehicle bigger than Fiona's SUV that could hold all of us. I felt sure it would be like driving a bus and rolled my eyes at how much dread I felt contemplating the purchase.

Ben included a set of coordinates with the report. The location ended up being twenty minutes north of Salem next to some farmer's field. We pulled both vehicles off the edge of a small country road into the grass because we had to hike to the energy source.

I used to get a sensation in my fingers and hands as I got close to a troll lair, but today I felt whole-body discomfort. The increased awareness didn't hurt—not exactly—but it made me suspect that the reason was in having shared magick with the man already peering into the troll-sized hole we'd found.

Conn assured us he had firm control over the demon wolves, but had shifted into his regular-sized demon form to make sure we were prepared. Rather than rush in and traumatize the troll's animal captives, Conn waited to see how I wanted to do the rescue.

The trail through the field had led to the side of a hill. The troll had moved two large rocks to make a door in front of his opening. Since he hadn't charged out at us with his club raised, it was a safe bet the troll was away.

A lot of barks and yowling came from the interior. Mulan's jaw tightened as did her grip on her staff.

"This is where we earn our keep," I said to no one in particular.

This felt a lot like the training jobs I used to do to break in new trainees. The last set I'd trained had included Hart, who was now training recruits himself. Had Hart ever fully embraced being a male witch? If so, it was news not shared in his records. I'd heard nothing of what happened to Jessing, either.

Seeing Ezra again made me homesick for Ireland and the life I left behind there. Nearly two decades had passed since I last saw my fellow paranormal agents and having to leave so abruptly still stung. Lots of things can happen in a single year of a person's life. Being gone seven felt like an entire lifetime.

Maybe one day I'd give Ben a list of names and ask him to check into what my former trainees were doing now.

My lips twitched as I watched Mulan creeping ever closer to the opening in the hill. Her head tilted from side to side as she listened to some sound escaping from the hole's interior. I covered my mouth to stifle a laugh while fervently wishing a troll would rush out and startle her. For sure, that wish made me a terrible friend, but it wasn't like the talented Wu Shaman didn't have the skills to handle a troll.

I glanced over at Conn who gave me a side-eye demon glance. I bit my lip at the mirth dancing in his gaze. We were terrible people—terrible.

Swearing in Chinese, Mulan jumped back a few steps when something furry burst out of the hole running straight at her. She pressed a hand to her chest and swore again as a yellow-striped kitten braked to a halt at her feet. It inspected Mulan and batted at one of her boots with its paw before its fierce little gaze took in the rest of us.

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When she didn't give it sufficient attention, the tiny feline both mewed and growled at her in protest. Muttering to herself, Mulan scooped it up. It rubbed its head on her chest.

"Be careful. That's a mutated kitten," I warned.

Mulan held it out to look at it. "How can you tell?"

"Ya won't be able to tell until it morphs into an adult tiger cat with claws. Trolls hire witches to spell domestic animals and turn them into tiger cats. They're fondest of the striped ones, like the one ya're holding."

The kitten mewed in protest showing Mulan her sharp kitten teeth. The Wu Shaman pulled it back to her chest where it snuggled close. Surprising me, the demon wolves left Conn's side and trotted over to inspect the little beast. I wondered if they could sense something we couldn't.

"It's definitely a tiger cat," Conn said in his growly demon voice.

Mulan set the kitten on the ground. One of the demon wolves rolled it over with her muzzle.

I grinned at the cute scene. "Are we drawing straws for who goes into the lair first?"

"Wouldn't it be wiser to draw the troll out to us?" Ramus asked.

I looked at the unhelpful guardian. "Sure. Do ya have an idea about how to do that?"

Trolls are good at ignoring the chaos happening outside their lairs.”

Rasmus stared at me calmly, but I could tell he wanted to yell.

“How do you usually fight them?”

I smiled at his question. “I set out muffins to lure them outside. Trolls always come out when they smell them. It never fails.”

“What kind of muffins?”

I chuckled. “Ma is a green witch. Her potion-making skill got passed to me by blood. I lace the troll muffins with something strong enough to put them to sleep.” I chuckled harder when Rasmus frowned. “What’s the frown for, guardian? I thought ya would applaud me for letting the trolls decide whether or not to eat the muffins.”

“Using food to lure them from their lairs doesn’t seem fair. You’re using their lack of knowledge against them.”

“I’m surprised ya think that’s bad since Orlin does that to me all the time. And ya used to do it to me regularly. Goddess, all of ya guardians think ya’re superior in yer thinking. Maybe ya are in some ways but ya’re being naïve about the lack of fairness in yer own actions. Trolls eat a muffin, go to sleep, and wake up in a cell strong enough to hold them. A troll whisperer...”

“Troll whisperer?” Rasmus repeated, his voice rising in question.

I narrowed my eyes. “Yes, I didn’t stutter. A troll whisperer is a master at communicating with trolls. The captured troll will be told why he was collected and warned against committing crimes. He won’t be allowed to get so bad that he and his entire troll species get banned to the veil.”

I called an energy sword into existence. Glancing down, I saw its blade was black, and that obsidian chain mail fitted itself to my breasts. I ran my fingers over its smoothness and raised my gaze to find Rasmus staring at me touching myself. “This armor is not a good sign.”

Conn changed back into his human form and shrugged. “Ben probably doesn’t know that troll shamans exist.”

I closed my eyes and nodded. Troll shamans were the more intelligent among their species and could wield basic magick like conjuring fire. The problem was that their simple-mindedness made for extreme focus. A troll couldn’t light a single candle because they always conjured a ball of flame that could level a building.

“Okay. So this troll is a magick wielder. Shield yerselves,” I ordered, surrounding myself with Conn’s mantle. “I’m going in to look for him.”

No one tried to stop me, which made me feel better about us as a team. One bold idiot in our group was enough. Currently, that one idiot was me.

The hole opened into a sizable entry that Conn in demon form could have easily walked through. It went on for twenty feet and emerged into a large round den. Except in this case, the den looked like a lab. The room was full of cages stacked on top of each other against the walls. The kitten’s cage had been large enough for its adult body, which meant the gaps were large enough for it to squeeze through the bars in its kitten state.

Fully grown tiger cats of various sizes slept in most of the cages. Their keeper kept them drugged to reduce their yowling. I could tell because only half of them appeared awake. One or two of the cages held strange creatures for an animal breeder. Neither of them was making a sound.

One contained a mutated animal that looked like it had once been a red fox. Its eyes watched me carefully, but it didn't make a sound.

The largest cage in the room held a black snake the size of a baby anaconda. They weren't normally poisonous, but who knew what they'd done to it. Once uncoiled, it would be at least six feet long. A mutated snake seemed the strangest one. I wondered if he had a client. Hisser popped into my mind because that was the sort of creature that would appeal to a delusional Naga who considered himself a god.

What had magickal enhancement done other than make the snake gigantic? I hoped it had done nothing but that was wishful thinking.

I opted to leave the animals since I couldn't move them without magickal help or lots of brawn. A search of the other two holes branching off the main room revealed living areas with no troll in residence. The troll breeder must have been off hunting or something.

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We'd have to return. Until we caught him, we wouldn't collect our fee.

The animals were a separate problem. Depending on how recently they'd mutated, Ben's only option might be to put them down, which was not a pleasant thought.

When I emerged from the hole, the first thing I saw was the two demon wolves with the kitten nestled and napping between their large bodies.

Mulan stood by Conn chatting with him. The pair stood over the animals, looking like yuppie animal parents.

Rasmus ceased pacing when I appeared. I gave him a wave to show him I was fine.

"The troll isn't home. We need to lay a trap for him. If we take his animals, he's going to know something's wrong."

Mulan looked hard at me. "We take escaped kitten with us. This is not stealing. It is rescuing."

I shook my head. "That's not a regular kitten, Mulan. It's magickly charmed to mutate into a tiger cat. Sometime very soon it will instantly grow into a beast that will try to eat you."

Mulan looked down at the tiny animal. "But it is small and innocent." The kitten roused itself and looked up at her. It was as if it had heard the concern in her voice. Mulan shook her head. "We cannot kill him for what is not his fault."

I blew out a breath. This argument was not one I wanted to have but I couldn't let her turn it loose in the farmer's field. The troll would track it down and sell it—or worse, eat it. “Are ya sure the baby cat is male?”

“High demon was sure so I did not check for parts,” Mulan said, stooping to scoop it up and peer between its legs. “It is barely male and still needs its mother.”

My regretful sigh got lost in Mulan's cooing defense of the dangerous creature. I reminded myself that it was going to take a while for her to learn about such things. Maybe they didn't have tiger cats in China.

I looked at Conn for help but he only shrugged. Demons saw all cats as a delicacy to be savored. He'd never eaten a live creature in front of me, but I was betting he could discreetly get rid of the mutated kitten without any of us knowing he'd done so. His people often solved troll infestations where they lived by eating the troll's livelihood until he got fed up and left. Until that happened, they treated the troll breeder's lair like a fast-food restaurant.

I rubbed my forehead as I considered how best to explain the situation to a woman I admired and didn't want to order around. “The only thing we can fairly do for the creature is to return it to its cage. The kitten's smallness allowed it to slip through the bars, but it shouldn't be roaming around free when it morphs. Adult tiger cats are bigger than most small dogs and regular cats. We know they see them as prey because that's why we're here to stop their breeder.”

Mulan held up the kitten. “We need new solution. You are powerful witch. Fix kitten with chaos magick.”

I glared at her demand. “It's not a matter of having enough power. A transformative spell can't be reversed by anyone without them transforming into the thing themselves. Zara's promise to change the demon wolves back into humans will make

history once it succeeds.”

The Wu Shaman snorted. “All magick has weakness. Spells break. We need to break this one.”

I let my sword disappear before throwing my hands into the air. “Setting aside the fact that I’d magickly inherit the transformation, we also don’t know what a counter-spell might do to the cat itself. I refuse to kill a kitten with a spell gone wrong. At least when the kitten transforms into a tiger cat, it will live some sort of adult life.”

“Only coward witch not try to break spell,” Mulan declared quietly.

“Now listen here...” I said, glaring when Conn burst out laughing. My glare swung from Mulan to him. “Ya’re not helping here, Conn. Do ya want me to explain to the love of yer life what demons do with tiger cats?”

Conn held up a hand and turned his back so I couldn’t watch him. Why did he always think that hiding his amusement made his laughter okay? Because it didn’t.

Stupid males.

Rasmus walked by me and brushed my shoulder. I don’t know what he was trying to tell me with the action but he glanced at me and smiled. He walked to Mulan and took the kitten from her, holding it close to his body with his massive hands.

A little fantasy of those hands cupping my backside slid into my mind before I pushed it away. I shook my head to dislodge the memory so I could pay attention to what Rasmus was doing.

The guardian closed his eyes and a low hum came from his throat. A soft golden glow appeared in his hands and surrounded the kitten who went perfectly still.

When he opened his eyes, Rasmus turned and looked at me. “Your guess was correct. Dark magick is currently attempting to change this creature but it’s not fully evil yet. Unfortunately, I can’t halt the progression of its changes. It is possible that I could alter some of the darker effects on the baby cat—if you think it’s worth the risk to the creature.”

I frowned. “Mulan obviously thinks it’s worth the risk. Is there any risk to you for doing such a thing?”

Rasmus shrugged. “If I possessed a mostly guardian body, I wouldn’t feel it at all. My power was limited in this current human form on purpose. The short answer is yes, there will be a price. It may cost me energy but I am willing to expend it. This small creature wishes to be adored and accepted. It has no dark thoughts.”

“And you got all that from merely holding the kitten in your hands?”

Rasmus shook his head. “It is a tiger cat in progress. The transformation has begun.”

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The kitten looked at Mulan and mewed pitifully. It was a clever little thing to know who in our group to seek pity from. Ya had to admire its will to survive.

I shrugged. “Do ya what can for it, Rasmus.”

He did something that surrounded the kitten in a golden orb of energy. The orb rose in the air without the guardian touching it. With a wave of his finger, Rasmus rotated it until wisps of black rose from the kitten’s body and floated to the top of the orb.

The kitten mewed ferociously before finally floating back down.

Looking tired now, Rasmus returned the kitten to Mulan. “It will need to be watched. Like every action inflicted on this young creature, there is no knowing what will result from my interference in its life.”

Chapter Five

Conn and I installed a miniature camera system that would send a warning to Conn’s phone when the troll animal breeder returned to his lair. In the meantime, we went after Romeo.

Romeo was the nickname we’d given to the naked stalker troll with the frightening large appendage. Finding him took little effort once Conn in demon form found his scent.

Like any brooding and lonely male, his lair stank of half-eaten, decomposing carcasses of unidentified animals. He grunted at us in greeting, eyed my energy

sword, and stomped out of his lair without giving us any fight at all.

I dialed Ben. “We have Romeo and need a pickup for him. He built a makeshift lair in an abandoned warehouse on Loveless Avenue. Send the troll whisperer out too. I’ve got some questions for this guy before he gets collected. He’s docile at the moment—too docile. It’s freaking me out.”

Ben laughed in my ear. “Great work, Aran. Ezra helped me hire two new pickup guys. I’ve already dispatched them to your location. I’m coming up to speed fast on how the branch you used to work for functioned so smoothly.”

My face wrinkled in confusion. “Who’s running my old Shadow Breakers branch while the fairy’s hanging out here helping ya? My daughter’s over there training with someone in his absence. Is there something going on there that I need to know?”

Ben’s hesitation in answering caused my inner alarms to go off.

“What are ya not telling me, Benjamin? Don’t make me pry it out of ya. Ya know I hate doing that.”

Ben released a breath. “Your old branch is doing fine. Ezra’s fine. There’s no need to worry.”

“Ya promised not to withhold anything from me, Ben. That was a condition of my employment. Ya know I don’t enjoy being surprised.”

“Ezra is thinking about staying a while longer. His family is pressuring him to return home to wherever it is his people live. From what I gather, he’s not ready to go and is happy to help me get things here up and running. We’re giving him a good excuse to stay. He’s teaching me a lot too. This is what we Americans call a win-win scenario.”

Fair was fair, so I said the words. “As long as Ezra staying here has nothing to do with me, I’m fine with him.”

“I explained about Rasmus and you being a couple. He didn’t seem upset by the news. But if there was ever a problem among the three of you, I’d expect you all to conduct yourselves in a professional manner. The man—I mean, fairy—is helping me and I need him.”

I could have told Ben that a fairy male as old as Ezra wouldn’t see someone like Rasmus as competition for a woman’s attention. Unless Ezra knew what Rasmus was, the guardian for sure wouldn’t impress Ezra enough to stay away from me. And even if he knew, that might not matter to the fairy. I hadn’t taken Ezra’s poetic speeches about second chances and how much better he’d become as a lover seriously, but if he was indeed staying, he could become a problem.

There was another long pause as I pulled my thoughts away from Ezra and back to my conversation with Ben. “Let’s put it all out on the table. I feel the same way about Ezra that I feel about Jack. I don’t want to work with either of them. If ya value their lives, please don’t make me.”

On the other end of the phone, Ben loudly cleared his throat. “Yes, well, I didn’t hire your ex-husband—not exactly.”

“Ben...”

“I contracted him and his father to do the out-of-town work you turned down. There was a multi-location Shadow Breakers meeting of Division Managers last week. I asked why the States had all these issues popping up suddenly. They informed me that this wasn’t a new situation but a shortage of trained paranormal agents overseas who would travel over here. They implied that was the reason they wanted us to have our own branch. To be honest, I’ve got everyone busy and still have open cases. I

need to hire more agents.”

“Fine. Use him but I’m never working with him.”

“Which him?” Ben asked.

I rolled my eyes. “Don’t play stupid. Ya know I’m talking about both of them. And ya know Jack’s name is still on my killing list. Ezra is tolerable but I’d rather not involve myself with him again even if I do respect the fairy with things involving work. His talents are many and he’s reliable. Jack, though, is a liar and a backstabbing bastard. Ezra is merely a womanizer. I don’t trust either of them, just for different reasons.”

“You shouldn’t confess your desire to murder your ex-husband to your boss. If Jack shows up dead one day, you’ll automatically be at the top of the suspect list.”

“If I ever kill the bastard, I’ll absolutely claim credit for doing it. I didn’t want this freaking job with ya, Ben. I only took it so I could stay in the States with Fiona. Now my daughter’s back in Ireland where I want to be and I’m stuck here buying a house big enough for a family of thirty. And don’t be throwing Rasmus in my face. Being involved with a guardian who treats me like a science experiment does not make me any happier.”

“Your partnering preferences have been noted. Let’s change the subject. What’s happening with the troll animal breeder?”

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“Conn put cameras in his place. We’re watching for his return. He’s got a room full of tiger cats and a couple of other creatures. The enormous snake is the most concerning to me. I sent ya photos. Ya need to hire a paranormal animal specialist.”

“I saw the photos and I’m doing my best. Don’t hate me but we may have to put them down.”

“Do not say that in front of the Wu Shaman unless ya want to be cursed. She rescued a mutated kitten and I can’t convince her to give it up.”

“Has it transformed yet?”

“No. Rasmus slowed the transforming process but it’s still going to happen. She’s carrying it around with her to keep me from touching it.”

“If you have to kill it, Aran, just do it. It’s dangerous.”

“Yes, I know, and I’ll take care of things if it comes to that. I’m only telling ya about it because I wanted ya to know the kitten’s not out in the world running loose. Yer troll whisperer would have weaseled its existence out of him, and then ya would send us out to look for it. We don’t have time for that sort of nonsense.”

“I do trust you, Aran. I know you do the right thing even when it’s hard.”

I grunted in his ear. “Wish I could say the same about ya, Ben, but ya keep hiding things from me.”

“Well, you know all my secrets now.”

Since I hated people lying to me even by omission, I jumped on the only opening Ben had ever given me to question his background. “Except ya still haven’t told me why the Shadow Breakers asked a fully human male to run their branch here. The only reason I haven’t pressed ya for a real answer is that Ma raised me to respect a person’s magickal privacy. But if ya expect me to follow yer lead about these jobs, Ben, then ya need to tell me why I should.”

I waited through the longest hesitation yet.

“I’ve known for years that magick was real. My wife’s an Obeah sorceress from the Caribbean.”

“Yeah, I know what that magick is. Are ya a sorcerer as well?”

“No. I was born human and grew up in Texas. How do you know about Obeah? It’s regional to where she was born.”

His surprise made me grin. “Just like in yer fantasy fiction stories, I went to a school for magickals. It always fascinated me that there were so many kinds. I think remembering the information comes from being related to The Dagda. I remember spells too. Once I do a spell, I never forget it.”

“My wife and I met when I sought her help with a problem I developed while serving my country. I was visiting her area of the world while on medical leave and our paths crossed accidentally. She knew what was going on with me without me telling her anything. I didn’t know whether to kill her or kiss her.”

“That must be why we get along so well. We share similar tendencies toward our lovers. The military mad scientists turned ya into some sort of monster, didn’t they?”

There was a long pause and then a sigh. “We’ll talk about the details over beers one day. The short version is that my wife solved my problem and I no longer change. I didn’t marry her out of gratitude so don’t think that was the case. It took me two years to woo her away from the harem of men who served her. She’s older than me so it took some convincing to get her to leave her sorceress life and come live with me.”

I chuckled at the revelation I hadn’t asked for but enjoyed learning. “I suppose that means ya’re as good in bed as ya looked like ya would be.”

“That’s sexual harassment, Aran O’Malley. You’re the worst employee ever. Thanks for the compliment, though... and yes, I am that good.”

My laughter was loud. “Ya’re not the first to say I’m nothing but trouble. And ya don’t need to worry. If I was that desperate for a male, I’d give the fairy a second chance before I hit on a married man, especially one with a wife who could curse me. I know without asking that Ezra is still single. He’s waiting until he turns six hundred before he even thinks about settling down.”

“How old is he?”

“I just told ya. He’s not six hundred yet. Ask him yerself if ya’re that curious,” I said, chuckling as I answered. “Thanks for telling me yer story, Ben. I suspected Jack’s mad scientists got to ya.”

“No, my experiment happened years before Jack’s time. The results back then had a higher mortality rate. They gave their serum to seventy of us who’d been gassed during a military assignment. We were all in quarantine and dying anyway, so we had nothing to lose. As far as I know, I was the only one who survived. Since I helped incinerate the bodies of most of those who didn’t make it, I suspect it’s true. It was why they had me working with your ex in the beginning. I put in for retirement when I discovered some of the people they used weren’t willing subjects. When you

rescued me and my new team, I decided that would be my last assignment. Someone in the system double-crossed me. I may never know who.”

It was probably Jack but I couldn’t prove that now without risking the wrath of Jack’s guardian father. Jack would never confess without being compelled to do so, so Ben was right in that he’d likely never know. I moved on to the obvious to lessen the tension of the conversation.

“So ya weren’t as surprised by my magick as ya pretended to be when Conn and I visited.”

“What surprised me was how easily you conjured fire in your hand. My wife told me other kinds of witches controlled natural elements but you were the first I met of your kind.”

I could have talked to him for hours, but there was still work for me to do. “I hate to cut this fascinating talk short but I need to go. Yer new collectors have arrived... and the whisperer is with them.”

“Ask your questions of the troll and copy me on his answers.”

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“Ya don’t even know what my questions are.”

“You’re right. If they involve any troll matchmaking, I don’t want to know. But I’m interested in everything else.”

My laughter rang out as I said goodbye.

Chapter Six

The troll whisperer’s real name was Jayesh. He answered to Jay for those he thought were too lazy to use his proper name.

Jayesh was a paranormal linguist and a naga. Unlike Hisser, who was a full snake shifter, a naga always shifted into a hybrid form. Their top half stayed human except for their long, forked tongues and slitted eyes, while their bottom half transformed into a gigantic serpent with massive coils they used to support themselves when slithering or rising to face their foes.

Today, Jayesh looked no different from the rest of us, except for the seven earrings he wore in one ear, the face chain running from his nose to his eyebrow and the whitest natural smile I’d ever seen in my life. The feathers near his ears spoke to his youth, but youth to a naga meant he was less than a millennium old.

“So what’s the miserable troll’s deal?” I asked.

Jayesh spread his hands. “Your troll’s name is Bo. A female troll recently chose him as her primary male. She broke things off before they sealed the deal because he

brought no courting gifts that pleased her. He thinks her parents spoiled her but still wants to mate with her. I'm paraphrasing for your benefit. It's hard to translate troll culture into human terms."

"No, I get it. His female thinks she can do better than him. I've had to take down a whole mated group at once so I know how they work. Being chosen as a primary male is a very big deal. They're the badass in the relationship and in everyone's eyes."

Jayesh smiled at me as he nodded. "I see you know trolls."

I nodded and thought of the tiger cats at the animal breeder's lair—the tiger cats Ben intended to put down. Trolls highly prized tiger cats as functional pets. Once properly trained, tiger cats assisted in hunts and kept smaller animals from invading their lairs. The cats could also assist when committing crimes though I didn't see this easily depressed fellow striking out in that direction. Bo seemed more like the home and family type given how hard he'd taken his female's rejection.

I turned to Jayesh. "Bo is not criminally inclined. I don't think he needs to be behind bars."

Jayesh lifted his hands in the air. "I agree, but our orders are to collect and hold him."

"Take him. That way, I'll know where he is. Would it change Bo's situation if he had a tiger cat to give to his future bride?"

Jayesh laughed. "Do you know where one is running around without an owner?"

I smiled at his amusement. "I know where there's a bunch of them. An animal breeder has been allowing his creations to hunt and eat human domestic animals so he's losing them anyway. Right now, the plan is for the tiger cats to be put down. That seems a waste of bargaining material when they could help Bo win his true

love.”

Jayesh burst out laughing. “If Bo were to show up with a tiger cat as a gift, she’d be shocked. Courting gifts are usually a half-eaten squirrel or a handful of mushrooms. Sometimes it’s a pretty rock. With a tiger cat, Bo could get any female he wanted. It might raise his standards.”

“How about if he had five of them? I think I remember seeing five.”

A snickering Jayesh tugged on his earring-free earlobe. “Bo could gift her one or two, and trade the others. What he gets for them could pay for a very nice lair. Five tiger cats for Bo would be equal to a human winning a million-dollar lottery. What do you want from him in return?”

I grinned at him. “I want to not worry about orphaned tiger cats eating human pets or naked trolls with appallingly large man parts frightening the people of Salem. Bo should get mated as soon as possible. He needs something productive to do with what he’s hiding beneath his loincloth.”

Jayesh lowered his head and laughed without restraint. “You are nothing like what I was led to believe.”

I shrugged. “Oh, I’m probably worse than ya heard, Jayesh, but not with this troll. This can be one of Ben’s win-win scenarios if ya’re successful. I don’t like killing mutated animals unless it’s necessary. Talk to Bo for me, will ya? Tell him I’ll see him soon with some tiger cats.”

“Do you want a long-term deal with him, Aran? Or is this a one-time situation?”

I pondered the possibility of having someone willing to take future tiger cats off my hands. That would solve a lot. “Long-term makes sense if Bo is willing. He’d have to

let me know where he lives so I could drop future ones off.”

“I can teach him basic language skills for human speech. He’ll be able to communicate with you but only a little.”

“So long as Bo’s not issuing threats and trying to beat me with a club, we’ll manage.”

Jayesh smiled at me. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Aran of The Dagda. I’m happy we found a mutually beneficial solution to our good friend, Bo.”

I basked in his approval. In our kind of work, it was likely temporary. I’d be making him mad one day. “Remember this moment when I make ya mad, Jayesh.”

Jayesh grinned and headed back to Bo. Instead of getting into the front seat with the brawn Ben had hired, Jayesh climbed into the back of the collection van with a handcuffed Bo.

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“Nice hire, Benjamin. I highly approve of Jayesh,” I said to my absent boss while watching the van drive off.

The next time I talked to Ben, I’d have to remember to tell him in person.

“That baby tigercat will have a good life with Bo. It solves the problem of what to do with him.” And I was also thinking that a baby tiger cat would be an irresistible gift for his potential mate.

Mulan glared at me. “I am Wu Shaman. If troll can train tiger cat—I can train tiger cat. Trolls do not speak English. How do they train animals?”

It took a lot to stifle my urge to laugh and say something inappropriate about Mulan’s speech, but even I wasn’t that mean. Or at least, I wasn’t feeling that mean today. She’d made a sling from an old sweater she found in the trunk of my car and was carrying the sleeping kitten across her chest in it.

“Then ya have to put the kitten into a cage until it transforms. It’s not safe to carry it around on yer person. Once it becomes an adult ya can see how ya feel about it.”

“Are you tiger cat expert?” Mulan asked staring hard at me.

I rolled my eyes in response. She knew I wasn’t. But I knew what tiger cats could do and she didn’t. The danger was real.

Conn stood nearby laughing at us. I looked at him. “Tell her how dangerous tiger cats are,” I ordered.

“They’re very dangerous. But then, so am I, and Mulan tamed me.”

Mulan held out a hand in Conn’s direction. “See? I tame demon.”

I gave Conn’s smirk the look of disgust it deserved. Conn wasn’t tamed. He only pretended to be so Mulan wouldn’t stop sharing his bed.

I gave up. “Fine. Let’s go home. Tomorrow, we need to go back to the animal breeder’s lair whether or not he returns. Starving animals get mean and will work harder to escape their cages. I’ve found someone willing to take care of the adult tiger cats. The other two animals need to be examined by specialists and classified.”

Rasmus followed me without commenting. He’d been steering clear of the debate about the kitten but I could tell he was monitoring Mulan’s mothering of it.

My sigh was loud.

The demon wolves jumped into the backseat when I held the door open. One stopped and looked at me with pleading eyes. I raised one hand in the air. “I swear not to hurt it. That kitten is like the two of ya only it hasn’t gone through the change yet.”

Turning away, the demon wolf whined in protest.

I caught Rasmus grinning at me when he climbed into the passenger’s seat. “If ya got something to say, guardian, get it over with now or ya’ll be sleeping alone tonight.”

“You made arrangements to change a troll’s life and found a home for most of the animals Ben wants you to kill. Why are you fighting with Mulan over the kitten?”

I started the car, turned it around, and pulled onto the road before answering. “If it changes into its adult form while she’s packing it around, it will claw her to pieces.”

“You can’t be certain of that fate.”

I looked over at him. “I’m not a tiger cat expert but I have fought a few. Conn is usually the one that tracks them down because I react violently to vicious creatures trying to bite me. It always results in one of us dying and I decided long ago it would never be me.”

Rasmus grinned. “I don’t recall you getting violent with me when I bit you.”

I turned the grin on my face toward the windshield. “Ya’re the only exception I’ve ever made to that rule. Don’t make me change my mind.”

I opened the door to my bedroom. “There are two beds—one for each of ya. If ya want to share one bed, I’ll be okay with that as well. Just try not to shed on them. I’m not locking the door but don’t be roaming around the house whenever ya hear noises. And no howling. I don’t want the neighbors to come knocking on the door.”

The demon wolves sniffed around. One jumped onto Fiona’s bed. The other jumped onto mine.

“There—now everyone is cozy and tucked in for the night. I’ll see ya both in the morning.”

I closed the door but left it cracked. Snickering and giggling filtered through the door across the hall. I knew putting the demon wolves into my bedroom was the source of Conn and Mulan’s amusement. Since I didn’t want an audience for what Rasmus and I planned, what else was I supposed to do?

I banged on their door with my fist. “Don’t be laughing at me, ya tiger cat lovers. And ya better have put that thing into a cage, Mulan. This is a rental house. Ya’ll be the one replacing the walls if it grows into an adult and unleashes its claws in the

middle of the night.”

“Go to bed, Aran. Everything is under control,” Conn said between choking laughter. Mulan was laughing and muttering about something in Chinese. Talking to them about that tiger cat was worse than talking to Fiona about being wary around magickal men.

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“Sure, ya think my fussing is funny now but wait until the kitten goes through its changes. I’ll be the one laughing then. The two of ya will be the ones with scratches to show for yer soft hearts.”

I stomped down the hall with Conn and Mulan’s laughter still ringing in my ears. If Rasmus disappeared on me tomorrow morning, I was going to show him what a scorned woman could do. Dealing with this shit alone would drive me insane.

When I opened the garage door, a nearly naked Rasmus greeted me by dropping his pants on the floor. It was a definite mood changer. He smiled at my stare and stepped out of the rest of his clothes as I watched. My face heated as I looked my fill. “Do ya think I’m being a harpy about the kitten?”

Still smiling, Rasmus shook his head. “No, I think you’re being a concerned friend.”

I squinted at him. “Do ya really think that? Or are ya simply trying to make sure I don’t go spend the night on the couch?”

“Even as a human, I can strive for simultaneous goals. I’ve got about seven in mind at the moment. All of them involve you wearing no clothes. Can I help you undress?”

When I didn’t answer, he took my silence for agreement. I chuckled as his eager hands pulled my shirt over my head and dropped it on top of his pants. Rasmus was not a tidy person and I couldn’t have cared less. My lack of caring grew as his mouth dipped down to tease mine twice while he helped me shed the rest.

The massive difference in our heights made kissing a challenge when we were

standing up. Once the rest of my clothes were finally gone, Rasmus dragged me to the bed where the difference in our heights mattered far less.

Nothing much mattered at all, though, when I was in his arms.

I fell to the pillows with him, happy and grateful to be sharing myself. Even a six-hundred-year-old fairy couldn't compete with a guardian who'd been around for several millennia. Rasmus didn't look like an older man, but his bedroom talents far surpassed those of a man his body's age. I had an enviable situation, and trust me, I did not take it for granted.

Later, when I was falling asleep, I remembered I still hadn't gotten around to asking why Orlin had come for him. I hoped I remembered in the morning before we got too busy with the trolls.

Chapter Seven

"It wasn't about Zara. Her human brain is undergoing memory adjustment."

I fought hard not to show how appalled I was hearing Rasmus talk so casually about altering any human's brain, even one with another species using it. By now, though, I knew that ranting two sentences in would shut down his willingness to tell me anything. I'd finally figured that much out about talking to them.

"Orlin collected me because genetic manipulation is one of my specialties. They needed to consult with me about growing new human bodies for the female guardians you insisted we resurrect. There were complications because of the sheer number required. I appreciate they were trying to be fair in doing them all at once, but it was far too ambitious. We settled on slowing down some of them while others were left on their current schedules."

I blinked as I tried to take in what Rasmus was saying. My ears heard “blah, blah, blah too many new human bodies” and that was where my calm thinking halted and my panicked thinking began. Was he talking about growing clones? Or did they create new people from scratch? It would have boggled anyone’s mind.

I drank more coffee hoping it would help me understand him—or at least to not freak out during the discussion. Thankfully, we had the kitchen to ourselves, so there were no distractions or others to worry about. Conn and Mulan had slept in this morning—or maybe they just hadn’t gotten out of bed yet. Whatever the case I wasn’t about to disturb them.

“So ya’re a genetics expert then. Are ya a doctor?”

Rasmus smiled and held out a hand. I set down my coffee cup and put my hand in his.

“Before I became a guardian, I was an ascended being of light. Before I ascended, I was what your kind would call a scientist.”

Trying not to be obvious, I gently slipped my hand from his because touching him made me think of last night and what those hands could do to me. I couldn’t be thinking of that kind of human activity while we were talking about things that defied human capabilities.

“I guess that explains why ya felt like ya did about the military scientists. Ya warned me I couldn’t stop them from doing it again. Ya said I could only get in their way for a short while.”

His nod was brief. “Knowledge serves no one if it’s not used. Genetic understanding is a marker of advanced societal growth. Every species eventually learns it.”

Because my “blah, blah, blah,” reaction started up in my brain again when he talked

about humans as a species, I blinked rapidly and picked up my coffee to hold it. It was going to take an entire pot to deal with what was going on inside my head.

“We humans must seem like small children to all of ya.”

Rasmus shook his head. “No. You seem exactly like we were half a million of your years ago.”

“That’s even more pathetic, Rasmus. We’re a story ya’ve read and ya already know how it ends.”

Rasmus sighed loud enough for me to hear him doing it. Was he impatient with my lesser thinking? That wouldn’t surprise me.

“Life never ends, Aran. Form after form, life goes on evolving. We were so sure of that fact that it startled my people to discover the life cycle broke after we ascended. Light beings exit the organic cycle of reincarnating, but they can return to it whenever they choose. Some of my kind decided that controlling the cycle was the highest form of living. That was why I became a guardian. I wanted to experience what it was like to control my physicality.”

Goddess bless, I’d fallen in love with a freaking alien scientist. There just wasn’t enough coffee in the world for me to take that in and stay sane. Was I having sex with a ball of light that trapped itself inside a human male body on purpose?

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My thinking was probably too small given the ease with which the guardians discarded their bodies and reshaped them. That gross process they had of shifting from one form to another must be the way they reassembled all the parts using the same basic organic materials.

They weren't balls of light in their winged guardian forms. Their human forms were semi-permanent, from what I could tell.

“Did ya always have a human form? Or did ya make a dragon body when there were dragons on our planet?”

“We took whatever form was necessary to communicate with whatever species we were guarding on your world. The short answer is yes—I once had a dragon body. I also had a Venusian one. However, my current human form closely mirrors my last incarnated form on my original world, except I am much smaller and I have only one set of arms. Where I lived had far less gravity than Earth. Our species grew very large. Those of us who ascended helped our planet survive and support those who remained as they were. Ascension became a normal end-of-life choice for my people. You either died and reincarnated... or you ascended. It is the most important life choice a soul ever makes no matter what species or planet they occupy.”

Why was I so surprised by what Rasmus was saying? Zara bluntly told me that humans should worship guardians as their superiors... and their saviors. She said her goal was to help humanity reach the point of leaving the reincarnation cycle. I still felt like that wasn't her job. Yet I also wondered what Zara hadn't said to me because she had thought I couldn't understand.

Goddess, maybe I was naïve compared to them. Maybe my thinking was limited by how much I valued the human form I walked around in every day. While I didn't look forward to my death and the cycle of rebirth, I supposed it seemed more natural to me.

Who knew how many forms Zara had worn since she'd ascended? Who knew what wearing them had cost her? I knew it had cost her a Venusian lover. No wonder the female guardian thought so highly of herself. My guardian grandfather, Orlin, looked as young as me in his human body. Rasmus had changed his appearance multiple times or at least had varied it.

I was learning something important from our breakfast conversation. I was learning that the arrogance I hated in guardians came from them mastering the life cycle and their abilities to make new bodies as they pleased. They thought the science they'd mastered had made them superior to us.

I believed in reincarnation for nearly the same reasons Rasmus mentioned, but The Dagda taught me long ago that not everyone played the game of incarnating by the same rules. Using Rasmus's terms, The Dagda was an ascended being. He'd become a being of light. All members of the Tuatha de Danann were. They ascended but left behind descendants like Ezra and me who were still endlessly cycling. One day The Dagda would leave his new human body and ascend again. He'd told me that.

I shook my head and drank more coffee. "Hearing this stuff hurts my brain, Rasmus. Did ya help Orlin make the body The Dagda is using?"

He nodded, but reluctantly. "Your brain hurts because it is stretching beyond its normal thinking. Your ancestors called us gods and didn't try to fit us into their ideas of reality. The reason you're trying to figure it out is because you are related to beings considered to be gods. You have inherited their soul knowledge and their powers. This can't help but cause you to think of yourself as being slightly superior to

your fellow humans. My situation does not differ from yours. It's just gone on for a much longer time."

Snorting, I glared at him over my coffee cup. "I bet the guardians loved our human ancestors believing they were gods."

Rasmus shrugged. "It made intervention easier. Humans did what we said without fighting us. Progression happened faster. We gave your kind knowledge of your planet and of yourselves."

I grunted. "Some of us might have gone along with ya, but I'm betting not all of us did."

"True. Some humans knew we weren't gods back then. That is still the case," Rasmus said, grinning at me.

I sipped coffee in silence for a few minutes, but I couldn't shake off the subject. "Zara rationalized the harm she did by trying to convince me it was for my greater good. It wasn't good for the five young women whose lives she stole. She seemed incapable of seeing it that way. Will those women be reborn one day? Yer rogue guardian took what made them who they were and used it up. Being a guardian doesn't mean her life was more valuable than theirs. I told her that and I still believe it."

"The life source of those she killed will leave her over time to rejoin the cycle of all who are native to your planet. Zara views it as 'borrowing' one incarnation. Once all the energy of the person is released from her, the parts will gather again and quicken inside an unborn child to begin another cycle. So yes, Zara is using them to survive but she is not using them up."

"Okay. But that's beside the point, Rasmus. Those young women she killed weren't

living this incarnation only to give their lives up to Zara. Their purpose was to use their energy for themselves.”

Rasmus shrugged. “You cannot know that for certain, Aran. The destinies of those five women might have been to make sure Zara lived. Zara’s destiny indeed could be to advance human magickal knowledge and forcibly move your people forward. My brethren and I discuss it often.”

Here was the same impasse I always got to with any guardian.

I grunted at the futility of the conversation. “Using yer reasoning then, my destiny was to stop her from killing more young women, which I did. Do ya see how this argument could go on endlessly with each of us defending every bloody thing that came to pass by calling it destiny? To hear ya talk, Rasmus, free will is worse than an illusion. It’s nothing more than a fight to the death between two beings for who gets to use the other’s energy for their wicked purposes. Value is in the eyes of the beholder.”

“Yes, I see how the argument leans in that direction, which is why I find you so fascinating. You and Zara share a similar level of commitment to your ideals.”

Rasmus studied his cup. I could tell he was searching for unfamiliar words that might prove I was the one who didn’t get the point. But I got it. I accepted his explanation, but I didn’t like that it bred neutrality toward killing innocents. The gods I served wanted me to survive and they helped me to do. They weren’t trying to suck the life from me so they could walk the Earth. It was a matter of respect. It was a matter of seeing that everyone had equal value.

This morning I regretted Zara waking Rasmus up. Sharing sex was great but not sharing the same viewpoints was traumatizing, given his kind was more powerful than mine. Why had I never felt that way when I was with The Dagda? It made no

sense, yet was still true.

“The creators thought they could spare humanity a few hundred thousand years of enduring the life cycle if higher beings like us gently sped up your growth as a species. But humans are not like the other species that have thrived on this planet. Early genetic alterations made humans like us, and more remarkably, like the creators themselves. Human evolution is genetic poetry. You and your people are unlike any other creation on this planet. But along with the good you do, your kind also destroys each other and the planet without thought. A guardian’s job has changed from educating humans to maintaining balance so your kind doesn’t die out.”

I snorted. “Maintaining balance is my job as well.”

Rasmus shrugged. “I am no longer actively intervening. Instead, I have returned to my pre-ascension roots to become once more a scientist. I am observing your efforts to maintain balance and giving them significant consideration.”

Rising, I walked to the coffeepot and poured myself a refill. “Do ya want more tea? We need to get ya a brewing pot that holds over two cups. I like a four-cup one myself. I need to add that to my online shopping cart.”

“Did my explanation disturb you, Aran? You’re trying not to continue this conversation.”

Blowing out a breath, I swung around to face him. “No, I got all the philosophical stuff and most of the science part. I’m just struggling to reconcile my understanding with the version of ya who spent the night connecting our body parts as often as I’d let ya. Ya have a huge sexual appetite for an ascended being, Rasmus. If ya’re carnal in other ways, I haven’t noticed, but ya’re no slacker between the sheets.”

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Rasmus smiled, looking as content as I'd ever seen him look.

“The cost of ascension is the loss of physicality, yet physicality within a single incarnation is fleeting. I did not wish my true essence to join the human life cycle because I knew Aran O'Malley would never be reborn again as the same being. I accepted what time you choose to give me in your current incarnation and count myself blessed to spend even the briefest of time being physical with you.”

I ran a hand through my hair and chuckled without humor. “That’s a lot of decision making for a morning. No wonder it took us so long to move to the next level of our relationship. Did I prompt yer acceptance of me by helping Bo the troll with his lesser-being love life?”

“Someone with your power always is a god-like being. Added to that, you are intervening to change the fate of one of their kind. Your actions might inspire Bo and his people to want to grow into a higher form of themselves.”

An image of Bo wearing glasses and talking in complete and intelligible sentences rolled through my head. It made me want to laugh but not in a good way. I understood what Rasmus was saying about the differences between Bo and me, but I was not doing anything to accelerate a species. I was just helping one troll earn his way into the love of his life’s heart.

At the same time I was helping Bo, I was also looking to arrest two others. For sure, I was no neutrality-loving guardian. I was a warrior witch who loved a good fight if it meant I could stop the bad guys from hurting innocents.

Rasmus normally thought the worst of my interference. If the guardian currently had me on some kind of pedestal, it was probably the sex talking. Our parts fit together well. There was no denying it. What satisfied woman would?

I sipped my coffee to keep from chuckling at my thoughts. I had a one-track mind lately and not about work. It probably didn't help that I wasn't the only one living in my house with a happy sex life.

"If Conn and Mulan end up spending the day in bed, we may have to collect the troll animal breeder by ourselves."

Rasmus shrugged and smiled. I was pretty sure he was reading my mind again.

Chapter Eight

Conn and Mulan both finally put in an appearance. Mulan surprised me by carrying a pet cage containing the kitten, yowling in protest. It was sized to contain an adult tiger cat. Maybe Conn had sensed the change coming.

I said nothing as we got into our respective cars with our respective animals. We drove to the site and made the trek into the field again. The area looked the same as yesterday. I called a sword and some armor. This time the sword was red and so was my chain mail that covered me from head to toe.

I looked down at myself while the others stared at me. "This can't be good."

Conn morphed into his kingly demon form sans crown. He stood twelve feet tall with fangs that could rip any creature apart. His size would help him stop a troll, but he would not fit through the lair's entry in his shifted form.

I raised my foot and took a step.

“No,” Conn growled. “Let the demon wolves go in. The troll will think they are animals seeking shelter.”

I looked down at the wolves who blinked up at him in shock. “I don’t think they like the idea of being bait.”

“Earn your keep,” Conn said to them, pointing at the hole.

The wolves looked at each other, snorted in disgust, and reluctantly trotted toward the opening.

I looked at Conn who showed me his sharp demon teeth. I had no idea what he was smiling about but I got the feeling he was bragging about getting the demon wolves to do what he said.

Moments after the wolves entered the lair, I heard a yelp. The ground shook as both demon wolves ran full speed by us as they exited. Right behind them slithered the biggest black snake I’d ever seen and it was moving at a speed that its non-mutated self never would have achieved.

My sword blazed. Now the full body armor made perfect sense as the snake immediately struck out at me. Instead of chopping off its head, I lunged out of reach to study it.

“Don’t be coward. Kill it,” Mulan ordered.

I didn’t look away from the snake who was eyeing me for a second strike. “I want to look at it first.”

“Kill that thing. It’s not Hisser,” Conn growled.

“Yes, I can see that,” I answered, calmly walking around the snake. “But why is it going after me and not the rest of ya?”

“Maybe it’s because you’re dressed in red armor and carrying a red sword. Magickal creatures are drawn to that color,” Rasmus offered.

I walked along its side and the snake coiled on itself to follow me with its head. I hated snakes—all snakes. I didn’t like dealing with snake shifters, nagas, or gorgons either, though the latter worried me the least. Gorgon snakes had manners and were as well-behaved as their owners. But I had no use for snakes who tried to bite my head off.

I was ready when the giant snake hissed and struck out at me a second time. My sword sliced through the air to end the threat. The snake’s body writhed even after its head rolled across the ground. Blood sizzled and evaporated as it flowed from the creature’s neck into the dirt.

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Conn morphed from a demon back into his human form. “It’s regenerating, Aran. The headless body is growing a new head. The severed head looks to be growing a new body. The giant snake is more than enchanted. It’s become a hydra capable of replicating itself.”

“How do we stop such a creature?” Rasmus asked.

I held out a hand and closed my eyes to better feel its energy. “It’s still mostly organic, which means we can kill it. Ash it with yer demon fire, Conn. That should do it.”

Conn nodded and morphed back into his demon form. He stomped to the snake’s head and bent to pick it up with one giant clawed hand. He growled out one of his power words and held on to the developing creature until it smoldered. Flames engulfed the entire head as it dropped to the ground. It burned until there was nothing left but a few ashes. The blood in the dirt had burned away as well.

Conn walked to the still-writhing snake body, which was trying to slither away. Behind me, I felt the wind rise as Rasmus released his feathered wings. He flew to the creature lifting it into the air by its tail to keep it from fleeing.

Conn’s hand on it looked small next to the roundness of the snake’s body. Was it still growing? I wondered if the shamanistic animal breeder could do that to every creature he bred or captured. It was a disturbing thought.

As Conn’s flames encompassed the snake’s still mostly headless body, I looked toward the entry to the troll’s lair. Had the giant snake eaten the other animals? I

hated that possibility for Bo's sake.

When the rest of the giant snake was nothing but ash, Rasmus waved a hand over what was left. "All energy has left the remains. You can return the ashes safely to the ground."

Flapping his wings, Rasmus took the skies pulling the ashes up with him. They followed like a black cloud, which he let fall over the farmer's field.

My sword hummed as I lifted it in front of me. "The troll got around Conn's alarm somehow. I'm going in to drag him out of his lair."

"I go too," Mulan said, striking her staff on the ground to make it taller than her. "I will protect animals."

I lifted an eyebrow. If she loved animals so much, why hadn't she had a pet before the kitten? "Aren't ya going in the troll lair to protect me?"

Mulan snorted. "Both goals work. Lucky you."

I suppose she was right, given the deal I wanted to make with Bo.

Shaking my head, I marched toward the hole and inside. Tiger cats yowled loudly from their cages. Remnants of their dinner littered the floors under the cages. Our shamanistic animal breeder had returned to care for them after all. Where was the multi-talented troll now?

I tiptoed through the main room with my sword raised. The mutated fox creature stared quietly at me through the bars of the cage containing it. In its gaze, I saw recognition and what I hoped was relief. Maybe it remembered me from yesterday.

The door of the cage containing the snake was flung open, but the latch wasn't broken. That meant the troll had turned the snake loose on us. Had he been the one to charm it into reaching its massive size? Had he turned it into a hydra? If he was a shaman as Ben's report hinted at him being, how dangerous was his power?

"Hey, Mulan. Did ya ever go toe-to-toe with a shamanistic troll?"

Mulan, still busy cooing through the door of each troll cat's cage, stopped cooing to stare at me. "How can troll be shaman? They cannot chant spells. That makes no sense."

"I imagine he got his magickal training the same way we did. One of his kind taught him."

Mulan made a disbelieving sound. "He might use staff for defense spells. I think someone else speaks for him."

I agreed with that only because it took a lot of magick to create a hydra creature.

Mulan lifted both of her eyebrows. "Will you find and kill him?"

I grinned as I shook my head. "No, we need him alive. Ya get paid less for a dead body."

"That is stupid rule for dangerous work."

"Yes, I've often thought that myself," I said, motioning to the way out with my head. "Why don't ya carry out the troll cats while I look for him? Tell Conn to be ready if the guy gets by me."

Mulan shook her head and sighed. "Sex makes you weak. You did not let female

guardian get by you.”

“I may be a little tired, but I’m far from weak. Ya pouted like a child after ya slept with Conn and didn’t even go to work. Ya got no right to critique how I’m holding up.”

My voice rose at the end of my defense. I hated it when that happened. It made me sound as weak as Mulan accused me of being.

A low growl shook the walls of the lair as the troll charged out of one of the connecting tunnels and straight at me. Despite my armor, his massive size took me down with a single shove of his hand to my chest.

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I rolled across the dirt floor and watched Mulan block the main exit. She was doing her best to stab him with her staff that had grown a helpful, pointy end. He shrieked when she finally sank her weapon into his shoulder. Roaring, he pulled the weapon out of the wound with Mulan still gripping it. He lifted her and the staff before flinging her at a nearby wall. Luckily, his walls were dirt and not stone. She smacked hard before she slid down, cursing in multiple languages.

The troll roared one last time at us both before fleeing down the exit and outside. It was someone else's fight now.

I laughed while we struggled to our feet. "Are ya okay, Mulan?"

"He used no shaman magick," she said to make sure I knew.

She muttered to herself in Chinese as she dusted off her perky ass. I limped to the exit and walked slowly down it. Outside, I found a giant Conn gripping the troublemaker around his neck.

"Don't kill him, Conn. Ya know he's worth more to us alive. Don't let the big bastard speak, though, because he probably is a shaman. There was no cage in there big enough for that giant snake. He did something to it before sending it out to attack us."

Conn made a fist with his free hand and bonked the troll on the head. He did it a second time until the troll hung in his grip.

I shrugged about the troll possibly not surviving Conn's abuse. Dealing with his unconsciousness was better than fighting his magick.

“He’s not going anywhere and that works for me,” I said.

Rasmus stood nearby watching us. Goddess only knew what he was thinking about our method of capturing the troll. He probably could have snapped his fingers or something, but I didn’t see him offering to help.

I grunted and turned away from him to see if Mulan made it out. She had and was carrying one of the troll cat cages.

“Call for collectors, please. I bring animals into sunshine.”

I looked to Rasmus and motioned to Mulan with my head as she went back to the lair entry. With a nod, his wings disappeared into his back. How did his shirt never get ruined when he did that?

“Magick,” he whispered as he walked by me.

“Are ya reading my mind again, Rasmus? That’s an invasion of my privacy.”

“You think so loudly that I have little choice in the matter.”

I pointed my sword in warning, but he only laughed. As he disappeared into the troll’s lair, I let my weapon and armor fade away. Conn dropped the unconscious troll on the ground. Even unconscious, the troll grunted. I decided that proved he was still alive.

Conn returned to his human form. “Spell him to keep him from talking. He will not stay under for long, though.

“Right,” I said, walking over to drop a spell on the troll’s mouth.

By the time all the animals were out of the lair, Ben had sent his new collectors to our location. Conn changed into his demon form to help them bind the troll who now couldn't speak and carry him back to the van. It took several trips for all of us to walk the animal cages out.

I looked at Rasmus. "Let's swing by the office on the way home. We'll turn in this capture and maybe I can set Bo free."

"Are all retrievals this easy?" he asked.

I grunted. "They are for the person standing around doing as little as ya had to do today. Mulan and I will be sporting bruises for a week, which is why I prefer the sleep muffin approach. Trolls love to beat ya up. It's in their DNA to prove they're stronger."

Rasmus grinned. "Do you want me to drive us?"

I took out my car keys and handed them over. "I'm going to nap because someone isn't letting me get enough sleep at night. Mulan says ya're making me weak."

"I am. Every chance I get," he agreed with a smile. "As always, the Wu Shaman is right."

I snorted. "Mulan is not always right. Maybe her average is higher than most people, but that's all I'm going to concede."

His eyebrow lifted as he glanced my way. "Are you still worried about her keeping that kitten?"

"It's not a kitten. It's a tiger cat."

“She’s keeping it in a cage like you suggested.”

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I closed my eyes and sighed. “And when it goes after her with three-inch fangs and deadly claws, she’s going to be heartbroken. Not even worrying about her family will keep her from grieving the loss of that kitten’s innocence. Maybe I should get her a real kitten—a normal one.”

Rasmus chuckled and shook his head. “The tiger cat would eat it. Or Conn might.”

“Yes, and those were the things that kept me up at night before ya came along to distract me from worrying about them.” His laughter made me smile. “I’m glad I amuse ya... and I’m not being sarcastic. I truly am glad getting yer memories back didn’t steal yer ability to laugh.”

“Human bodies are made to express emotion. I think as both a guardian and a human and sometimes my conflicting thoughts cancel each other out. We used to change into our human bodies for entertainment purposes. It relieved our boredom and brought stimulation to all our senses.”

“Are ya saying guardian bodies aren’t equipped to feel?”

Rasmus was silent as he drove. Several miles later, he finally answered me. “Guardian bodies channel higher, systemic thinking into direct decisions and actions. Any other use of it causes confusion and anxiety.”

“I see. Does that mean laughter is not allowed for yer kind?”

“Guardians can laugh, but things do not seem funny enough to merit the confusion it causes.”

“What a shame for ya,” I said, secretly glad Rasmus was currently more human than guardian. Orlin had been right that it wouldn’t have worked between us if Rasmus hadn’t made some changes. I smiled at him. “I don’t think I’d survive my life without being able to laugh at the chaos.”

Chapter Nine

I was upset to see Ezra sitting in Ben’s chair doing paperwork. It was all I could do not to yell at him for it. The only reason I didn’t was because that wicked fairy would love knowing his continued presence riled me.

“This is yer second troll apprehension in a week, Aran. Doesn’t this work remind ya of old times back when we were a team? It must feel good knowing ya haven’t lost yer touch.”

I nearly rolled my eyes at his fake sentimentality but managed not to. “No, because I have a new team, Ezra. We work differently than the two of us did.”

“And I hear ya have a new man sharing yer bed. I’m happy for ya.”

I ignored his personal comment and looked around for Ben. “Where’s my new boss hiding?”

“Ya’re looking at him,” Ezra said, smiling at me in his wicked way.

Rasmus had gone in search of the troll whisperer to make arrangements for us to receive one of the tiger cats. Ezra wouldn’t have been so flirty if the guardian had been at my side. The fairy may not know what Rasmus truly was, but I was sure Ezra felt his power. It was impossible to miss for anyone with magickal senses.

Strangely, I had no idea where Ben was, which was something I was not used to. I

couldn't sense anything of him in the space. No alarms were going off inside me but I was going to have Conn look into Ben's absence. Once I would have trusted Ezra with my life but I didn't trust people as easily these days. I didn't even fully trust Rasmus who was sharing my bed. I'd learned to be wary of all male thinking and that would probably never change.

Oddly, I trusted Mulan—well, mostly trusted her. Her stubbornness regarding the kitten was throwing me off but I was trying not to be petty about it. She didn't think twice about pointing out when I was wrong but I preferred to let mistakes reveal themselves over time. It was sort of like waiting for a practical joke to play out or a mean prank to take root.

When the kitten shifted into a full-blown tiger cat, we'd see what happened then.

Pretending Ezra's presence didn't make me want to punch him for smirking at my confusion, I narrowed my eyes and shook my head. "What are ya smiling for? Ya're not the boss of me or mine, fairy, and ya never will be. Where's Ben? Or should I ask Conn to hold ya upside down until ya tell me?"

"Yer boss had to take a month-long sabbatical to undergo Shadow Breaker testing of his unique talents. And before ya ask, it was all his idea, Aran. It wasn't mine. Since it suits me not to go back to Ireland at the moment, I volunteered to sit in his chair for a bit."

My grunt was loud. "That's not putting me off, either. I know all about Ben's unique talents. Why would he leave without telling me? He knows how I feel about transparency."

"My understanding is that Ben's been waiting a good long while for a chance to get this done. I heard he and his wife are treating his trip to the testing facility like a vacation. They're in a plane headed to Norway as we speak. The Shadow Breakers

are picking up the tab. They count this as necessary testing since he hasn't stayed in touch with his inner beast."

I nodded. "If that's what this is about, everything's fine. I'm just surprised he left without at least sending me a message. Ben is all about sending me written communication on his phone. He's worse than my daughter."

Ezra shrugged. "Ben probably assumed ya wouldn't have a problem with me handling things in his absence. He told me himself that ya respected me professionally."

"Yes, but I refused to work directly with my ex-husband or ya. Ben went along with my demands as if he agreed with them. If the man keeps tweaking things behind my back, I'll declare a breach of contract and wish him luck in finding my replacement. And I'll be taking three other agents with me because I'm the one who signed Ben's bloody contract for five years. Rasmus has his own agreement but is currently my trainee. The other two members of my team work directly for me."

Ezra held up a hand. "Calm down, woman. I don't know what in Goddess Danu's name yer ex did to make ya hate men forever, but I thought the two of us parted on good terms. Outside of bedding other women, I never said or did anything to harm ya that I can recall. We were partners. I wouldn't have betrayed that way."

I blew out a breath. "Right... we did part as friends, Ezra, but I can't say the same for my ex. After I got out of prison, Jack Derringer admitted he only married me to gain control of how I used my powers. He imprisoned me for seven years and used our daughter to blackmail me into staying put. And then after I got out, he let military scientists turn him into a monster so he could become powerful enough to kill me once and for all. He's not just my ex-husband, Ezra. Jack is my enemy. I'm letting him live for Fiona's sake and no other reason. I want to stab him with my sword every time I look at him."

Ezra nodded. “Ben told me he was hoping to get ya to soften yer attitude toward yer former man, but he didn’t fill me in on how bad he’d treated ya. Do ya still see yer child’s father as yer enemy even though he recently helped save yer life?”

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I snorted. “Jack only helped me to impress his guardian father and to make everyone think he was nice. Ben fell for it as well because Jack is a charming bastard. My ex-husband craves power more than any human joy. I’m sure he’s hoping to finally gain something from sucking up to the man responsible for his existence. So, no, I’ll not play Jack’s fool again and believe he’s reformed. Thirteen years of trusting him was enough. What I’ve discovered after I got released from prison has only made me hate him worse.”

“Is it true ya put a demon compulsion on him?”

“I did but Conn didn’t do it. Sure, he offered to do so, but I promised Conn that I would never ask that of him. Instead, I got a demon friend who felt she owed me a favor to do it. Then I had to bloody release him from it because I needed information only the old Jack had.”

Ezra lifted both hands in the air. “I’m sorry the man hurt ya so badly that ya carry such hate for him. I’m glad yer dislike of me is not as harsh. Would ya like me better if I assigned yer ex-husband to a job where he will die a terrible death? Unlike Ben, I have no desire to see the two of ya make peace. Based on what ya told me, the man doesn’t deserve yer forgiveness.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I said with a chuckle, plopping down in the seat in front of Ben’s desk.

I wanted to joke with him about his offer to give Jack a dangerous job, but that would give Ezra a way back into my good graces. Trust did not easily to me come these days.

“If I wanted Jack Derringer dead, ya know I’d make him so. My daughter loves the bastard who fathered her and she’s a crier when she’s unhappy. My life is full enough of drama without having to deal with her mourning him.”

Ezra chuckled as he nodded. “Ya’ve matured, Aran, but it pleases me to know the wild witch part of ya remains. I applaud yer restraint.”

“Thank ya,” I said, tossing my paperwork for the second troll job on the desk. “Here is Ben’s beloved paperwork. I hope he left the checkbook. Ya can add this collection fee to the other. I need to be paid as soon as ya can get it done. I’m buying a house for cash this week and I’m not sure yet if I have enough.”

“Why are ya buying it in cash? Humans don’t pass property to each other that way. They like having each other in their debt.”

“I don’t love the place. I’m buying it for the investment. Plus, I have a cash partner. We’ll be fixing it up to sell in five years when my contract with Ben is up.”

Ezra laughed. “Ya could improve yer chances of making money on it with a spell that wouldn’t go against witch’s code. Why don’t ya use yer magick to help yerself?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Outside of paying a demon to put the compulsion on Jack, I rarely spend magick on selfish things. That’s why The Dagda chose me instead of my cousins. I don’t have much of the O’Malley greed.”

“Yes, I know. Ya’re the perfect heroine for the King of the Tuatha de Danann. Ya’re even legendary among my people. I got nothing but grief for wronging ya so badly that ya ran off and married a human. Even my family blamed me for the trouble ya ended up in.”

Jack had never been fully human, but I had believed he was. But that was none of

Ezra's business. "The only person who owns my mistakes is sitting in this chair. Why are being so nice to me, Ezra? I don't need yer flattery. I know who I am."

"Sure, but ya'll hear my flowery words just the same," Ezra said, adding my new folder to the other I'd given to Ben. "I'll get both payments processed as soon as I can get them through accounting. If ya like, I'll courier them to yer house."

"We'll be moving soon. Just call and I'll come by. Thanks for hurrying them. If ya're truly my stand-in boss, I need a work favor and it's a big one."

Ezra stopped shuffling papers and snorted. "And what would that big work favor entail?"

"I want ya to release the naked streaker troll. His name is Bo. Jayesh, the troll whisperer, should have spoken to him by now. If my plan for rehabilitating the troll works, Ben won't have to pay to feed the tiger cats we confiscated from the animal breeder. All ya'll have to deal with is the odd fox creature that needs to be shipped off and studied. It has a higher intelligence than it should have for a beast. I'm not a hundred percent sure it's an animal."

Ezra laughed. "Forget the fox, Aran. For quarantine reasons, we can't ship it overseas so the creature will have to wait until some animal specialist from Dublin finds time to come over here and take a look."

"Fine. What about Bo? If he gets into trouble again, I promise I'll hunt him down and bring him back for free."

"Are ya joking with me because ya're still mad that Ben is gone? I can't turn a prisoner loose simply because ya have some daft idea to turn a troll into a zookeeper. It's a well-known fact that ya can't reason with trolls. They're primitive beings."

“I’m not trying to reason with Bo. I want him to get married and share that massive appendage of his with a wife instead of all of Salem. If I help Bo woo the lady troll of his dreams, I think he will want to become my regular tiger cat handler. Having access to tiger cats would make him rich among his people and it would save the Shadow Breakers a bundle in not having to care for the ones we collect from criminals.”

“That bundle of money for animal care will be saved regardless because Ben had already placed an order to have the tiger cats euthanized.”

I shook my head. “We can’t kill them, Ezra. The Wu Shaman I work with is an animal lover and Conn is her bed partner. If Ben values his life, he’ll let me work this out another way. The woman fights demons for a living. Cursing Ben for life will be an hour’s worth of effort for her. His history with getting cursed isn’t great so here I really need to let me deal with the tiger cats.”

Ezra froze before he burst out laughing. “Goddess, Aran, I missed ya something awful. Ireland wasn’t the same exciting place after ya left. I didn’t realize until then how much I relied on yer craziness to keep life interesting. Ya were my favorite work partner.”

I lifted my hands. “Ben thinks I’m brave but hasn’t learned the extent of my crazy yet. Reforming Bo was going to be his introduction to what I could accomplish without using one of my swords to get my point across. Since he’s gone, I’ll have to show him another time. So what do ya say about letting me experiment on Bo?”

Ezra stared hard at me without speaking. After a few minutes of that, he released the breath he was holding. “I would need concrete proof of this deal working and yer agreement that we only owe ya half of yer streaker troll’s retrieval fee. It’s not like ya had to work for his capture. He didn’t even put up a fight from what I heard.”

I smirked at his weak effort to bargain. “Do ya think I’m stupid? Add up the money to care for the tiger cats until they get put down, which I know requires an animal specialist as well. That means Ben will have to wait on yer Dublin person for that as well as looking at the fox. I’m sure the amount ya save from their care will more than cover that half of the fee ya don’t want to pay me.”

Ezra grunted but eventually shrugged. “I can’t see paying ya the whole fee. We both know the troll gave himself up.”

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“He gave himself up after we found out where he’d built his new lair. Don’t be a cheap bastard, Ezra. Ben’s a lot more generous. He was told to pay me whatever I asked.”

A laughing Ezra shook his head. “Fine. I won’t deduct any of the fee for retrieving him but I still need proof that he’s safe to be set loose. How can ya guarantee that?”

“I can’t guarantee Mulan won’t curse Ben if he kills the tiger cats or that Bo is one hundred percent safe to be cut loose. All I can tell ya is that I believe in him. He’s a male in love. Come with me and watch the negotiations for yerself. I don’t mind an audience for it. Bo might feel a bit intimidated by yer presence but he’ll have to get used to the people here if he wants to work as my troll partner.”

“Partner? Ya’re truly crazy to believe that’s possible, Aran. Can the troll even speak to ya?”

“Jayesh said Bo’s speech is limited but I’m not worried about that. Five tiger cats in cages speak for themselves. The shamanistic troll is a very different story, though. He needs to stay in custody until he realizes the error of his ways. I don’t have direct proof he’s a magick wielder but he or someone working with him sent a giant hydra snake after us while we were trying to collect him.”

“Hydras? Those came from the Greek pantheon. They’re simple to make if ya have enough magick, though. The magick wielder could have been any sort of practitioner.”

“That giant snake could never have fit in the cage the troll originally had it in. That snake had been further enhanced after he released it from the cage, which means

someone in his lair used magick to change it. I put a spell on the troll to make sure he couldn't speak any spells himself. Take care with that one, Ezra. He's dangerous."

Ezra stared at me, blinking slowly. "What is a troll shaman like? Trolls don't have enough brain retention to speak full sentences, much less practice magick. How does a troll memorize the spells?"

I lifted my shoulders and let them fall. "All I can tell ya is that the snake was so big it took three of us to take it down. We learned the hard way that it was a hydra. Conn called demon fire to ash it. Also, someone magickly programmed it to come after me. The snake ignored everyone else."

"It could have been Hisser who helped the troll. Word got out that ya were working for the Shadow Breakers again. I can see him encouraging someone he knew you'd want to hunt down."

"But why not come after me directly? It's not like I'm hiding."

Ezra shrugged. "Who knows what he's thinking? He fancies himself to be a god. We both know Hisser loves altering normal creatures. The prison gave him herbs in his food to stifle his magick. If that hydra snake was his creation, he's more powerful now than he used to be."

"I know, which is not good news for me."

Ezra frowned. "No, it's not, Aran. Keep yer team close."

I would do that but not because Ezra suggested it. I would do it because it was good advice.

Jayesh puthis hands together and bowed in greeting. "Greetings, Aran of The Dagda.

I have been looking forward to meeting you.”

“I’m sorry to have kept ya waiting, Jayesh. It took me a while to convince our substitute boss to give my idea a chance. Fairies are natural skeptics.”

Jayesh’s smile was brilliant as he chuckled. “I have explained things to Bo as well as I could. I think he understands but do not think he believes it is true. I got the impression Bo isn’t used to things going well for him in his life.”

“They say actions always speak louder than words. Let’s unlock his cell and see how it goes.”

I lifted my chin and waited for the guard to bring Bo out to us. Rasmus stood by with one of the tiger cat cages. He’d gotten someone to feed this particular animal and it now calmly watched the proceedings. Food was the way most trained them. I was trying to imagine Mulan feeding fresh meat to her mutated kitten.

Bo arrived in magickal cuffs looking quite studly for a male troll. His hair hung in dark black strands that showed no silver hairs yet, which meant he was well under forty. His muscles were defined but he was still very lean.

The troll seemed much bigger than I remembered, towering over me from his seven-foot-plus height but nearly everyone was taller than me. My five-foot stature intimidated no one who couldn’t sense my magick.

I smiled at Bo before turning to nod to Rasmus. He walked over with the tiger cat cage and set it gently at Bo’s feet. Remembering how uncomfortable those cuffs were, I reached out and chanted until the metal bindings on Bo’s wrists opened. He didn’t flinch a bit as I removed and handed the cuffs to Rasmus.

When I was done, I pointed down at the tiger cat cage. “Bo’s,” I said, stating the

possessive term.

Bo rubbed his wrists and tilted his head. “Bo’s?” he answered, turning it into a question.

I nodded and said, “Yes,” in as firm a tone as I could manage. “Tiger cat for Bo’s mate.”

“Mate,” Bo said softly, eyes widening as he glanced down at the tiger cat.

If I’d been Bo, I wouldn’t have believed my luck, either. Me giving him a tiger cat was an offer too good to be true.

Jayesh jumped into the conversation. He grunted a few times and moved his hand between the tiger cat cage and off to somewhere else.

Bo’s eyes widened further as his gaze connected to mine. “Lie?” he asked me.

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I found it sad that being lied to was part of Bo's understanding of humans. "No," I said, shaking my head. I flattened my hand on my chest. "Truth."

"Truth," Jayesh repeated, hitting his fisted hand on one of his palms.

I repeated Jayesh's action with my own hands. "Truth," I said again.

Bo glanced down at the tiger cat and I followed his gaze. "More for Bo," I said, waving at the tiger cat.

Jayesh grunted and rolled the fingers of one hand across his palm. Then he repeated the action, counting to four. Bo tilted his head and stared at Jayesh. I could tell the troll still wasn't convinced.

I touched my chest. "Aran," I said. Then I gently touched his chest. "Bo."

I looked over at Jayesh. "How do I show a troll that I want to be his friend?"

Jayesh crossed the two fingers on his right hand. I turned to Bo, held up my right hand, and crossed my fingers. "Bo. Aran.Friends." I uncrossed my fingers and waved them between our chests.

"Freens?"

"Sure.Freens," I repeated, using his version of the word.

Jayesh smiled at me. "He and I practiced a few words I thought you might use. That's

as close as he can get to saying friends.”

“It’s close enough for me,” I said, smiling at Bo as I waved at the tiger cat cage. “Take it to yer future mate. Bring back the cage and we’ll give ya another tiger cat.”

“More?” Bo asked, directing the question to Jayesh instead of me. When Jayesh nodded, Bo turned back to me. “Bo—Aran—freens.”

I nodded and smiled again. “Yes,” I said and then turned to Ezra. “Is this enough proof for ya?”

Ezra shrugged. “If he returns to get the next one, maybe I’ll be convinced.”

Unworried, I turned to wave at the cage. “Gift for yer mate.”

“Gift. For.Mate,” Bo said hoarsely, pronouncing each word to prove he understood.

But the look in his eyes spoke volumes about his lack of trust. He was wise to question our sincerity. I didn’t blame him for doubting.

“Bring cage back for more.”

Surprising us all, Bo nodded. “Freens,” he said, favoring me with a smile.

“Yes. We’re friends,” I said, imitating his nod, and adding a smile. Then I made a shooin motion with both hands. “Go to mate,” I said. “Go.”

He looked to Jayesh again for confirmation. When Jayesh nodded, Bo bent and lifted the cage.

“Freens,” he said, hitting his chest hard with his massive fist before giving my chest a

gentler tap.

I stumbled back a bit at the force of even that minor hit, which made Bo chuckle at me.

“Small.Freen,” Bo carefully pronounced, laughing as he walked off with the cage.

I grinned at Ezra. “Ya need to get the word out that Bo is our official tiger cat disposal service. When he returns, give him the second cat.”

“If they call me, I will witness it,” Jayesh said with a grin.

Ezra rubbed his jaw. “I’m not as sure as ya are that he’ll bother returning.”

“No, ya never were much of an optimist. Trust me, Ezra. Bo will be back. He and I are friends now.”

“Don’t ya meanfreens?”

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I shoved Ezra's arm. "Don't be making fun of the way Bo talks. If all trolls were as non-violent as Bo, they wouldn't be on our collection list so often. And ya know it."

"Trolls are never nice, Aran. Ya're as crazy as ya always were," Ezra said with a grin.

"No, I'm way worse, but luckily, I'm notyerproblem."

"No, you're mine," Rasmus said, picking up my hand. "Let's go home. I'm covered in snake ashes and need a shower."

I couldn't tell if the guardian was staking a public claim, warning Ezra off, or truly wanted to get the snake ashes off. Rasmus didn't sound jealous but he did sound possessive.

I never could tell what motivated him. Guardians didn't think like humans.

Snorting, I decided the best thing at the moment was to accept Rasmus as normal. I wanted to celebrate my Bo win and bask in the possibility of being right.

And if Bo never returned? Well, I'd be picking him up for free like I promised.

Pulling my hand away from Rasmus, I turned to Jayesh, put both hands together, and bowed to him. "Thank you for your help, Jayesh. Communicating with Bo wouldn't have been possible without ya. If he asks for more word lessons, will ya teach him? I'd like not to have to call ya every time there's a communication problem."

He responded with a nod and a smile. "I'm happy to help. Let's consider that our Bo

experiment has officially begun.”

I returned his smile before letting Rasmus take my hand again and drag me out of the cage area to the car.

Chapter Ten

On paper, the property officially belonged to me and Mulan. Conn was a silent backer that only the four of us knew about. Rasmus maintained guest status, though he offered to pay us rent every month. Since he was sharing my bed and wouldn't be taking up even one of the many, many empty rooms, I let my guardian lover keep his cash.

Conn did some sort of accounting magick that made it possible for the two of us to combine his cash and mine. My financial agreement with Conn was that he pointed at something and said, “Do this, Aran,” or “Sign here,” and I obeyed.

When it came to money, I always did what Conn thought was best. I wasn't irresponsible with my earnings. I could keep a budget because Bridget O'Malley had insisted on it. I simply wasn't diligent enough to take proper care of it by myself. If Conn hadn't stashed away my earnings when I went to prison, I'd have been broke because Jack took everything I'd had at the house and in our joint account.

Thanks to Conn, I had money, a life, and now... property.

The real estate people closing the deal were awestruck by our ability to request wire transfers and have the money immediately processed. With all they knew, between the two of them, Conn and Mulan probably could have bought the entire city of Salem if they had wanted to.

Thanks to Ezra's prompt payment, we even had enough to hire movers.

Mulan had sold her house and put her things into storage. She made arrangements to have it delivered, never once doubting that we'd close successfully and it would be done.

After signing a giant stack of papers, the place was ours to do with as we pleased. I texted Fiona a picture of the actual signing and got back a squeal of happiness in little pictures that I understood substituted for actual feelings. Or at least, I think that's what Mulan told me. I couldn't even tell what half of the tiny pictures were in Fiona's reply, but her written "yay" was clear enough.

I currently stood in the foyer of the giant and empty house and wondered how I could ever feel like this was home to me. My dreams of a home were cottage-sized, and this place was a mansion.

Rasmus moved the queen bed from the garage of the rental house into a large bedroom on the first floor with an attached bathroom. The sad couch and sofa had belonged to the rental house, so we left it behind. I still had trouble imagining how I could afford to buy enough furniture to fill up even a tenth of this space.

"Aran?" I turned at my name to see Conn leading an older couple into the house. They were both about the same size as he was. Looking around at the emptiness, the couple wore the same shocked expression I felt sure I did. I smiled at them to let them know I understood.

"Hello. Are these our new caretakers?"

"Yes," Conn said, stepping aside to let them walk forward.

Both bowed their heads to me in greeting. I smiled wider at them. "Welcome to my empty museum," I said because that's how I honestly thought of it.

Conn chuckled. “It’s not that bad.”

I made a strangled sound. “This house is empty and cold. Everywhere I look all I see is a space with nothing in it.”

“It’s big and full of possibilities,” Conn argued back.

I snorted. “I’m thinking about moving to the small chocolate-colored house. No one has claimed it yet.”

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“No,” Conn said. “You just need some furniture and time to adjust. This space will suit you one day.” He directed my attention to the couple with his eyes. “Aran, this is Henry and Gale. They’ve agreed to help us.”

I blew out a breath and sighed. I didn’t know whether to feel relieved or sorry for them.

“Hello, Henry and Gale. Please choose any bedroom ya want on any floor that suits ya. I’m afraid we have a bring-yer-own-bed situation at the moment. I apologize for not providing ya with a warmer welcome. We closed on the house three days ago and haven’t fully moved in yet.”

Conn shoved his hands in his pockets. “Henry and Gale have amassed quite a few possessions. Perhaps you might allow them to help you furnish this place with their things.”

Henry turned to me. “We could certainly do that. What are your tastes, Madam?”

I shook my head. “Oh, no... there’ll be none of that madam stuff. Ya’re not to be my butler and maid. Conn might have talked ya into being museum keepers, but ya must call me Aran like everyone else.”

Henry looked at Conn. “Aran of The Dagda is just as you described.”

Gale grunted. “She certainly needs a lot of help with this place. It is too much for one person.”

Conn sighed. “We all need your help, Gale, but only Aran needs your house expertise. Mulan is going through the small home we plan to share like a tornado. She’ll be completely moved in before the sun sets.”

“Will we be expected to help your consort as well?” Henry asked.

Conn shrugged. “Not with caretaking, but I would like you to meet her. Mulan means a lot to me.”

Henry blinked at him. “We will, of course, make time for her then.”

“Of course,” Conn replied, waving a hand. “There’s no rush.”

He sounded strangely casual when addressing them—almost too nice and not very kingly in his answers. The only other demon I’d ever heard him talk to like that was Lilith.

“So how do ya know Conn?” I asked.

“Connlander of the Fir Bolg is our one true king,” Henry said, sounding proud... and something else I couldn’t quite name. Perhaps it was his weird tone because he talked like snooty butlers did on television. He sounded irreverent but subtly so. Goddess, Henry nearly sounded as snarky as Conn did when he was giving me a hard time.

Wanting to know the truth, I looked over at Gale. Men would lie for days but a woman would usually tell ya straight. “Tell me something, Gale. Why would Henry and ya be willing to give up yer normal lives to be caretakers for the woman who commands yer king? I’m honorable enough to hear the truth of the matter and not hold it against ya. If ya tell me, I won’t put Henry on the spot.”

Gale looked at me before moving her gaze back to my empty cavern of a foyer.

“You’re right, of course. We did not come here of our own accord. Connlander emotionally blackmailed us. He promised we would see him more if we agreed with this caretaking arrangement.”

I shook my head in disgust before glaring at Conn. “Ya can’t use yer kingly status to force these poor people into becoming servants, Conn. I won’t have that under any roof I own. Consider whatever deal ya made with them to be void. They can stay or go as they please, but if ya want to welcome them here, there will be no strings attached to their residence. So long as they don’t try to kill me in my sleep, I’m good with putting them up until they figure out another situation that suits them. As big as this place is, I probably won’t even know they’re around.”

The bane of my existence rubbed his nose hard and kept his head down. Finally, he burst out laughing.

“Yer laughter is getting on my last nerve, Conn. Ya didn’t actually blackmail these people, did ya?”

Rasmus walked up behind me to stand. Henry and Gale flinched at the sight of him and backed away.

Henry glared openly at Conn as he fussed at him. “You never said the witch bedded with one of the ancient ones. Who is this woman you serve? Did she steal The Dagda’s power? We deserve to know the truth.”

“Hey now,” I exclaimed, interrupting the insult. “The Dagda’s my ancestor. And I’ll have ya know that this version of Rasmus is not ancient. His body is practically brand new. Also, Connlander of the Fir Bolg does not serve me and never has. Conn is my partner. It took me seven years in their prison to prove it to the damn demon hunters. I won’t be wasting my breath arguing with a couple of strangers about our relationship. There’s a good reason Conn looks like me in human form. It’s because

we're family."

Gale stared at my outburst with wide eyes.

Guilt hit me immediately. My sigh was loud as I rubbed both my temples. "I'm sorry I ranted, Gale. It's been a stressful couple of weeks. It always makes me tense when someone I don't know talks about Conn like he's property and I own him. Trust me, that is not the case. Yer king and I are partners."

Rasmus put his hands on my shoulders. His touch immediately calmed me down. Knowing I owed another apology, I turned to look at Henry. "I'm sorry, Henry. I didn't mean to go all fishwife on ya. Insults to Conn are a touchy subject for me."

Snickering, Rasmus massaged my tight shoulders. Why did he always have to find my embarrassment funny? He never failed to find the humor in me making things right that I'd done wrong.

"Aran? Did you notice they share Conn's energy signature?"

I looked at them closely and then turned around to look at Rasmus. "So? All of Conn's original caste reads like him. Are ya saying they're related to him by blood?"

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Rasmus smiled at me. “They are his original family.”

“Original?What does that mean?” I turned around to look at Conn. His head was down and his shoulders were shaking. I snapped my fingers at him to make him stop laughing. “Look at me, ya laughing hyena. What’s the guardian hinting at? Ya know I hate it when Rasmus knows something I don’t. He’s arrogant enough as it is.”

Henry cleared his throat. “Connlander, stop laughing at your keeper and answer her. She deserves your respect.”

Conn finally raised his head. “I told you Aran was like no one else before her. Do you think I would ask you to come here if she were not worthy of your time?”

Gale crossed her arms and looked at him. “I admit I am impressed that the witch defends you to the world.”

Nodding, Conn smiled at the demoness. “Yes, Aran does that all the time. She’s done it since I met her.”

I glared at Conn. “Are ya going to tell me about yer actual relationship to these two demons, or should I keep trying to guess, Conn? Sometimes yer joking around is not funny and this is one of them.”

The Wu Shaman chose that moment to walk into the foyer singing in Chinese. When she realized there was a crowd listening, her staff struck the floor until the turtle shells on the end of it clacked together.

“Don’t attack, Mulan. These people are Conn’s guests.”

“They are demons... andstrangers,” Mulan added.

I rolled my eyes at her drama. “Yes, I know they’re demons and that Conn never warned us they were coming today. Put yer Wu Shaman staff away and come be introduced. Henry and Gale will be our new caretakers. Conn pranked us. We’ll have to get even with him for it later.”

Henry laughed loudly as he stared at Mulan while Gale’s frown at the Wu Shaman couldn’t have been deeper. I sighed and wondered if I needed to draw my sword to keep the peace.

“No,” Rasmus said in my ear.

Wondering who I could get to train me to keep Rasmus out of my head, I blew out a breath and waited for things to play out.

Still laughing, Henry shook his head at his mate’s reaction. “Why are you pretending to be above this? It wasyouruncle who used to pretend demons weren’t real and that he wasn’t one. You need to admit once and for all that your genes are the reason the boy only falls in love with the odd females.”

Gale turned and looked at him. “Connlander isour king, Henry. He can consort with whatever sort of female he chooses but some warning of what she was would have been nice. Her magick is strong enough to be a problem for him and us.”

“Yes, Galicia. I agree with that. As you said Connlander isour king, but he is a king who knows more than most about how hard it is to live alone. If this strange female gives him joy, we have no choice but to accept her.”

“I am not strange. I am Wu Shaman,” Mulan said, pounding her staff on the foyer floor until the entire house shook.

I flinched and looked around for any damage before glaring at her. “Don’t cause an earthquake in my museum of a house, Mulan. Put your staff away.”

I looked from Mulan to the demons and blinked at their strange conversation.

“Have you figured it out yet?” Rasmus asked from over my shoulder.

I turned my head and glared up at him. “Ya enjoy it when I’m too tired to think clearly, don’t ya? If ya weren’t keeping me up every night, I’d be doing fine figuring things out.”

Chuckling, Rasmus turned me to face him and pinned my arms in place so I couldn’t move.

“Long ago, Henare of the Fir Bolg fell in love and mated with Galicia of the Fomorians. Their forbidden love for each other resulted in the surprising birth of the first immortal child born to any of Goddess Danu’s tribes in several millennia. The child grew up to become the youngest demon king the tribes had ever known. When the Goddess sent her beloved Tuatha de Danann to bring peace to all of Ireland, legends say the one true king traded his freedom to save his war-hungry people from experiencing true death. Some say he’s the reason demons never die. Even if that isn’t true, he is certainly the reason that demons still live.”

Mulan and I both turned in shock to look at the couple. She stared at them, frozen like a statue. I was the yeller so that’s what I did. “Goddess bless, Conn. Why didn’t ya tell me Henry and Gale were yer parents?”

Conn shrugged a shoulder. “I’m so used to hiding our relationship from the world

that it never dawned on me to point it out to any of you. But I should have known the guardian would explain it. Rasmus loves sharing every little thing he knows with everyone he comes into contact with.”

Rasmus grinned at Conn. “Is that supposed to be insulting? Surely you know I think more highly of myself.”

Conn chuckled. His grin left when Mulan dropped her staff on the floor and covered her face with her hands. He rushed to her side to offer comfort, but she wasn’t having it. Mulan yelled at him in Chinese and pushed him away to face his parents.

She bowed her head to each of them. “I practice Wu Shaman magick and drive out evil demons for living. You may hate my work. I accept this. Still... you are welcome in my home while your rude, insensitive son shares my bed. I will kick him out if he deceives me again.”

I blinked at Mulan’s long speech. She rarely said more than a few sentences and she rarely showed any humility.

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Gale narrowed her eyes at Conn and sighed at his snickering before walking to Mulan. Looking pained, she reached down and patted Mulan's head. "Do not worry about what we think of you. Connlander deeply cares for you and that is all we need to know. I'm sure you're a nice person in your own way, dear."

"Yes," Mulan said, lifting her chin. "I am nice person. And successful hairdresser. Also, Aran's partner."

Henry snorted as he stooped and picked up Mulan's staff. Looking completely unaffected by touching it, he handed it back to her. "That staff of yours packs quite a magickal punch. Is it hard to control?"

"Staff has cranky days," she said.

"Yes, I'm sure it does," Henry said, and then he also patted Mulan on the head.

If she hated their head patting, Mulan hid it well. I'm surprised she didn't smite them to prove her power—or at least smite Conn to make a point. Maybe he'd be spending the night somewhere other than with Mulan.

I reached up and ran both hands through my hair, tugging hard on the strands to snap me out of my daze. "Conn... I can't believe ya didn't warn us. We don't even have a bed to offer them."

Henry turned to smile at me. "If you allow it, we can help you make this house into something much more pleasing than a museum."

I looked over at their mischievous child. Conn's wicked grin did not reassure me. I knew better than most that it only warned of more troublemaking.

I would not be forgetting this surprise any time soon.

I smiled at Henry. "How much money will yer help cost me, Henry? I spent most of what Conn and I had saved just to buy my half of this place."

Gale turned to me. "We do not require money, Aran of The Dagda. We only require your permission to stay. Will you let us help you and your odd menagerie of people as we see fit?"

"Sure," I said, looking at both of them. "Does that mean we're okay here? We'd have given ya a much better welcome if Conn had simply told us."

"Gale and I are fine. The jury is out about how the rest of you are doing," Henry said, not cracking a smile at his joke.

My gaze narrowed. "That better not be an insult, Henry. And ya sound just like Conn."

"No, dear," Henry said favoring me with a genuine smile. "I am the demon king's sire. It would be more proper to say that Connlander sounds like me."

After that, I gave up trying to make conversation with Conn's parents. They didn't look a day older than I did. Had they regenerated over and over throughout time? Or had Conn hidden them so well from the world that they had lived a truly eternal life together?

Goddess, I barely could stand Rasmus sometimes. How had they kept from killing each other?

Then I sobered in my thoughts enough to wonder what they had thought about the Great War and their son's sacrifice. Thinking about how long they'd been around and how much they'd seen made my head hurt more than one of Rasmus's philosophical explanations.

Henry's sudden good humor was giving me a headache too at the moment. But I would learn to deal with the headaches if Henry and Gale could truly turn this museum of a house into anything that remotely felt like an actual home.

Because from where I stood that was going to take a bloody miracle.

Chapter Eleven

The constant pinging of my phone informing me I had multiple messages kept me from going back to sleep. Fiona was messaging that she and her Gigi were going shopping to get some things for her new house. She was buying a suitcase to bring things home with her. I typed "yay" even as sleepy as I was.

Once my eyes were open, though, I realized the wonderfully delicious smell of bacon had permeated the nearly empty bedroom of the incredibly empty house.

Last I heard, we'd all agreed to fend for ourselves for breakfast until the rental house was ready to be released back to the owner. I'd been getting by on breakfast bars for several days now. It pleased me greatly that the kitchen was functional enough to cook bacon in because that promised the possibility of cooking other meals there. I'd only glanced at that room before we purchased the property and hadn't paid attention to the details. The sheer size of the house had overwhelmed me too much to appreciate the minutiae.

But who was the chef doing the cooking? My stomach rumbled in curiosity and hunger.

Despite the pillow next to mine being empty, I'd yet to see Rasmus cook anything. The guardian was finicky about what he consumed and stocked the refrigerator with healthy, cold fare. Or at least, he claimed it was healthy. He didn't begrudge me the comfort of a hot meal, but he didn't always partake of it.

Had Mulan come over to cook so she could impress Conn's parents? I could see that being true. She would have known I was starving away in here. I considered the merits of getting dressed and following the smell to find out.

It was fully light in the bedroom Rasmus chose for us, which meant I had slept in this morning. His need to christen our room with several hours of moaning pleasure had made that extra sleep a necessity this morning. I kept thinking any day now he'd tire of having sex with me but that didn't seem to be happening. Some days I was grateful. On other days—like today—I wouldn't have complained if Orlin had needed to retrieve him so he could help with critical guardian tasks.

Just as I was grinning over my thoughts, Rasmus opened and backed through the bedroom door carrying a tray. It contained a large mug, a whole carafe of coffee, and a plate of food. I could smell the bacon. My stomach rumbled in anticipation.

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“Henry called you lazy for sleeping in. Gale said you needed nurturing through all the changes. She ordered me to make sure you ate.”

“Did they feed ya too?”

“They fed everyone. I believe it’s their way of staking ownership of us and the house. I shared breakfast with Mulan and Conn at the kitchen bar. Henry told us not to get used to casual dining because he was having a proper dinner table delivered as soon as possible.”

I scooted to sit up completely and tucked the covers discreetly over my naked body. Rasmus set the tray down on an unpacked box we were using as a side table.

“The tray is from Mulan. She’s unpacked already.”

I snorted. “Of course, she has. Mulan is Ms. Perfect.”

Rasmus chuckled. “She’s definitely Ms. Efficiency.”

“Same thing,” I said, sipping the coffee. “Do I get the whole carafe to myself?”

He nodded. “Yes, and you can thank me and Conn for it. We both shared stories of what you were like before you had your coffee in the morning. Mulan ran to her house and found the tray and carafe.”

I would have sighed but the coffee was wonderful. It was better than what I made and I was picky. “So Henry and Gale think the worst of me already. What a great start to

our relationship. I can't believe they're Conn's parents."

Rasmus chuckled. "Those three demons are not family in the same way you and Fiona are. Henry and Gale seem more like friends than his parents. Perhaps that's what happens after being alive together for so many millennia."

I looked at Rasmus over my cup as I drank. "Are ya feeling wistful?" I asked.

His laughter shook the queen bed, which he'd not tightened properly. I suppose I needed a better quality one given the nightly use we made of it.

His gaze on me was kind but condemning. "Sometimes I need a dictionary to talk to you."

I held my now empty coffee cup out to him for a refill. "Let me rephrase my question to accommodate yer limited guardian understanding of nuance. Do ya ever wish ya had actual parents? At yer most forgetful, ya once mentioned not being able to remember being a child. Ya sounded sad about it."

"Oh," Rasmus said, finally understanding my question. "This body feels the normal human longing for familial connections. Sharing your life and bed has appeased most of them. I have studied how inclusive you are with the beings you encounter. It is a trait I'm attempting to emulate."

I sipped more coffee while I tried to figure out what he was saying. "Right. Sometimes I forget ya're an alien."

Rasmus stared at me. "I'm not an alien. All beings are one. All planets are one. We are connected through the divine source from which we were all made."

"Even the criminals?" I asked, snickering when he narrowed his eyes. "Sorry. I hear

what ya're saying and know what ya mean."

When he lifted the plate of food and set it on my lap, I immediately plucked a piece of bacon from the plate and chewed. After swallowing, I took the fork and cut into an amazing omelet. "Did Mulan bring all this food? When did she find the time for shopping? I've been too busy to breathe."

"My understanding is that Henry had food delivered this morning. I believe they have a crew of demons who work for them because there are people outside working. Some were playing with the demon wolves."

Guilt hit me for nearly forgetting to feed them yesterday. I'd locked them in the nicest barn ever built to keep them out of our way as we came and went. Poor things had waited all day for me to remember them.

I thought about Henry and Gale having a crew as I ate. Conn had to have known about that. No wonder he hadn't been worried about the size of this place. Was I supposed to house the crew as well? I shook my head and decided to think about that after I finished eating my yummy breakfast. It was nice to be taken care of and I'd be sure to thank them for it later.

My phone dinged again. I ignored it to continue eating. This is why I hated technology. All it mostly did was interrupt my real life.

Rasmus smiled at me. "Want me to see what it says? It's late morning and people will expect quick answers from you."

I waved my hand at the phone. "Check it if ya must. There's no password blocking ya."

"Aran, you need to set one. It's an unfair temptation to cyber thieves for you to have

none. It's like leaving your front door standing wide open when you're away from your house."

I stared at him while I finished my omelet. "Do they infuse ya with instant adaptability when they stick ya in a new body? I bet ya lived on Earth before, haven't ya? It's obvious that living with me is not yer first human experience."

Rasmus stopped reading the message on my phone to look at me. "All guardians are required to live among humans every couple of centuries."

Grunting, I returned to my coffee. "People on Earth call that a working vacation."

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His head moved up and down. “Yes, I took the equivalent of one of your vacations. Each lasted about half a year of your time. Most of it was spent acclimating to whatever daily life was like.”

“When was yer last human ‘vacation’ before the one ya’re taking now with me?”

Rasmus hesitated but finally answered. “I visited Medieval Europe. Thinkers among your kind were persecuted daily. At the end of my time among your kind, I gladly returned to my guardian duties.”

“I imagine ya found the unreasonable people of Earth boring and beneath your concern.”

Rasmus lifted one eyebrow. “I will refrain from answering honestly. I have no wish to fight with you today.”

I smirked at him. “Yer restraint in defending yerself proves ya’re an alien. Earth is a wonderful planet and humans are fascinating. I’m never bored when meeting new people and making friends. If ya could stop comparing humans to guardians, ya might feel the same.”

Rasmus sighed. “I am willfully changing the subject. Your phone message is from Jayesh.”

“See? Hearing so soon from Jayesh excites me. What did he say?”

“Jayesh says a happy Bo returned this morning with an empty cage and exchanged it

for another tiger cat one. He said Bo brought a gift of a rare honeycomb to show his appreciation. He also said Ezra cursed Bo because he had to use his fairy skills to fabricate some way to house the active hive including the bees who made the rare honey.”

I laughed. “So Bo didn’t just bring us honey. He brought the whole hive.”

“So it would seem.”

My smile was wide. “Ireallylike that troll, Rasmus.”

Rasmus chuckled. “If every human were like you, Aran, it would change life on this planet.”

“It’s called having compassion for my fellow beings. If killing demons actually killed them, I probably wouldn’t be able to do my job. Killing someone I knew would not regenerate made me determined to never do it again. Sadly, it was a promise I couldn’t keep in my work. I can do what I have to do now, but I don’t enjoy wasting a life.”

“We have discussed this many times, Aran. Why is it so hard for you to incorporate it into your thinking? All beings regenerate in some process. The demons merely have a different one than humans and animals.”

“Yes, but humans do not return as the same person. That’s partly why Hisser hates me so much. I killed his favorite female follower. He sent his human sorceress girlfriend after me with a poisoned blade. She ended up stabbing herself during our fight. With her death plaguing my conscience, I didn’t go after Hisser for a year. Ezra tried to bring him in. Others did as well. Eventually, I had no choice but to go after him. Hisser was one of my last apprehensions before I moved to Salem, but I couldn’t bring myself to kill him. That was why I spent the rest of my time in Ireland training

newbies.”

“The snake shifter must respect you as an adversary and also believe you are weak. Besting you may be how he intends to prove his greater power to himself. I suspect catching him will not be easy.”

I nodded. “Yes, I’m aware of the difficulty but I’m not planning a capture. There will be no imprisoning him this time. Hisser’s mental delusions of being a god are as dangerous as his venom. Conn won’t be sparing him whether or not I feel merciful.”

“Why did you spare the snake shifter’s life before?”

I moved my gaze to study the sunshine filtering through the bedroom’s tall windows. Waking up in this room with Rasmus made me happy and it relieved me to feel this way. Being held prisoner, no matter how nice the jail, warped a person’s nature and I had been no exception. I was less forgiving now and did not trust easily. There were days that I looked for betrayal around every corner. It was causing me problems in dealing with Ezra.

The punishing isolation forever changed me, and some of those changes created scars that would never fully heal.

This is why I knew Hisser would seek more than merely to hurt me. He would want revenge against me for catching and locking him away. Why wouldn’t the snake shifter hate me as much as I hated Jack and the demon hunters? Expecting him to feel anything else would be foolish after what I’d experienced myself.

I looked at Rasmus. “Letting Hisser live was my way of making amends for killing the woman he loved. His death was on her hands as well but he’s unable to see that. Conn is still angry at me because sparing Hisser required additional precautions from prison officials and the guards who had to watch over him. The snake shifter’s

delusions of being a god remain even after all the time he spent behind bars. Like me, he's now older and stronger. All my mercy did was create a powerful nemesis."

"What are you planning to do?"

I stretched and rubbed my arms. "I'm going to get up, get dressed, and then go thank Henry and Gale for my wonderful breakfast."

Rasmus smirked at my change of subject. "Is that your way of saying you don't know?"

I shrugged at his stare. "Later today, I plan to hunt down the troll thief because that will be more easy money for us. After we're done with the trolls, I'll hunt for the far darrig and see what his problem is. Then—if he doesn't find me first—I'll track down Hisser."

"You won't have to face your nemesis alone."

I smiled at the guardian. He resented his higher purpose because he now felt a strong need to protect me. It was human of him to feel that way about me. I felt honored that he even allowed himself to feel those feelings. His mental conflict might not be every woman's idea of romantic devotion, but knowing what he was giving up to stay with me was fast becoming mine. The time Rasmus had spent with me could be the most I could expect from an advanced being who could leave his body whenever he wanted. Ascension was his highest goal and he'd achieved that long ago without me. His only interest in me was as a source of new knowledge.

I kept having to pull my attention away from my thoughts and back to the present. "Hisser's sneaky. He attracts crazies who worship him and will do his dirty work. Walking over the dead bodies of those foolish enough to believe in him is the part I dread most."

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“But you’ll do what you have to do to stop him.”

I nodded. “I’ll stop him for the same reasons I had to stop Zara. Hisser has no right to use his followers as slave labor and hired muscle.”

Our conversation faded after that. Rasmus said nothing as I threw off the covers and walked naked to the bathroom. I must have worried him with my resolution about Hisser because my nudity didn’t even earn me a nice leer.

Chapter Twelve

Conn was missing by the time I dressed. Given the size of this property, using my phone to message him was all I could do to find him.

I was heading through the giant foyer to the kitchen when Henry met me in the hallway dragging a stranger by the back of his neck. The man was even shorter than I was. His shoulder-length black hair and green-eyed stare caught my attention before I even noticed the rest of him. The strange male looked young enough to be my son, but his red coat and hat told a different story. He was a far darrig and only looked young. They were classified as solitary fairy folk but all the ones I met had lived and worked with their families.

Henry glared when the man finally pulled away from his grip.

“If I was planning on sneaking in, I wouldn’t have announced myself to ya, now would I?” the far darrig demanded. He turned an apologetic smile my way. “Greetings, Aran of The Dagda. The troll thief you’re chasing informed me that I had

made Salem's paranormal criminal list. I needed to come set the story straight with you. I'm not here committing crimes."

"Announcing that ya're keeping company with a troll thief doesn't help ya much. If ya're not here stealing from people, what are ya doing in Salem? I know what ya are. Ya're a far darrig."

He straightened his coat and his hat. "Why would I care if ya know what I am? I'm not hiding my species. I dropped all my human illusions before I walked through yer fancy entry gate."

I barely caught myself before I smiled at his story. If he was lying, it was at least entertaining. "What's yer name, wicked fairy?"

"Dylan... and I'm quite sure even the wicked fairy folk wouldn't claim me. My people proudly declare ourselves to be far darrig. My family migrated from Wales to Boston when this land was new. My parent didn't have me until they'd relocated. I'm a first-generation American."

A quick calculation had my eyes widening. It meant Dylan was over two centuries old. That might be young for his species, but it was not as young as he looked.

Dylan glanced sideways and up at a glaring Henry who snorted at his glare. Goddess, Henry even glared like Conn—or vice versa, I guess.

"I don't know why your demon butler doesn't believe me, Aran. I haven't pilfered from him."

Henry stared at him. "I too am from Boston, you thieving cretin. I am well acquainted with your family. Your kind cannot be trusted."

Dylan shrugged. “Yes, well, I can’t apologize for anyone but myself. If you had dealings with my cousins, I understand your distaste for my family. But I swear on my mother’s life that I only came to clear my name. I came as soon I could after discovering a child of The Dagda was hunting me.”

I studied Dylan. “The report I got said ya were breaking into homes and stealing from normal humans.”

Dylan slipped off his hat and combed his fingers through his hair. “I may have helped myself to some food when I was hungry. But I didn’t take their wealth or anything of value. I mostly looked around for something that was taken from my family. The people I visited were thieves or connected to thieves. I left them a few valuable coins for their trouble. What more do you want from me?”

I tried to remember the details of the report. Didn’t it say he’d taken money? Or was it that he left money? I couldn’t recall so I’d have to check the details later.

The far darrig suddenly looked startled as if he’d read the questions running through my mind. Goddess, I needed to get a handle on keeping my thoughts to myself.

He held out a hand. “If anyone reported I took cash from them, they were lying to collect on the insurance.” He held out his wrists. “Get your demon king to test me. I swear on my great-grandfather’s grave that I’m telling you the truth.”

“Who could ever trust the word of a thief?”

I looked at Henry and lifted an eyebrow. “No one lies all the time.”

“Excuse me. I’m done here,” Henry said, walking away.

I held up one finger to Dylan. “Henry, wait...” I said, chasing a few steps after him.

“Thank ya for breakfast. Is it all right if I come to the kitchen for tea?”

Henry’s glare softened. “Gale supervises all the cooking. I will pass your thanks along to her. I set up the study early this morning. Go there to talk to your questionable guest and I’ll have tea sent in for both of you.”

“Okay,” I said, smiling to deflect any further unhappiness. “I’ll have Conn find us an office space outside the main house. I don’t want my unsavory work to clutter up the energy in here.”

“I’ll work with the king to see it gets done.”

“Thanks, Henry. Can I ask ya one more question?” My mouth twitched when he fought not to sigh. “Where’s the room ya’re calling the study?”

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“Behind the stairs,” he said gruffly before walking off.

I looked back at Dylan. “We moved here yesterday and this place still feels like a museum to me. I don’t know where anything is.”

Dylan nodded once and followed me. Sure enough, we found a pleasant room containing an unlit fireplace, two big chairs flanking it, and four walls lined with empty bookshelves. I suspected they would not be empty for long.

I forgot about Dylan as I looked around in awe. This room was like something out of a dream. When I came back to my senses, I shook my head and sat in the chair Dylan hadn’t already taken. We were both so short that we had to pull out the fabric-covered footstools from beneath the chairs to keep our feet from dangling.

My sigh was loud. I refused to spend the rest of my time in this place with my feet off the ground. I would buy furniture that fit me as soon as I could go shopping. And I’d buy doubles for when Mulan came to visit.

“You’re nothing like what I expected,” Dylan said.

I gave the far darrig the answer I gave everyone. “I’m worse than ya heard but ya caught me in a rare moment. It wouldn’t be to yer advantage to lie to me, Dylan.”

“I didn’t fight my way past your demon guard to wastemy timelying to you. I came to explain myself so you wouldn’t wasteyour timetracking me down. The troll thief told me all trolls are quaking in fear that you’ll come after them next. Stories of you are getting around.”

“Yer troll thief has reasons to quake because I’ll be chasing him down today.”

Dylan sighed. “Would it help my case if I guided you to the troll thief’s lair? I put the coordinates in my phone.” He reached into his coat and pulled out a red phone to show me. “I’ll even send them to yer demon king.”

I grinned at his eagerness to save himself. “Why would betray yer informant? Is there no honor among thieves these days?”

Dylan rolled his eyes. “I am not a thief—I’m a man on a mission. And I took him a bottle of mead as a bribe so he’d talk to me. It contained a sleep potion that knocked him out, which allowed me to safely search his cache of stolen goods. Unfortunately, what I was searching for wasn’t among any of it. I left the troll sleeping peacefully with no actual harm done. I also left all the goods. Trolls aren’t the most selective of thieves.”

It was a clever story but one that also smacked of truth. Dylan was eager for me to believe him and eager to continue his search. “Tell me more truth, Dylan. What are ya looking for?”

He didn’t hesitate. “I’m looking for a relic that was stolen from my family. Well, it was actually stolen from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston where we were storing it for safekeeping.”

I chuckled. The door opened and a young demoness dressed all in black rolled a tea cart into the room. I nearly frowned at the formality, but it wasn’t her fault Henry had decided I required the full lady-of-the-manor treatment. I thanked her for the tea. She nodded and left without saying a word. This was the kind of service ya got in the snootiest of restaurants.

Dylan and I both watched her leave with the same incredulous expression. Finally, I

shook my head. I reached out a hand and pulled the cart between us so I could pour for us both. I waved a hand to the treats and the condiments on it. “Please fix yer drink how ya like, Dylan. This isn’t a real tea party. I think Henry is having a laugh at my expense.”

“Your demon butler is stern and unrelenting.”

I shrugged. “I can’t say what he’s like yet. I only met him yesterday. And he’s not my butler. He’s a caretaker without a proper title.”

“Is Henry not the demon king?”

“No, that was most definitely not the demon king. If ya ever met Conn, ya would remember him.”

Dylan laughed at my revelation. “Okay, let’s get back to my story. Hiding something in plain sight is often the best way to protect it, especially from family members who’d like to sell it for a profit. My parents said the power the relic holds could be dangerous in the wrong magickal hands. Before they sent me looking for it, my parents made everyone we knew drink a truth potion. No one they tested took it. That meant the theft was likely an outside job. I checked all known thieves in Boston and found nada. My uncle’s a diviner so I asked him to help. He said our family relic was here in Salem.”

“What does this relic do?”

“The short answer is that it controls animals. It might do other things as well, but controlling animals is its primary magick.”

I thought of the snake hydra we fought and glared at Dylan. “Can it turn a normal animal into a hydra?”

“I honestly don’t know what it can do,” Dylan said with a shrug before sipping his tea. “I’ve not seen it used in my lifetime. What I know is that my parents are afraid of it. So were my grandparents.”

“What does this relic look like?”

“It looks like a tiny megaphone made from stone. It lived in our home for a couple of centuries. The museum decided it belonged in a Viking kitchen, which was the exhibit where it has rested since the first day the MFA opened its doors. Either my grandmother or great-grandmother put that Viking idea in their heads because we’re on record as the donating family.”

“Why is it not with someone of the Abrahamic faith? Did yer family convert after they moved to Boston?”

Dylan chuckled. “If I told you the story, Aran of The Dagda, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Ya would be surprised by what I can believe. Call me Aran and tell me,” I ordered as I sipped my tea.

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Dylan set down his tea and spread his hands. “An Abrahamic angel gave it to St. Patrick when he was still a missionary. He told Patrick to use it to drive all the snakes out of Ireland. The creator of the thing wanted the Irish peasants to work in their fields safely. History says St. Patrick successfully drove all the serpents out of Ireland.”

I shrugged. “Everyone knows it happened, but few know the details of how it came about.”

Dylan shrugged too. “My family got involved after the deed was done. The Church with a capital C wanted to use the relic’s power. They promoted missionary Patrick to bishop as a reward. Later, when he died, they made Patrick a saint. One of his new bosses—I don’t know all their fancy titles—decided to rent the relic out and make some extra moola. The angel who guarded it instructed my great-grandfather to steal it and then charged him with keeping it safe. Before he died, my great-grandfather insisted we guard it until the angel returned for it. So that’s what we’ve done—until now.”

I snorted at how often humans betrayed their moral ideals for the sake of money. “Let me guess. It didn’t work for those that paid to rent it.”

Dylan made a gun sign with his finger and thumb, pointed it at me, and said, “Bang on.”

I rolled my eyes. “Holy relics made by angels are made sentient enough to choose those they want to serve. Ya can’t force them. I’ve experienced that personally.”

Dylan snorted. “So you’ve had run-ins with angels as well.”

I shook my head. “No, I’ve only worked with demons. My father was the one who worked with angels.” Or so I still believed. My daughter was probably going to end up working with angels as well, but that was information Dylan didn’t need to know.

“My team and I recently went after a troll animal breeder, who moonlighted as a troll shaman. His magickal creations were eating domestic pets which is why we had to go after him. He sent a giant snake out to fight us that turned into a hydra when I sliced off its head. More interesting was that it went after me specifically. Yer relic might have been used to alter the snake.”

Dylan stopped drumming his fingers. “This is worse than my parents thought.”

I nodded. “If it was the shamanistic animal breeder who used yer relic, it still might be among his things. We confiscated all the items in his lair when we collected him and his animals. Those are being held at the office I work out of for now. Once he’s been counseled and released—a process that takes several months—the items determined not to be stolen goods will be returned to him. Would ya like to come look for yer relic before that happens?”

Dylan stared at me. “Is this your tricky way of arresting me?”

I laughed. “Not today. Today, I just want answers. I will probably have to talk my temporary boss—a very powerful fairy—out of arresting ya, though, but we’ll cross that bridge when we have to.”

Dylan crossed his arms. “What happens if I refuse to directly help?”

I grinned as I shrugged. “Well, I suppose I would let ya leave my property and get a head start on running since I’m a good sport. Eventually, I’d track ya down and arrest

ya for the bounty they've promised me. As ya can from these chairs, I need money to buy smaller furniture so my feet don't dangle."

Dylan chuckled at her story and sipped his tea.

"After I did all that, I would look for the relic among the troll's things myself. If I found it, I would get Conn to lock it away in our storage facility until ya made restitution to the people who brought those charges against ya—rightful or not. If that relic wants to stay in yer family, I'll not be the one moving it elsewhere. Once ya were released, I'd hand it over."

"Those options aren't actual choices," Dylan said.

I finished my tea and set the empty cup back on the cart. "I told ya I was worse than ya heard. But I'm not completely unreasonable. It's simply in yer best interests to help me and not become one more problem I have to solve."

His resigned sigh was loud. "Fine, let's do this then. I guess I should thank you for the tea."

"Wait to make sure ya don't drop dead before we leave the house. I don't know what kind of demon my new caretaker is yet. Some of them hold a grudge when ya annoy them."

Dylan smirked. "So next time, I should probably ring the gate console and wait to be let in."

I laughed. "I can see ya're one of the more intelligent members of yer kind."

"I'm a Harvard graduate," Dylan said, sliding from the chair. "So what now, Aran?"

I stood and stretched my limbs. I was still sore from my fight with the troll. “If my demon put a sleepy potion in our tea, I’m going to get pissed and use my sword on him. Let’s give it a good minute or two to see.”

Dylan snickered before finally laughing. “I’m not feeling sleepy. Do you mind if I change into my human form while we wait? It will prevent the looks that my shorter stature gets from most humans.”

“Whatever pleases ya,” I said.

Dylan slowly morphed into a six-foot-blond male wearing a t-shirt, jeans, and a man-bun. Fiona would have melted at the sight of him. I was suddenly very glad she wasn’t around. I’d felt that a lot lately.

The far darrig’s human form also reminded me of a skinnier and less golden version of Orlin. I wouldn’t be telling him that story, though. I wanted to like him, but still didn’t trust him.

“Ya look very handsome as a human, Dylan. I bet ya get a lot of looks because of it.”

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Dylan shrugged. “I find lustful glances far more pleasant than looks of disgust or pity. Don’t you hate being so short?”

I chuckled at his directness. “I find most males like short women. I think it makes them feel more manly. It’s only other women who look at me like I’m defective. If I was as tall as my power, I’d be twenty feet tall. So no... my size doesn’t bother me often.”

Dylan laughed as we walked out of the study and back to the foyer. Henry was hanging out there directing movers who were busy carrying furniture into the house.

“Change into whatever form you like, thief, but I still know what you are,” Henry told Dylan in an ominous demon voice.

When Dylan sighed, I covered my mouth to hide my smile.

A full human woman carrying two lamps stopped walking across the foyer stopped to stare at Dylan who smiled at her and said hello.

Henry cleared his throat. “Keep it moving, Daisy. I’d like to finish the ground floor today,” he said.

The woman blushed and hurried on.

I smiled at my bossy caretaker. “I’m headed to work, Henry. Message me if ya need anything.”

Henry briefly nodded before Dylan and I walked out.

Chapter Thirteen

Dylan not finding his relic among the animal breeder's things didn't surprise me. I hadn't expected his search to be successful but never realized why until just now. Watching him go through the troll's things had me thinking back to the day we apprehended him. Mulan and I hadn't gotten to check the tunnels leading to the other spaces in his lair.

"If the troll used it, he passed it off to someone else. Or perhaps he hid it. The latter is unlikely since trolls don't know what it means to be subtle. Clubs are their preferred method of getting their point across."

"Yeah, tell me something I don't know," I said with a chuckle.

The troll could have run out that day to draw us away from some magickal hiding in some other room of his lair. If that had been his intention, he'd done a good job. It was my fault for not even thinking to search the rest of the place before we limped out of it. I couldn't remember any of us going beyond the first room with the animals.

What if Hisser had been hiding back there? He could have sprung out and killed me while I was rolling around in pain on the lair's floor.

What if the snake shifter who hated me had gone after Mulan after she got slammed against the wall?

Giant snakes, roaring trolls, and rescuing the animals had all distracted me. There was a time in my life when I was sharp enough never to allow any of that to happen. Had I gotten so old that I needed to make a list of what not to forget for every job?

I looked down at Dylan who'd changed back to his real self once we were inside the Shadow Breaker compound. In his natural form, the far darrig stood a couple of inches shorter than me but that difference seemed greater with his head hanging as low as it was at the moment.

“Cheer up, Dylan. I'll give ya the coordinates for the animal breeder's lair. Yer relic could have gotten overlooked when they packed up everything. Most of the staff here is new and inexperienced. Ya'll want to keep a watch out for squatters when ya go there, though. That snake hydra might have been the creation of a snake shifter who's hunting me. He's dangerous so don't take my warning lightly.”

He looked up at me and nodded. Dylan was discouraged but there was nothing I could do about it.

We walked into the space next door. Ben had created an area with holding cells for the animals his agents brought in. It had been built beside the storage spaces for the belongings of prisoners. Ben no doubt considered the animals as a prisoner's personal property as well. Well, all except for the ones created by the animal breeder that Ben had scheduled to be killed.

There were a few regular dogs in cages. One held a parrot that squawked and complained in some language I didn't recognize. Bo had retrieved all the existing tiger cats because I didn't see any left but I wasn't looking for them, anyway. I was looking for the strangest creature the breeder had caged. It would remain here until some Shadow Breaker scientist came over from Dublin to look at it.

I finally found the creature in the last cell at the end of the row. I guess the person in charge of animal care had moved it as far away from the barking dogs as possible. The fox creature was curled up on a dog bed in one corner. It blinked sad eyes at us through the bars.

Dylan whistled softly. “I’ve never seen anything like that in my life. What it’s supposed to be?”

“A fox—I think.”

Dylan grunted. “It looks more like a corgi with fox ears and a fluffy tail. Its eyes look nearly human, which is highly creepy if you ask me.”

The far darrig was smart. I nodded as I studied the fox creature. “I’ve been wondering if it might be a transformed human. Maybe someone used yer relic on it, Dylan. What do ya think?”

The far darrig chuckled. “I think you lead a very strange life to be asking those sorts of questions, Aran.”

I laughed at his reply. “Since we don’t know what yer relic does, who knows what a true magickal could do with it?”

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“True. I wish I’d paid more attention when I was told about it. The best I can do now is ask my parents and grandparents what they know about its powers.”

“Could I talk with yer parents myself?”

Dylan smiled at my request. “Who would say no to a child of The Dagda?”

I smiled back at him. “Ya would be surprised. People tell me no all the time. Making them answer is how I got some of that reputation ya heard so much about.”

The far darrig rubbed his jaw. “If I get my parents to talk to you, will ya keep me posted on yer animal situations until I find the relic?”

“Sure,” I said, thinking it was a small ask for the gain I’d get.

I meant what I said about returning the relic to his parents. The last thing I wanted was to cross the angel who gave it to them. But I was still curious about why the relic was allowing itself to be used.

The magickal misusing it was living on borrowed time. Eventually, the item’s guardian angel would find out.

Before we went our separate ways for the afternoon, I gave Dylan the coordinates to the animal breeder’s lair. He gave me the ones where the troll thief lived. We made concrete plans to meet back at the house after his search was done so I texted Henry to make sure he knew Dylan would show up again.

I hoped to be home long before Dylan got done with searching the animal breeder's lair. I also texted Conn and asked for him and Mulan to meet me.

I didn't bother having them check on Rasmus. He'd texted earlier that he had to leave again and that was the last I'd heard of him. He always found me when he returned. I refused to get my panties in a wad over his absence. It wasn't like he was flying away on his own.

Rasmus told me himself that he could not travel to the guardians. His current body had guardian wings but wasn't capable of getting him to wherever it was they hung out and worked.

A full guardian had to come to collect him each time they decided they needed his help.

Sadly, I now thought of them collecting him as his real job. Studying me was his second one. Before me, I'm sure Rasmus had studied other humans. Sometimes I felt like I was living in a movie where the heroine was married to a man with a secret life. Only I guess Rasmus's life as a guardian wasn't exactly a secret to me. It was probably more something I resented when it took him away from me for days on end with no communication.

I waited in the parking area of a large, private fishing lake ten miles outside of Salem for the more reliable members of my team to arrive. I knew which direction to take to find the troll thief's lair but I wasn't keen on tackling him alone. Waiting made more sense and might save me from getting tossed on my butt again.

Between hunting for Dylan's relic and Gale taking over my kitchen, there had been no sleepy-time muffin baking. That meant that once again we would have to take down a troll the hard way.

But on the plus side, the far darrig had solved his own case for me by showing up. Maybe it was more on point to say Dylan had turned out not to be another problem needing to be solved. Instead, he was mostly a magickal visitor needing to be monitored while he was here in Salem on family business. Hopefully, I could talk Ezra into the half-payment the Shadow Breakers paid for cases that got resolved before apprehensions were made.

Of course, if I found out Dylan was lying to me about the relic, that would change things. He would be dealt with swiftly and without mercy. I didn't think that was the case with him but my trust issues and his kind's reputation wouldn't let me rule it out. Henry's reaction wasn't outside the norm and reminded me of the need to keep my guard up.

I waved when Mulan's tiny sports car pulled into the parking lot. Conn looked like a giant climbing out of it even though he kept his typical human height to only five-feet-eight for her sake. We needed to buy two larger vehicles with some serious hauling capacity. If we continued to get as many jobs as we currently had, it might not take us long to save enough money to buy them.

Conn stopped in front of me and raised an eyebrow. "Henry chased me down to tell me in person that he caught a far darrig sneaking onto our property today and that you took him to work with you. Would he be the far darrig we hadn't gotten around to searching for yet?"

"It turns out the far darrig case was connected to the troll thief's. His name is Dylan and he's not a true criminal. I took him to the office with me because we're currently helping each other solve a mutual problem we have."

Conn rubbed his nose. "Henry doesn't agree with you about his non-criminal status."

I smirked. "Yes. Henry made his feelings about the far darrig crystal clear. Is Henry

going to be an ongoing problem?”

Shrugging, Conn looked off. “Henry trusts no one’s judgment but his own and won’t be easily won over. You may need to establish your dominance with a show of power.”

My mouth tilted up at the corners. “I see. Will convincing him of my power require chopping off a few of his demon body parts?”

Conn laughed at my question. “Let’s hope not. That would for sure make Gale mad. She’d be left taking care of things by herself. Henry and I both know from experience that makes her very unhappy.”

I turned to Mulan. “How are ya settling into yer new house, Mulan?”

She grunted before glaring in Conn’s direction. “House is fine.”

Her tone could have cut glass. I scratched my head. Were Conn and Mulan fighting? That would be a dangerous situation for everyone.

When Mulan came to live with me, I promised her that she’d always have a home no matter what her arrangement with Conn was. If my demon familiar had made her this unhappy already, I’d have to order Conn to move into the house with me and his parents. For her, I would do that, but I would hate to have to play that card.

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I tried again to get my brooding Wu Shaman bestie to talk to me. “So what do you think of our demon caretakers?”

“I think nothing of them,” Mulan said as she walked away from me and my questions. “Which way to troll lair? We need to work fast here. I have more chores waiting.”

I pointed toward where the lair was supposed to be. Mulan walked ahead of us, turning her baton into her staff while she was moving. After I heard her turtle shells clacking, she sped up and soon outpaced Conn and me.

Shit. She was mad at both of us

Dealing with an angry Wu Shaman was not something I needed right now. Conn had gone too far with his teasing yesterday.

When she was a good distance ahead, I turned and smacked his arm. “Ya big idiot,” I hissed at him. “Ya went too far with yer jokes yesterday and made her mad.”

Conn rubbed his arm and glared at me. “This is not about my parents. It’s about hers. She tried to talk them out of coming but they won’t change their minds. Then she tried to delay them but they won’t delay their visit, either. She’s mad at the world because she doesn’t know how to stop them from walking all over her.”

I grunted in disgust. “Are they her parents or her tormentors? Goddess bless, Bridget O’Malley. Ma gets insistent but she also knows when to back off.”

Conn smiled and shrugged. “Mulan’s father is decent enough to her. It’s the women in her family who are the problem. All three of them—Mulan included—are constantly fighting to control the other two. Her mother and sister are nowhere near as powerful as she is. Neither is her father. I think Mulan only gives in to keep from killing them.”

I wanted to laugh at Conn’s conclusion only because he was right. But this was not the time to be amused by Mulan’s pain. Between hooking up with Conn, helping with my work, and going through the big move to our investment property, Mulan was understandably at the end of her rope. As her friend, my job was to help her tie a damn knot in it that she could hang on with.

I glanced over at Conn. “What if we discreetly put demon compulsions on her whole family while they’re here? Surely there are a few things left in storage we can sell to pay Lilith to do it.”

Conn’s low chuckle held approval. “I love your new wicked side, Aran. You continue to surprise me. Why don’t you ask Henry and Gale to do the compulsions? They’d do it for free.”

I straightened as I gave his suggestion some serious thought. Finally, I shook my head. “Henry would think I was too weak to handle them in any other way. No, I’d rather pay Lilith. She wouldn’t judge me as much.”

Conn rolled his eyes. “I thought Henry and Gale would be a pleasant addition to our eclectic family group. Was I wrong?”

“Are ya ever wrong?” I asked with a grin.

“Not really—no,” Conn answered in his most sincere tone.

I laughed at his arrogance, which usually served him well. The king of demons hid it from most people or cloaked it with charm. With me, Conn tempered his confidence with compassion for my human thinking. He annoyed me often but I would never ask him to change. An arrogant Conn kept me on my witchy toes.

And this was why I smiled at him. “I think I’m going to hold off forming any opinion about yer parents for a couple of years. I fear it will take that long for me to win them over.”

We walked in silence for a bit. Mulan was nearly out of sight now. I knew she’d find the lair without the coordinates so I didn’t bother to send them to her phone. It would be good for her to have to ask if she needed them. I couldn’t let her brood about Henry and Gale coming to live with me for as long as she’d brooded about sleeping with Conn.

“Why is everything in my life so complicated?”

Conn gave me a disbelieving look. “Is that a rhetorical question or do you truly not know the chaos that comes from all of us striving for your high ideals?”

I decided to overlook Conn’s snark. “If I can’t compel them, they can stay on the second floor of the main house where I can watch them. I’ll also ask Henry and Gale to hire some extra help during their visit to take care of their demands. Mulan told me the oldest daughter serves the family in her culture. I refuse to let her waste her time waiting on them like a servant. That would be even worse than their rudeness.”

“You’re being a loyal friend, Aran. Your suggestions may appeal to Mulan more than the one I made.”

I chuckled at his admission. “Goddess, I’m afraid to even ask.”

Conn grinned. “I told her to put her family in the stables with the demon wolves. There are several open stalls not being used. You need practice with your transformation spells anyway. I suggested she ask you to turn them into donkeys or mules while they were here.”

“I guess that explains why she’s glaring at ya.” I grinned at Conn’s cheeky smirk. “Are ya aware of any artifacts that aid transformations?”

Conn shook his head. “Shifters are born human and their bodies remember that form throughout their life. They experience a natural DNA mutation shortly before the first time they change into their inner beast. The rest of us who shift between forms do so using only the magick we carry inside us. Demons, dragons, unicorns, and many other ancient creatures, are born as the creatures they are. We teach ourselves to shift into a human form.”

I recalled that from my studies but I was glad Conn mentioned it. Rasmus had explained his shifting process many times but my brain still struggled to accept that guardians only wore their human form like it was an exchangeable set of clothes.

I shook thoughts of Rasmus away because what guardians did wasn’t important to this current discussion. And I refused to waste time every day wondering where he was and what he was doing.

“Dylan said he was looking for a relic that belonged to his family. He said it allowed the magick wielder to control animals. He told me St. Patrick used the relic to drive all the snakes out of Ireland.”

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“It sounds Abrahamic.”

“I agree. His parents said an angel gave it to Patrick when he was just a missionary. Dylan said it was given to his parents after Patrick became sainted and died. He said all his family did was hide it as the angel had ordered. Outside of the weirdness of it being in the care of a far darrig family, why would an Abrahamic relic suddenly choose to work for the person who stole it?”

“Are you thinking Hisser used it to create that mutant snake that attacked you?”

I shrugged. “A snake is one of his favorite pets and it targeted me.”

Conn lifted an eyebrow. “Except it wasn’t poisonous. It was just a black snake.”

“A giant, mutant black snake,” I corrected. “Maybe he was testing my abilities to see if I was as powerful as he remembered. I can’t wrap my head around Hisser being able to use the relic, though, because I know Abrahamic relics have sentience. Da’s ring refused to acknowledge or show itself to ya, Conn. I don’t think yer inability to see it was accidental. It hid itself using all its tricks. So why would this one let Hisser anywhere near it?”

Conn shoved his hands in his pockets. “Perhaps Hisser is as powerful as the relic’s angelic guardian. Could Hisser have become an actual god since he escaped?”

We exchanged stares and then both of us shook our heads. The snake shifter was no god—not even a dark one. Maybe Hisser wasn’t involved at all and I was trying too hard to make a connection. It went against my instincts to deny it but I’d been wrong

a few other times in my life, as my need to divorce my ex-husband proved.

We arrived at the lair with nothing decided.

Mulan stood outside waiting. She glared at us for taking so long.

I smiled at her. “Sorry. We were discussing the snake shifter who’s out to get me.”

Mulan gave a small shrug. I refused to believe it meant she didn’t care. She was moody and broody, but she wasn’t uncaring. Her family problems were getting to her and I knew how difficult that could be. I spent many years being mad at Jack and a whole year being mad at Fiona. Only people who knew ya could aggravate ya so much.

“Dylan—the far darrig I met—said he left the troll thief sleeping. One of us should go in and check if he’s still out. Dylan drugged his drink.”

Mulan didn’t say a word as she started forward.

“No! I’ll go.” Conn had growled the order at her.

I was surprised Mulan bothered responding to him, but she stopped and glared wordlessly. Ignoring her disapproval, Conn turned himself into an adult tiger cat and yowled at both of us before disappearing into the lair.

I smirked at his newly perfected animal form. Conn must have studied Mulan’s kitten closely. I could also see him morphing into an adult version of it to show Mulan what to expect from her dangerous pet.

Mulan and I waited outside the lair, not speaking or even looking at each other. Moments later Conn scampered out of the darkness. He morphed back into his human

form and motioned for us to follow him before heading back in.

Mulan and I looked at each other. She shrugged before following Conn. Sighing at the uncomfortable tension between the three of us, which I found highly distracting, I reluctantly trailed behind her.

The thief's lair was shorter than the animal breeder's, which wasn't a problem for any of us in human form. If Conn morphed into a demon, though, he'd bring the lair crashing down around us.

The troll thief had constructed it out of small trees and covered it in mud. It was homier than the animal breeder's lair. There were no additional tunnels off the main room, just two other open rooms that were easy to access.

One held a stick bed made thick with leaves and grass. A soft covering of moss covered the top of it. This was luxury compared to Bo's upcycled urban lair, created from junk he'd salvaged around the abandoned warehouse.

Smiling at my thoughts of the only friendly troll I knew, I peered cautiously into the other room. His storage room was organized and easy to search. The thief had stolen all the items from human homes and farms, probably those in the nearby area.

I walked in and looked around, but didn't feel Dylan's relic. The object he described to me would have put off a magickal signature if it was present. Nothing among the stolen goods gave off even the slightest hint of magick. Most of what he'd stolen were human kitchen implements, dishes, and hand tools.

I was leaving when something sticking up from a pile of dirt caught my eye. It had been tossed in a corner along with other broken scraps that had fallen off the hundreds of items in the room. Excess dirt had been heaped on top of the pile.

I dug through the trash and pulled out the object. Just as Dylan described, it was made of stone and looked like a small megaphone. Unlike what he described, there wasn't an ounce of magick in the object I held. Or none I could feel. That meant only one thing to me but I wanted to get a second opinion before I started swearing at our bad luck.

I carried the item out and handed it to Conn. Mulan stepped closer to look at it as well. The unconscious troll snored softly with two empty mead bottles next to him while we looked at the now-dead relic.

Conn shook his head. "Was this hidden among the stolen goods?"

"No. The troll thief is a tidy person. He must have thought it was a useless rock because I found it in a trash heap on the floor."

My demon familiar's sigh was loud. "The magick residue has faded so much that it's barely there anymore. Someone drained the magick from it, Aran."

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I nodded. Dylan had missed finding it because he'd been looking for a magickal signature that was familiar to him. If I hadn't seen the odd cone shape sticking up through the pile of trash, I would have missed it as well.

I looked at Conn and Mulan. "If this relic was created by angels, who could have absorbed that kind of energy without dying? Da's ring was powerful enough to block you from feeling it, Conn. I only got a sample of what it could do but that was enough for me to know the ring would never allow me to control it."

Conn held up the hand with the dead relic in it. "Let's not think the worst yet. This device likely isn't as powerful as your father's ring. If you can believe the far darrig is telling you the truth, the power of this relic was only over animals. That's good news, right?"

None of us had a genuine answer. My churning gut wasn't buying that theory as good news, either.

A feeling of absolute dread had taken hold of me the moment I held the stone relic in my hand. If the magick who drained the relic was Hisser, Conn and I might need some help to take the snake shifter down.

Chapter Fourteen

Ezra got someone from the office to bring him out to our property. Conn met them at the gate and rode into the compound with them. The driver opted to stay in the vehicle while Ezra visited with us.

We trooped into Mulan's house because there was so much chaos happening at the main house today. The last thing I wanted was for Ezra to think I'd hired a caste of demons.

Mulan's cottage kitchen was small, but she'd somehow fit a table that seated six in the space. Dylan was here for our meeting, but Rasmus wasn't. That meant we only needed room for five. We'd needed a table for eight to ten eventually, but that was something to think about another day.

My gaze sought Conn's as we took our seats. "I told Henry we'd find someplace on the grounds to turn into a home office. How about we use the blue house? We'll keep the furnishings simple in case we need to clear it out for a residence."

"Fine," Mulan said while frowning as if she hated the idea.

"It doesn't sound fine. Are ya sure?" I asked.

I got a middle finger salute for trying to be nice to her. My answer was to roll my eyes before turning to get Conn's thoughts.

He crossed his arms. "Even if it's temporary, I think having a separate place to talk business is a good idea. I'll discuss it with Henry tomorrow. I may need to set up one of the bedrooms in case I end up sleeping there."

Mulan turned to Conn and frowned. "Grow up, demon. This is no time for throwing our dirty underwear all over."

Confused by her taunt, I tilted my head as I tried to figure out what she had meant. Had she and Conn had some sort of underwear fight? Was she really that stressed out by her family's demands? I blinked several times as my brain replayed her words over and over.

Taking pity on me, Conn grunted as he answered. “The eloquent Wu Shaman was trying to say this was no time for she and I to bearing our dirty laundry.”

“Oh... ya’re still fighting,” I said, chuckling over his explanation. “I still get tripped up by Americanisms but I know that one. Jack used to say it all the time.”

“Where is confusion in my words? I meant what I said,” Mulan said while glaring at me and Conn.

Conn’s mouth looked evil as he smirked at her. “Yes, I’m sure you meant every word, but that doesn’t mean we understood you. Most of us need context and logic to understand what you say, especially the constant, unreasonable, demented ranting about your family.”

“You fear angry women. This is not my problem. I have enough problems,” Mulan said as she scowled at Conn in disgust.

I turned to the fairy who had watched their verbal brawling with a shocked expression. Ezra didn’t look amused by it, which was my problem. Normally, I would have enjoyed every moment of hearing them arguing over something so stupid. But I agreed with Mulan. We needed to show some restraint when guests were present.

“I’m sorry, Ezra. We’re all the worst sort of busy and tired. We’ve been moving in while doing all those jobs ya’ve been writing me checks for.”

Ezra pointed at Conn and Mulan. “Ya didn’t tell me yer demon familiar and the Wu Shaman were a couple.”

I looked at Conn and Mulan, and then back at Ezra and shrugged. “Why would I tell anyone that? Their relationship is their business. It has nothing to do with our work for the Shadow Breakers.”

Ezra shook his head. “Yet ya’re all living here together like one big, strange family.”

I frowned at his nerve. Where I lived and who I lived with was none of Ezra’s or Ben’s concern. Bosses were bosses. Did I need to set boundaries over what I did outside of work?

“Why do ya care who I live with? Normally, Fiona and Rasmus would be here as well.”

“This is a strange situation ya have created here, Aran. Yer butler told me to wait at yer security gate until someone came to let me in. When did ya get a butler? Or a security gate, for Goddess sake?”

I smirked. “Ya’ve met my sneaky ex-husband, Ezra. That gate helps me sleep at night.”

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Ezra gave me a dirty look for joking about his shock. I pressed my lips together to keep from saying something rude.

Inviting Ezra here was my idea because I needed to ask for his help. But he and Ben both needed to get used to the fact that I would do the Shadow Breakers jobs as I saw fit. Which was why Dylan was part of this meeting. After warning him of the dangers, I'd told Dylan he could tag along while we looked for Hisser. The far darrig didn't want to tell his family what happened without having a full explanation.

I'd returned the relic to his care because it was no longer a magickal item that could harm anyone. The poor guy had held the stone relic in his hands and stared at it in shock. He hadn't cried over it being drained, but he'd looked close to weeping before confirming the inert stone was once the relic. Afterward, all Dylan had said about its condition was that he'd let his family down by failing to protect it.

I was mad at Ezra because of his nosy questions. If I wanted Henry's whole caste to join me, it was no one's business but mine. At the moment, I wanted to yell the same thing at him that Mulan had yelled at Conn.

I had enough problems and no patience for the fairy trying to push his agenda onto me. Not that I knew what that was, because I didn't. For some reason, the fairy couldn't seem to reconcile the version of me he once knew with the person I'd become.

What was his deal?

Sure, I knew I had changed over the years, but it wasn't like I'd switched

personalities. All magickals had some eccentricities. I realized our property seemed a tad excessive when ya first saw it. I'd thought the same. But my living arrangements and what I did with my money were none of Ezra's or Ben's business. I doubted Ben would react the same, though. Ben might simply laugh at the oddity of this place.

Forced into defending myself to keep the peace during this meeting, I hardened my tone to get the rest of my point across to my "temporary" boss as quickly as I could.

"Henry is not my butler nor my servant. He's half of a caretaking couple the three of us hired to help us while we're working. Conn and Mulan live in this house. Fiona claimed the yellow one. And as ya heard me say to Conn earlier, I'm hoping to convert the little blue cottage into a temporary workspace so we don't bring work energy into our homes. We needed more space and this suited our needs."

Ezra spread his hands. "I thought ya wanted to return to Ireland, Aran. Ben said ya put him on notice that ya intended to leave one day. Why would ya buy a house if ya intended to move home?"

I winced a bit. "Ben wasn't wrong—he just took me too literally. I say a lot of things to Ben when he annoys me. He persuaded me to sign a five-year contract, which means I'm here in the States until that's done. Conn, Mulan, and I bought this property as an investment. Does this satisfy enough of yer curiosity for us to talk about work now? I didn't call ya out here to hear ya criticize my personal decisions."

Ezra looked like he wanted to say something more but he didn't. Conn and Mulan had gone quiet too, probably because they knew I was not happy with the direction Ezra's questions had taken. Jack's manipulation had made me forever wary of people digging too deeply into my life.

I hurried to fill the silence with what I'd called him here to discuss. "I appreciate ya coming here on short notice. We had too much going on to come by the office. I

wouldn't have intruded on yer time if it wasn't something critical. And call me old-fashioned if ya want, but I still like to look people in the eyes when I'm asking them for a favor."

Ezra blew out a breath. "A favor? Okay. What do ya need from me?"

I stared at him and wondered how he hadn't already guessed. "I need yer help to capture Hisser. He may have gained more power. I'm not saying he's become god-like for real but I don't want to be in the middle of a fight with him and realize I need an army to take him down."

Ezra smirked as he shook his head. "Trust me, he's only delusional about his power. Why would ya conclude such a thing about him?"

I spread my hands. "Because all the jobs we've done lately are connected. Well, all the ones except for Bo."

My temporary boss spread his hands too. "Yeah, ya turned that troll into a real asset, didn't ya? Given our shared past, I wasn't truly surprised by that. Yer soft heart always worked in mysterious ways that caused trouble for everyone involved."

"Bo's not causing trouble nor am I. Ya better have been kind to him, Ezra, or I'm going to be unhappy with ya."

Ezra grunted. "Yes. Goddess forbid we don't be nice to yer troll. I wouldn't want Aran of The Dagda to be hunting me."

I snorted at his mocking praise. "I'm not missing yer tone, fairy. Ya're being sarcastic but ya know Bo is an asset. And I heard about the beehive. That honey is rare and expensive. Be grateful for his friendship."

“Don’t ya meanfreenship?”

“Laugh all ya want about his speech but ya know I was right about his usefulness. And I’m right about the rest of our cases being related as well.”

“Fine,” Ezra said, crossing his arms. “Explain yer theory to me.”

I glared at his demand but did as he asked. “The troll thief stole an ancient relic that gave its user the power to control animals. Dylan’s family has been taking care of the relic for several generations. By the time we found the relic, its magick was gone. Someone had drained it.”

Ezra rolled his eyes. “Nice summary, but how does this one thing add up to all yer cases being related?”

Wasn’t it obvious? I glared at him before answering. “The person who drained the relic’s power likely helped the shamanistic animal breeder create that snake hydra. Everything leads to Hisser being the person behind this. No, I have no hard proof, but I don’t want to find out the hard way that I was right. This is a situation where I’d rather be over-prepared.”

Ezra blinked several times and then rubbed his jaw. “I can’t believe ya found the relic. Where in bloody hell was it?”

“The troll thief had tossed it into a scrap pile that was half-covered with dirt. It was lucky I happened to look down as I was walking out of the room.”

“What did ya do with it?”

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I looked at Dylan. “Show it to him.”

Dylan said nothing as he pulled the relic from a pocket. He set it on the table near Ezra. Making a strangled sound, Ezra jumped up from his chair to stand.

After he stood two feet away from the table, Ezra looked around and seemed embarrassed by his reaction.

Clearing his throat, Ezra pointed at the relic. “I can’t touch what an angel once touched. Angel magick is one of the few kinds that fairies fear. Their magick is unpredictable.” He looked at Dylan. “Put that back in yer pocket. Ya should have left it in the trash.”

Shrugging, Dylan picked it up and tucked it away.

I stared at Ezra as he sat back down. “I didn’t know that about angel magick.”

He nodded to Dylan before looking at me. “My ancestors learned that lesson the hard way. There was a time when my people felt they had the right to take power from the human realm. They didn’t think humans deserved to benefit from it.”

“Are ya saying fairies stole angel power?”

Ezra chuckled. “They tried, but things did not go well. Angel magick only responds to certain people—human people typically. I have no idea why angels intervene in humanity when they hate humans even more than demons do.”

When I felt Conn stiffen, I turned to look at him. Ezra knew better than to insult Conn. The fairy knew what my relationship with Conn was like. I'd never hid it from him.

"Demons don't hate humans," Conn said with an edge in voice. "Demons fear humans massing together in numbers large enough to overwhelm an entire demon caste. Once my kind moves beyond that fear, humans and demons get along quite well."

"Only because demons have the advantage of beingmagickal," Ezra insisted. "Humans lack the power to control their destinies. They are weak as a people. That has never changed."

To say I was surprised by his attitude would be an understatement. Ezra's blatant disrespect for humanity nearly mirrored what Zara said all guardians felt. I didn't think a few hundred years among humans was enough time for Ezra to be passing that sort of judgment. I didn't think a few thousand years were enough for the guardians to be doing it, either.

At least guardians compared humans to all the other species who'd ever occupied the planet. They were, as Rasmus so often reminded me, fairly neutral about us. I'm sure sometimes they saw us as naïve versions of themselves.

Until Ezra's rant, I'd had no idea fairy folk held humanity in such low regard. Why did his people send their children to serve here for hundreds of years? It made no sense.

I thought of Fiona and the powerful, sentient ring she now guarded—the ring Da had watched over. Two mostly human members of my family were the rightful caretakers of King Solomon's ring, which I still believed was an angelic relic. What would Ezra think if he knew about Fiona and the ring?

I narrowed my gaze as I looked at Ezra. I no longer trusted him enough to tell him about my daughter, but he could use a bit of education about me.

“Angel relics are sentient and make their own choices. I ended up wearing one for a brief time. The best I can say is that the angel relic tolerated me having it. I suspect that tolerance was because I made sure it landed in the proper hands. Some relics talk to ya when they want to make their preferences known. They project words into yer head.”

Surprising me, Ezra laughed. “I wouldn’t go that far, Aran, but I agree their magickal influence is strong. What ya considered magickal telepathy was merely its ability to make ya think what ya already wanted to think.”

I found his denial of relic sentience interesting and made a mental note to dig deeper later. But witnessing the fairy’s odd reaction to the dead relic, while interesting, wasn’t the reason I called him here. I had bigger concerns today than species politics.

“If Hisser absorbed the energy of Dylan’s relic, the snake shifter’s power to control animals could be a bigger challenge than my small team can handle. It took Conn and I both to defeat the one snake hydra we fought. What if Hisser has an army of those? The snake hydra can be killed with magickal fire, but it was not stopped with other weapons. I’m going to need a crew armed with Greek Fire dispensers. Plus, we’ll probably be facing Hisser’s crazed followers. Ya know how fond he is of recruiting witches.”

“This is all conjecture, Aran,” Ezra pointed out. “Do ya expect me to mobilize yer Greek fire army and keep them on standby until ya call for them?”

Yes, that was what I wanted. “Why is finding me the help I need a problem? Ya’re the boss while Ben’s away.”

Ezra smirked. “Ben doesn’t have Greek fire in stock nor the manpower to use it. His stock of weaponry is sorely lacking. Magickals who live here are not rushing forward to sign up as agents. Most of the people Ben is hiring are coming from other countries. So let me clarify my reasons.” He counted on his fingers. “No weapons. No men. No way to confront him safely.”

I slowly released a breath and worked not to scream at Ezra for not even trying to help me.

“Okay. Can ya help me personally then? Maybe yer powers have grown enough for ya to use yer fairy influence on Hisser’s followers. That would at least even the odds a bit. Ya could take out his followers while my team deals with the snake.”

Ezra sighed. “I suppose I could do that for ya if necessary.”

“I hear the reluctance in yer answer, Ezra. Why did ya travel all the way over here from Ireland to warn me of Hisser escaping prison if ya didn’t mean to help me catch him?”

Ezra shrugged. “Because I want to go home with all my body parts intact more than ya do. My time is up here. My family will demand my presence among my people the moment I land on Irish soil again. Despite not being keen about returning, I’d like to still be alive when I get there. Fairies live a long time, but then they die, just like humans.”

I sat back and crossed my arms. “So ya’re saying that my team and I are on our own fighting Hisser.”

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Ezra spread his hands. “Ya said yerself that his power has to have grown. I’ll help where I can, but I won’t directly engage him. Maybe the right answer is for ya to wait until yer Shadow Breakers branch is fully staffed and more functional. Go after him later.”

“So ya want me to wait even though Hisser is likely amassing more cult followers every moment?”

“Don’t get yer dander up, woman. It’s only a suggestion. I wouldn’t dare tell the mighty Aran of The Dagda how to do her job. Go ahead and rush out there if ya must.”

I nodded tightly. It was hard to nod when your jaw was clenched. “So if I go after him now, ya’re limited in the kind of help ya can offer me.”

“Yes. That’s a fair statement.” Ezra’s exasperated sigh echoed in the room. “This meeting was illuminating but I have to go.”

He looked at Dylan as he stood. “I suggest ya drop that dead relic off a cliff or into the sea, far darrig. Ya’re harboring all manner of trouble carrying it around with ya. Dead means something different to angels. Who will the angel blame if he returns? Don’t say I didn’t warn ya.”

Dylan blinked up at Ezra but shook his head. “I can’t dispose of it yet. I’ll take my chances.”

“Suit yerself,” Ezra said.

Conn rose to walk out with him. Mulan and I watched them heading to Ezra's waiting car.

"Fairy lied," Mulan announced. "He came here for you. He wants to take you home with him. He imagined bedding you but also plotted your snake shifter attack plan in his head. He knows we will ignore his advice to wait."

I shook my head at her. "He doesn't want to bed me. Ezra and I are nothing except old friends and barely that. Are ya reading minds too now?"

"No. It is feeling I get when near him. He keeps many secrets. His energy hides in blurry bubbles."

I chuckled at her description. "Blurry bubbles, eh? I believe ya about his secrets but I don't think what he feels for me is one of them. We were lovers once but we ended well before I married Jack. I barely remember being with him."

"Fairy is equal to high demon in power—very dangerous being. I find him sexy in strange way. His power excites my woman parts."

Ezra attracted females all the time but I was immune to his allure. He'd been a selfish lover and I held no fond memories of our time together. The second fairy I'd slept with had validated Ezra's selfishness. Maybe it was because of Rasmus or maybe it was because I didn't believe Ezra capable of being faithful. Whatever the reason for my immunity, Ezra's desire to rekindle what we had didn't interest me at all. The fairy wasn't even good fantasy material.

I turned my head and watched Ezra's car drive away. "How can Ezra be more powerful than Conn? The Dagda said only djinn were more powerful than the demon king."

Mulan shrugged. “There is big lightning in fairy aura. He shines like god but hides it well.”

“Ezra? Are ya saying Ezra shines like a god?” I repeated it because I didn’t sense anything at all like that from Ezra.

“Yes,” Mulan said with a nod. “Fairy glows with power like your wicked ancestor.”

Part of me wanted to laugh at the idea of Mulan comparing Ezra to The Dagda. She didn’t feel the same level of respect for him as I did. The other part of me wanted to know what Ezra’s deal was with his fairy family and what his true agenda was for spending hundreds of years in the human realm.

I still considered Ezra and I friends of some sort and wished I could ignore Mulan’s observation. But I’d never known the Wu Shaman to be wrong when she was reading a person.

Why would Ezra hide his true power from all of us? Why was he able to hide it from me?

Fairies liked bragging too much to hide anything. Or at least, that had been my observation. He’d bragged about bedding me to all who would listen about our lackluster time together. We’d stayed friends and partners in our work, but I’d moved on to other men without any regrets. Once I’d stopped being angry, Ezra’s infidelity hadn’t been worth being upset over.

My attention got snagged by Dylan talking. I looked down the table at the far darrig. Dylan had kept quiet while Ezra was here and I’d nearly forgotten him. His size seemed like that of a child’s today but it wasn’t only a matter of stature. Dylan’s energy was diminished. His depression over the relic had made him nearly invisible.

“Sorry, Dylan. I was still thinking of what Mulan said. Will ya explain that again? I want to hear what ya have to say.”

His smile was full of understanding and I felt guilty for making him repeat himself. “Fairies collect power from our realm. That’s why they come here. They don’t care about us. They pretend to care. After their time ends here, they return to the mound portal and take their collected power across the veil to their people.”

“Seriously?” I asked.

Dylan nodded. “Harvesting the power is a painful process but a good deal of them still volunteer to come collect it. Here—your fairy has a lot of power. There—he will hand his power over and be less than normal for a while. This is what his people do to keep each other in check. Only a rare few are allowed to travel back and forth without that agenda.”

My brain hurt again. I was going to have to start carrying headache pills to survive what I was learning. “Why is this information about fairies not common knowledge?”

Dylan smiled patiently. “I didn’t learn this in school. My great-grandmother was part fairy. She was told she could live among the fairy folk if she brought them power. But she knew all fairies lie to get their way. She was the one who told me that a fairy is only given one chance to walk among humankind.”

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Now I was starting to see why Ezra might have come here. In Ezra's mind, he and I had unfinished business. "So when Ezra returns to his family, ya think he'll never be able to come back here."

Shrugging, Dylan smiled at me. "My great-grandmother told my grandmother who told my mother that seeing the land of her fairy ancestor had tempted her but knowing they could trap her there kept her from agreeing. She feared she would have lived out her far darrig life alone and powerless against her captors. Luckily for her, and our entire family, my great-grandfather talked her into staying here with him. His love for her was strong."

"So some know what fairies are really like but the majority of us still accept when they show up volunteering to help. Why are we so gullible about them?"

Dylan shrugged his small shoulders. "Fairies cleverly use their charm to make the people they interact with forget to question their motives. Humans never find out the truth. Magickals seldom notice and can't be bothered when they do, since fairies don't openly threaten them in any way. The only reason I don't suspect the fairy is behind the relic's death is that he was genuinely afraid of the angel magick that might still be in it."

I snorted. "I never heard about any of this fairy stuff in school. Someone needs to write this down. I'm ensuring there are records of what it's like to interact with guardians. Now I'll be submitting this stuff about fairies too."

Dylan blinked at me. "I do not know much about the ones you call guardians. My family calls them 'ancient ones' and they warned me to avoid them any way I could."

“Ya don’t have to avoid Rasmus. But watch yerself around his brethren.”

Dylan blinked. “The ancient ones have brethren?”

“And sister-en,” I said, grinning at him.

Across from me, Mulan snorted. “That is not real word.”

I turned to smirk at her. “Are ya seriously throwing stones at my word choices? Really? Don’t be tossing yer underwear around all over until I leave, Mulan.”

I couldn’t help smiling widely when a true smile bloomed on Mulan’s face. Goddess, I wish Conn had been present to see it. He was losing his mind dealing with her angst.

Dylan chuckled at me and Mulan arguing. “Visiting fairies work hard to make the truth seem like a false tale. I don’t see the power in the fairy that the Mighty Wu sees with her clever eyes. Truth sight is an enviable skill.”

Mulan lifted an eyebrow at Dylan’s compliment but said nothing back to him. Typically, she would have preened when someone praised her powers. Sometimes she even smirked if she thought it would annoy me. At the moment, Mulan acted as bored by the discussion of fairies as Ezra had seemed with my request for his help.

Goddess, the Wu Shaman was such a brooder.

I turned back to Dylan. “So fairies use subtle influence over a very long period to make us forget what they’re here to do,” I summed up with a shrug. “Humans do that as well, just not with magick. They use boring television, repetitive news, and social media rants to plant ideas in each other’s heads. Ya should never underestimate the power of normal words to influence people.”

“Exactly,” Dylan replied.

Yes, I understood all that quite well, but I didn’t like thinking about Ezra fooling me into thinking he was nothing but a helpful fairy. How badly had he fooled me?

I lost that train of thought when a seething Conn stomped back into the room. “Why the deep frown?”

His gaze drilled into mine. “Ezra is hiding something big, Aran. He told me to stop you from going after Hisser. Why would he tell me to do that? You were the only magickal capable of catching him. I was unsuccessful in getting the fairy to tell me his reasons.”

I had no idea either and I said so. “I got the same feeling but can’t imagine what he’s covering up. Tell me something, Conn. Do ya think Ezra’s power is as great as yers?”

“Yes. It’s been that way since you met him,” Conn said.

I blinked in surprise. “If ya knew that, why did ya never tell me?”

“Because you took him as a lover and The Dagda forbade me from getting between you and the men you bedded.”

“Well,that’sa stupid rule,” I said. And then I gasped in realization. “That’s why Ezra never shared magick with me. I would have known the truth about his powers if he had.”

Conn nodded. “Fairies serve humanity for the sole purpose of gathering power which they take back to their people. Ezra is at the end of his service in our realm. He can’t afford to use any of his power. Whatever he promised to deliver to his people, that’s what he has to carry across the veil.”

I threw up my hands. “And ya didn’t think that was something I needed to know?”

Conn shrugged. “Not as long as he left our realm peacefully, and you never suspected. Ezra was both a lover and friend to you, but I was not surprised when he refused to help us with Hisser. I expected him to confess to you the reason why, though. He likes to think he has the upper hand and to brag about what he’s done.”

My head was shaking in denial. It did that sometimes even when I knew it was a useless action. “Would ya lose a fight with him if he engaged ya?”

Shrugging, Conn looked off. “A fight between us would be brutal, but I doubt he would risk one. If he loses any of his power, his entire family will suffer for his actions. Fairy society is both strict and self-serving. This is common in societies run by the children of gods.”

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My head felt ready to explode. Getting hit in the head with a troll club would have hurt less. “What else have ya not chosen to tell me? Mulan thinks Ezra came to Salem to win me back.”

Sighing, Conn sat back down at the table and stared at me. “You don’t want to hear this, but I agree with her. I think it vexes your fairy that you feel nothing for him anymore. It wouldn’t surprise me if he arrogantly thought he could pick up with you where Jack left off. The guardian’s interest bothers me too, but at least Rasmus likes you for you.”

If it had been only the three of us present, I’d have bragged to Mulan and Conn about all the amazing things Rasmus and I did in bed just to hear them laugh. But I couldn’t acknowledge the pleasure I’d found with Rasmus in front of Dylan.

“Vexes?” I asked, snickering at Conn’s word choice. “If I vexed Ezra, it was an accident. I’m saving my vexing skills for when Rasmus returns.”

Conn’s lips flattened into the same thin line they took when I pretended to be obtuse. I shrugged as he stared at me. “Ya know I’m not comfortable talking about my sex life.”

Conn narrowed his gaze as he glared openly at me. “You’re a powerful witch, Aran, and as much of a descendant of a god as the fairy is. You don’t see it but your power is nearly as great as Ezra’s. The Dagda spent centuries imbuing that stone you carry with his energy. Only one of your predecessors ever tapped into it because the others couldn’t handle it. Who knows what effect taking it inside your body will have? I look forward to your discovery of its true purpose, and yet I dread it at the same

time.”

“Who was the only predecessor able to use it?”

“Cermait.”

My eyes widened. “The Dagda’s own son? Goddess, that was centuries and centuries ago. Someone else had to have used it since him.”

Conn shook his head. “All others were content to rely upon me. I advised them all to embrace the stone’s power but no one before you listened. The others wore it like a talisman, just as your grandmother did. In the beginning, you didn’t listen to me, either. You only put the stone inside you to keep Jack from stealing it again.”

I bit my lip and tried not to look as guilty as I felt. Everything Conn said was true. Most of what I did in my life was to fight back from something Jack did to me. I needed to move past the anger I felt for my ex-husband for my own sake. How was I supposed to do that when I still hated him?

“Your relic sleeps,” Dylan said, pointing at my chest. “It rests near your heart, Aran. Your relic allows me to see it when my relic is nearby. I bet the fairy sees your relic too. Maybe he came to see you hoping to steal its power.”

I hoped Dylan was wrong because the only way Ezra could get to the Dagda stone would be to rip it out of my dead body. Conn was right that I put it inside me to keep Jack’s power-hungry hands off of it.

I put my hand over where it lay in my chest and felt the skin heat under my hand. Keeping myself alive was also keeping the relic alive. I had thought it would be safer inside me.

My wariness about Ezra coming to the States to tell me of Hisser's escape suddenly made more sense. I'd nearly convinced myself that my mistrust of Ezra's motive was a PTSD issue leftover from being in prison for so long.

Had the stone been trying to warn me? Was I guilty of not listening to it? I nearly wished it could talk to me the way Da's ring had. But that would be creepy. Right?

Then I had another thought.

Had Ezra used his fairy influence on Ben to convince my mostly human boss to leave so he could substitute for him? Was he playing at being boss to keep tabs on me?

I knew the fairy too well to believe he'd have stolen power from me and run off without bragging about doing so. He enjoyed not only being powerful but being known for it. Like Jack, Ezra liked being famous.

Despite his encouragement for us to do nothing, Ezra had to suspect I would ignore his advice and track down Hisser anyway. That's what I'd done in the past, even after killing Hisser's witch lover. I felt sure the snake shifter had recruited a whole new batch of crazed followers by now. His tricks would be stronger and more convincing of his fake godliness. Desperate humans looking for a spiritual leader wouldn't stand a chance.

I rubbed my forehead. My suspicions about Ezra gave me the kind of headache that made me feel sick.

Goddess, I hoped Fiona chose better lovers for herself than I had chosen. It had taken me over twenty years to figure out that I had terrible taste in men. If I didn't like sex so much, I would give men up completely.

But I did.

So why even entertain the thought? The only thing on my mind was wondering when Rasmus was coming back.

Chapter Fifteen

It turned out that all the chaos at the main house had a purpose. The foyer looked like something ya'd see in a New York hotel when I walked back inside.

In the short time my team had met with Ezra, Henry had transformed the entire entry space. Leather couches and coffee tables were positioned under windows on each side of the stairway. Multiple tall valets waited for coats to be hung on them.

A large, round, and highly polished table now filled the center of the space. A massive green vase of expensive flowers rested majestically on it. The tall vase somehow directed yer gaze immediately to the dual stairways leading to the upper floors.

I'd planned to grab a nap and see if I could make this headache go away. Unfortunately, I got ambushed by both Henry and Gale before I could turn left. They asked if we could talk in the library for a few minutes. I agreed with the stipulation that someone make tea.

I figured the demon couple had made some decision about which floor of the house they wanted to claim as their own and wanted to discuss it with me. All I could do was say one more time that I didn't care what rooms they chose.

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When I made a few snarky comments about not being able to afford to replace the beautiful flowers, Henry informed me the blooms were enchanted to look beautiful until someone lifted them free of the vase. He assured me they only required replacing every three months or so.

Honestly? I'd break my own rule about using magick for myself to keep from breaking the bank to replace those flowers every week. But I knew enough to keep my opinions about the uselessness of fresh flowers to myself.

In a few short days, I'd learned Henry ran the place like a general. I'd also discovered that Gale defined the standards Henry gleefully enforced. The house still didn't feel like a home to me, but its current five-star hotel look suited it well.

Instead of awing visitors with its vast emptiness, the house now would impress anyone who entered. I'd certainly been impressed when I'd walked through the door.

But the house was grand and I was not. I did not look like its owner.

The nicer the house looked—the more like a visitor I felt. Henry and Gale fit the space much better than I did.

Rather than head to my room and meet them later, I went directly to the library to wait. Since Dylan and I last sat here, the library had acquired the soothing smell of lemon oil, lots of books on the shelves, and a plethora of tasteful decorations artfully placed for maximum ambiance.

A masculine desk that would have fit Rasmus or Conn in demon form was placed off

to one side of the room near a window now draped with several layers of textured fabrics. I got the feeling the desk was for show and not intended for daily use. No energy had been left on it yet, which meant it was probably new.

The room contained two matching leather couches exactly like the ones in the foyer. The library couches faced each other with a substantial wooden coffee table separating them. The furniture created the same kind of opulence I'd seen in Zara's penthouse suite. It was nothing I would have chosen on my own, yet it seemed completely appropriate for the space.

Two very comfortable-looking armchairs with small side tables next to them flanked the fireplace. I found the chairs appealing and could easily imagine myself sitting by a crackling fire while sipping a glass of Jamieson's. When I sat down to test out one of the chairs, it instantly and discreetly reduced its size until my feet touched the floor.

I stared at Henry as he entered the room. "How did ya spell the chair to resize itself when I sat in it? I didn't know demons had such magick. This is a miracle."

"I know a witch," Henry said.

What I heard was a New Yorker saying, "I know a guy." He glared at me a little when I laughed, but I couldn't help myself. As long as Henry had been alive, I bet he knew a lot of useful people.

"Ya amaze me, Henry. I don't know any witch that could do this. I certainly couldn't do this."

"Larissa specializes in wood. She's a Black Forest witch from Germany. Her spell works specifically on wood, even if it's been made into furniture. It will do almost anything she asks of it."

I rubbed my hands over the arms of the chair. “I think your wood witch is worth every penny ya paid her.”

“I never pay Larissa. We trade favors instead. But I’d rather not divulge my arrangement with her.”

I held up my hand. “Then I’ll just thank ya for being thoughtful and let things be.”

Henry rewarded me with a smile. When he went to one of the couches to sit, I reluctantly rose from the chair and went to sit on the opposite couch. Both were the kind of modern furniture that seemed to fit everyone whatever size they were. I wanted to ask if the couch was magickal as well but didn’t want to risk the new peace between Henry and me.

I looked up when Gale sashayed through the door with a tray loaded with tea and treats. That woman’s walk in those heels she favored issued a siren call I imagined few men ignored. She smiled, set the tea tray on the coffee table, and poured tea for all of us.

“How do you take your tea, Aran?”

The demoness had sent tea service by someone working for her every other time I’d requested it. Today she seemed determined to play hostess. I had no problem with that. “I drink mine plain most of the time, but I have a headache today. A little honey would be appreciated.”

Gale added a generous helping of honey before handing me my drink. I noticed right away that she hadn’t served me with a dainty porcelain cup that would need constant refilling. She gave me a mug like most people would use for coffee.

To keep myself from asking about her teacup decisions, I thanked Gale and leaned

back a bit in my seat. But as usual, my mouth and my brain warred over what my tongue wanted to say. Out came the truth of what I was feeling. “The house looks amazing.”

Henry lifted an eyebrow. “I can tell that it doesn’t feel like a home to you.”

I stopped sipping to stare at him over my mug of tea. “Are ya reading my mind, Henry?”

He breathed in quickly and released it slowly. “I’m trying not to, Aran, but you think quite loudly.”

I lowered my mug and giggled. “Rasmus and Conn have mentioned that as well. Do ya know someone who could teach me how not to think so loud?”

“I think I know a guy,” Henry said.

I pushed down my urge to giggle again. His lord-of-the-manner tone had me wanting to laugh harder.

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Henry cleared his throat before speaking. “Would you like me to make an appointment for you? I’m sure he’d be willing to come here for a short stay. Conn told me your work prevents you from having much personal time.”

Straight-faced at last, I shrugged and smiled. “Conn is not wrong. We do have work lulls, but right now, that’s not the case.”

Henry glanced at Gale and then back at me. “Are you satisfied with what we’ve done?”

Chuckling, I waved at the chair. “That chair is the best furniture experience of my entire life. And the house looks beautiful. Are these all yer personal things?”

Henry nodded. “They’re from our businesses They’ve been in storage.”

“Not storage exactly,” Gale said, joining our conversation.

I grinned at her mild correction. “They look like they belong here.”

“They were the furnishings for a hotel in Boston that we sold. The new owner wanted to get rid of all the beautiful pieces we’d collected.”

Just as I was ready to ask if they were hoteliers, Henry jumped in to explain. “Those working for us are members of our caste. Every few hundred years, we allow a new caste to spin off with one of our properties. Connlander visits them regularly. He typically combines those visits with his liaisons.”

“Henry, be discreet. Aran doesn’t need to know the details of Conn’s paramours.”

“Paramours,” I said as I giggled at the term. “Ya aren’t telling me anything I don’t know. I’ve been with Conn many times when he’s picked up women. Why do ya think he chooses to look like me? No one ever thinks we’re anything but siblings.”

“I suppose that will change now that he’s settled down with one woman again.”

I chuckled. “I seriously hope so for his sake. He’s promised fidelity to a magickal who casts demons out for a living.”

I smiled as I sipped my wonderful tea. “I don’t keep Conn on a leash, so he’ll do whatever he thinks best. He honors our contract and comes when I call. That’s all I have a right to expect. I’m an only child and he’s been passing himself off as my brother for a couple of decades. It hasn’t felt like playing pretend for a long time. I consider him family.”

Gale smiled softly and sighed. “You are nothing like the others.”

Henry instantly turned to Gale. “She is like Cermait.”

“Well, yes,” Gale agreed. “Aran is a bit like him.”

Henry turned to face me fully. “Beauty should not be divorced from comfort. Even though you appreciate the beauty, Gale and I can tell you are uncomfortable with it. I propose that we connect your bedroom to the room adjoining it. We will turn that end of the wing into your private living quarters with furnishings you choose for yourself. At least part of this residence should be a true sanctuary for you. I hope in time you will make use of all the spaces. This property is quite remarkable for what you paid for it.”

I blew out a breath as I looked at both of them. “Conn, Mulan, and I bought this place as an investment. I’d love a smaller space of my own but I wouldn’t want to do anything to jeopardize our resell value.”

Henry shook his head. “It could only benefit the next owners to have a first-floor master suite with a cozy sitting room. It will add to the value of this house.”

I smiled. “If that’s true, then I’d love to take yer suggestion.”

Henry held up a hand. “I’ll take care of all the details about re-appropriating the space. When I finish, all you will have to do is choose your furniture.”

“Thank you. Since we’re being honest here, Henry, I’m also not comfortable being taken care of so much. Please know that any lack of gratitude I might show is just me feeling overwhelmed by yer generosity.”

“Why would someone taking care of you make you uncomfortable?” Gale asked.

“I guess it’s because all this lavish living is so foreign to me. I’m a simple woman. Gale looks like she belongs here more than I do. More often than not, I’m wearing boots covered in blood or some other disgusting body fluid. I’m in constant need of medical care. Elegance is not part of my DNA makeup.”

Henry pondered me the way a scientist ponders a strange, new idea. I could see in his gaze the moment he made some sort of decision. “Perhaps there’s a way we can look at this house as a mutually beneficial business venture instead of as a museum or hotel.”

I held out my mug when Gale offered me a refill. I even took the cookie she handed me.

Was I being set up? Would I even know if I was?

Though small, the cookie was very good and I ate it in three bites.

“Are you always so mistrustful?” Gale asked with no venom at all. “It’s tea and cookies, Aran. If I wanted to poison you, I would be far more discreet.”

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Sighing, I stared at her. “I’m going to blame my bad manners on being in prison for seven years.” My gaze turned to Henry. “Call that teacher for me. I’m tired of broadcasting every thought and feeling to whoever is within receiving distance.”

To my great surprise, Henry laughed. “I’ll make the arrangements and let you know what I get worked out. He enjoys making a bargain. I’ll be careful about what I promise him.”

I nodded over my mug. “Tell me more about yer business venture.”

Henry smiled again. I blinked and pretended not to be affected by the complete change in his face. Conn liked being handsome and he controlled how much, but Henry was stunning when he smiled. Poor Gale probably never stood a chance.

“Once a quarter, Gale and I like to invite special guests for a long weekend. Essentially, they are retreat weekends for magickals who will pay quite handsomely for the reprieve from real life that we give them.”

I chuckled. “Do ya offer them legal or illegal entertainment?”

“Mostly legal,” Gale said with a small smile.

I smiled and laughed a little at her answer. Despite her occasional haughtiness, I genuinely liked Conn’s mother. “So long as we keep them to mostly legal, I’ll be good with yer plans.”

More relaxed now, Henry drank his tea. “You should consider the pay we would get

from those weekends to be our salary for taking care of you and whoever else you choose to live in the house. Conn said others were coming.”

I sighed heavily and nodded. “Unfortunately, that is true. The far darrig will be leaving shortly, but I’ve got a female guardian in human form coming sometime soon. She’ll be my responsibility for the next five years. I may let her move into the blue house at some point, but until I’m comfortable I need to keep her close by.”

Henry nodded. “When you trust us more, perhaps you’ll tell us why the ancient ones are so drawn to you.”

I shrugged. “I don’t mind telling ya now. There are a lot of reasons. Rasmus and I met when I saved him. Human scientists had captured him and made him forget what he was. His guardian brethren never got off their neutral asses to do anything to release him.”

“Did they leave him to suffer as some sort of punishment?” Henry asked.

“No, they were waiting to see how bad the situation got. They do shit like that on the regular. Goddess, I didn’t even know what a guardian was back then. I just saw Rasmus being used by my ex-husband and his military people. I felt compelled to help him. It seems like a lifetime ago even though it’s only been a matter of months.”

“So when the ancient one remembered his true self he returned and claimed you as his lover. How romantic,” Gale said with a small, pleased laugh.

I studied my cup and thought about it. “Yes, I suppose that is how it happened. Rasmus and I have gone through a lot since we found each other. As ya probably noticed, Rasmus comes and goes from my life without a thought or care. It’s plain to anyone with eyes that I can’t count on him being here day after day.”

“Does his absence bother you?” Gale asked.

I grunted into my tea mug. “Conn is the only male I’ve ever been able to count on. Well, Conn and my Da—Goddess rest his soul.”

“Well, Henry and I are here for you now,” Gale said briskly, with another smile and a nod. “We will make sure you never lack for creature comforts. It’s the least we can do in exchange for you allowing us to stay. If the ancient one doesn’t return to meet your needs, we’ll help you find another suitable male.”

I grinned at the offer. “If the guardian were that easy to replace, I’d have given up on Rasmus long ago. He has my heart now—the bastard.”

“I can certainly relate to that irritation,” Gale said softly, earning her a withering glance from Henry.

It hurt me not to laugh at their dynamic but I managed to hold it in. I hoped this mega politeness we used with each other wouldn’t become a habit. Laughing at life’s strangeness was my favorite way to de-stress.

I finished my tea and set the mug back on the tray. “Thank you for the tea and the talk. I feel better. Dylan will be staying until we solve the current case that involves him.”

“We have created several sets of guest quarters for your visitors on the second floor. We will also create a common room where you can entertain them up there. This should keep your private quarters free of their energy. When we clean we also clear the spaces of lingering emotions and questions. As a witch, I assume you don’t mind the smell of white sage and palo santo.”

“No. I use them all the time. Where are the two of ya living in the house?”

“We’re still trying out bedroom suites,” Gale said.

I waved a hand. “Don’t just claim a bedroom. Take the whole third floor. All I will ever need is the second floor for guests. I hear there are several rooms and bedrooms in the basement as well. If ya want to set those up for yer paying guests, feel free. They’re nearest to the pool. I’d love a sauna too. An exercise room also would be nice down there if there was space.”

Henry looked at me over his tea mug. “Do you exercise often?”

I shook my head. “Not really, but I’ve always thought it was a good idea. Mostly I train outside. My practice swords can get deadly indoors. Plus, martial arts moves take up a lot of room.”

“Perhaps it would be acceptable to furnish a gym in the house you plan to make your office.”

“Did Conn text you about that?”

Henry grinned, drank his tea, and casually tapped his temple.

“I see,” I said with a grin of my own. “I do have one personal favor to ask of ya both. It’s above and beyond all we’ve discussed, but I’m desperate.”

They didn’t comment on my statements. They just patiently waited for me to find words.

I released a breath and let it out. “Mulan’s family is coming for a visit. They drive her crazy. I’d like to put them on the second floor and assign them a keeper—maybe two of them. I’m happy to pay those persons to keep her family from bothering Mulan any more than necessary. I thought about asking ya to drug their food but Conn doesn’t think that’s a repeatable option day after day until they leave.”

Henry snickered and shook his head. “I think we can put some of our younger caste members on that task. They will keep the Wu Shaman’s annoying family entertained. We wish to care for her as well. No payment will be necessary.”

They made everything so easy. I was going to have to work not to lean on them too much. “That’s wonderful news, Henry. I’m going to head over to Mulan’s and tell her. Her brooding about their visit is getting on my last nerve as well as Conn’s. Maybe if I can take some worry off her shoulders we can tackle the job we still have to do.”

“What is your job?” Gale asked, looking sly. “You don’t have to tell me details. I’m

just curious.”

I rose and walked out of the library with them. The caffeinated tea wouldn't let me nap now but I felt much lighter. Best of all, I felt headache-free. “My current task is to find and kill a delusional snake shifter who thinks he's a god. The last time I caught him, I put him in prison. His power has grown a lot since then. This may turn into one of those bloody clothes times that I mentioned.”

Gale giggled at my description. She seemed so pleased to know my life was violent and my work was bloody.

At least one of us was amused by my life. Too bad it wasn't me.

Chapter Sixteen

“Didn't ya hear what I said? Henry is going to take care of everything.”

Mulan's gaze darkened in anger and I didn't get it. Why wasn't the woman happier about my good news?

She leaned toward me and stared hard. “Did you sell your soul for demon favors?”

Maybe it was the super serious way she asked the question but I burst out laughing. When she cursed my parents in English for giving birth to me, I laughed even harder. Eventually, I had to wipe tears from my eyes between my laughter slowing down and starting up all over again.

“Why do ya care if I did, Mulan? It's mysoul.”

“You are very bad friend,” Mulan said sternly.

I held my stomach as I tried to reign in my amusement but her attitude was killing me. “Henry is not going to try any tricks with either of us. Why are ya letting yer family make ya this nuts? Ya’re not being yer normally terse and confident self.”

“You will soon see why I am so cursed.”

“Ya talk about your family like they’re demons ya failed to cast out. ”

Mulan snorted before glaring at me. “They are worse than demons. Do you think I’m not smart? I had plans for them,” she spat at me.

I grinned at her. “I bet ya did. Were ya planning to stand over them shaking yer staff to put them to sleep every couple of hours? I’ve seen ya do it to demons. Maybe it would work with yer parents.”

Mulan looked at me and blinked several times. “That was not part of plan but would work.”

I rolled my eyes and made sure she saw me doing it. “That would only work if ya don’t intend to live yer life while they’re here. I’ve never seen ya show an ounce of fear about anyone else. Why are ya making yerself crazy over them? Talk to me.”

Mulan grunted. “Parents demand honor and duty. As their child, I must give it.”

I leaned forward and pounded the table with one finger. “Well, I think ya should be able to demand consideration from them in return for that honor. No one would consider what they did to ya when their business failed as treating ya honorably. Instead, they blamed ya for it and practically banished ya from China. If ya ask me, they haven’t done their parental duty, now have they?”

“What do you know of my life, witch? You have dead god ancestors who visit to help

you. You have nice mother who nags about your bad hair. I can only dream of mother like yours.”

While Bridget O'Malley wasn't as nice as Mulan thought, she was a great mother, probably the best I could ever have hoped to have. We'd had our disagreements over the years, as all mothers and daughters do, but Ma never tried to run my life. This was why I wasn't telling Fiona how to run hers. The women in my family reserved their interventions for times when it looked as if ya were truly screwing up.

Ma had warned me about Jack but I hadn't been able to listen. When she warned me about Da's ring, though, I had paid attention. When she told me something was wrong with Fiona, I knew better than to ignore her instincts. Good Goddess, I even got my haircut when Ma insisted I take better care of myself. Plus, I got a best friend from Ma's pushing... and the kind of hair that behaved itself.

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On the subject of Rasmus, Ma had so remained completely silent, which I admit had kept me awake a night or two. Either she had nothing to say about my guardian lover or she didn't deem him to be a problem. I didn't know her reasons for keeping quiet but I appreciated her restraint.

So what kind of empathy could I feel about Mulan's ungrateful parents? It wasn't my fault that I had won the good parents lottery and Mulan was emotionally bankrupt with hers.

I rubbed a hand over my face to erase the last of my amusement before I switched to glaring.

"If ya intend to suffer their abuse while they're staying under my roof, ya'll have to do so when I'm not around to see it happening. I'll spell yer parents in a heartbeat, Mulan. Rather than us destroying our property with some mega-bitch fight, ya should give Henry and Gale a chance to help. Conn's parents want to help ya. Ya should let them try before ya prostrate yerself."

Mulan grunted in open disgust. "Why do you mention man's body part? You always confuse me."

"No, that's a prostrate. When I said prostrate, I meant lie down at yer parents's feet so they can walk all over ya. It's sort of a metaphor."

Mulan lifted a hand. "Then why did you not say that?"

I sighed and closed my eyes. "Do ya want me to tell Henry ya're good with them

staying at the big house or not?”

Walking back to the table, Mulan slumped into a chair. “Why do you bother to help me? My parents are my problem—not yours.”

I blew out a breath. “Look, I’m trying to be a supportive friend, ya dozy cow. So let me be one. My house is like a hotel anyway. It won’t hurt me to use it as one while yer parents are here. It was part of my deal with Conn’s parents.”

“What deal? Did they ask for soul as payment?”

I rolled my eyes at her mistrust of Conn’s parents. Head shrinkers had a term for what she was doing but I couldn’t think of the word. That was just as well because I would have had to explain to Mulan anyway.

“I made a deal I’ll share with ya once ya agree to let Henry and Gale help. We’ve wasted twenty minutes now on a no-brainer decision, Mighty Wu. Get over yerself. No one’s soul is at risk and everyone needs help now and again.”

After spending an hour talking Mulan into going along, I finally returned to the house and snuck to my room before anyone could stop me. Someone had started removing furniture and curtains from both rooms but the bed and my make-shift moving box side tables remained.

I slipped off my shoes and crawled on top of the covers.

Sleep came quickly which just proved how exhausted I was.

The nap did me good and my headache was gone.

The urge to find Hisser before he did something terrible returned along with the

realization that finding him might require me to take special measures.

Conn tracked me down on my walk to visit the demon wolves. We stood watching them play for a while. I wanted the wolves to have complete run of the paddock. I'd also had Conn set a boundary around it that they couldn't cross without him knowing.

Surprising us both, they hadn't even tried.

Henry had assigned a young demon male the task of watching over them. I'd caught him throwing a frisbee for them to chase and the sight of the three of them playing made me smile.

That was probably the first time I'd felt happy about having all this space. It had also made me homesick for Grandma Murieann's farm. I hoped the family living there was building the same wonderful memories that I carried in my heart.

Conn leaned one arm on the paddock fence as we talked. "Maybe you should use your white feather and get a real answer."

I shook my head. "No, I'd rather not call Orlin unless there's no other option. Every time I involve him, my life gets worse, not better."

Sure, it had crossed my mind the second day Rasmus was gone to sound an alarm that I knew Orlin would answer. But Rasmus had plainly said he lacked any way to communicate with me when he was with his fellow guardians.

He'd been gone a week now without being in touch. I could have died in that time and he wouldn't have known it until he returned. Orlin said no others were watching me now and I believed him.

With so much happening, I had no energy left over to miss the guardian anyway. Like

every time Rasmus had been gone, I quickly got used to sleeping alone, having no sex, and not having anyone to talk to about my day.

Goddess, I'd be very glad when Fiona returned. Helping her settle into her quaint yellow cottage would give me someone to talk to at least. Maybe I should call her. But as quickly as the idea occurred to me, I remembered the last time I tried to call. It had taken six hours to even get a text reply.

So no... I'd best wait for her to check in with me. Fiona said she'd get in touch when she could, and I had to trust that she meant it. Her excuses about not communicating weren't any less believable than Rasmus and his "time is different there" nonsense.

I was sitting on my bed feeling sorry for myself when Henry came to collect me for dinner. He'd insisted all of us eat together in the dining room this evening.

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Since I had no idea which room he'd chosen for the dining room, I just followed him. Conn and Mulan were already there and sipping drinks. Dylan was missing, but when Henry disappeared, I had a feeling my far darrig guest would be joining us shortly.

Figuring I deserved a break, I chose the end seat at the long table where Conn and Mulan sat side by side. They were chatting about their unique and delicious cocktails. A smiling demon hurried into the dining room with one for me on a tray. He set it in front of me and hurried off after acknowledging my thanks.

I didn't imbibe often but something to dull my senses sounded good this evening. Maybe it would stop me from wondering if Rasmus would return before I had to hunt down Hisser without his help.

I lifted my drink to eye level to inspect it. Mine looked different from Conn's and Mulan's.

Conn smiled at me and held up his drink. "Frank is one of Henry's bartenders-in-training. He hand-crafts each drink specifically for the individual he's serving. No two drinks are alike. He asked if he could practice on us this evening and I agreed. I hope that was okay."

"Is this drink going to leave me functional?" I asked.

Conn nodded and smiled. "Not only will it leave you functional but it will enhance your enjoyment of life. I believe Henry told him you'd been having a lot of headaches lately."

I smiled back at Conn. “I’ve done the aspirin and liquor combo before. I suppose I’ll sleep well tonight.”

Trusting Conn was second nature to me so I lifted the drink and sipped. It tasted like pineapple but there was something slightly fizzy about it. I took several more sips before I forced myself to set it down. It was delicious and I could tell my eyesight had sharpened. It was like I’d been sick for a long time and my body finally realized I was well again.

I turned to Mulan who smiled and lifted her drink. “It’s good to see ya smiling again. Are ya feeling better about life now?”

She nodded and held my gaze. “I know I am not easy woman.”

“Neither am I. I wasn’t judging,” I said, waving her apology away. “Are ya enjoying yer drink?”

“I feel happy for first time in days.”

Grinning over that admission, I looked at Conn. “How’s yer drink?”

“It keeps me from wanting to kill people and things. I’m feeling quite peaceful.”

I chuckled at the oddity of our trio and picked up my tasty drink again. “He makes a tasty headache cure. Maybe I’ll ask Frank for one of those peaceful drinks next time.”

I heard myself say “next time” like I drank cocktails and ate in formal dining rooms every day. There was a real danger that I could get used to being pampered. I don’t know why I saw that as a bad thing, but I did.

Then suddenly I wondered who was buying the groceries. What was the deal with all

of Henry and Gale's people serving us? Were Henry and Gale using us to train them for hotel service?

"The short answer is yes—the demons here are in training. To answer your other concern, Mulan and I set up a budget to provide Henry and Gale with caretaking money. We used the money you gave us for the troll jobs. Henry's going to take care of the utilities as well. I told him we wanted solar panels installed on the roofs of all the houses. That will be a huge selling point in five years," Conn said, breaking into my musings.

My sigh was loud. "Ya can't imagine how much it annoys me when ya extract things from my head, Conn. I'm thankful Henry knows a guy who can fix me."

Conn laughed. "You'll find Henry is very resourceful."

"So long as his teacher shows me how to keep Rasmus and ya out of my head, I'll be thrilled. I prefer to privately ponder my life and not broadcast my every stray thought."

Dylan appeared at the doorway and stopped. Henry motioned to him to enter. The far darrig looked at the three of us strangely. An echo of my discomfort sat in his expression. I don't think he'd seen all of smiling before.

Hating all this stuffy formality, I waved Dylan over to sit across from Conn and Mulan. "Come join us, Dylan. We're having cocktails like rich people on television. Henry's bartender is using us as guinea pigs tonight."

Snorting at my teasing, Dylan sat in the chair across from Conn and Mulan. Sure enough, Frank soon appeared at his elbow and set a glass of liquid in front of him. Something thick and golden swirled in its depth.

The three of us watched him closely as the suspicious far darrig thanked Frank. Dylan took a sip, pondered it, and then took another. Surprising us into gasping, the far darrig grew in his seat, clothes and all. It was a slow and easy process, but ya could watch it happening. Dylan stared down at himself and then at his drink.

I laughed. “Yer cocktail was made to meet yer specific needs.”

Dylan ducked his head and shook it. “This is so strange, Aran. I haven’t been able to stop wondering if my size had anything to do with my failure to protect the relic.”

Mulan and I looked at each other, looked back at Dylan, and then burst out laughing. The far darrig’s head snapped up to stare at our rudeness.

I held up a hand. “Look at us, Dylan. Why would Mulan and I ever think ya being short had anything to do with what happened? Ya need to just accept that a thief stole yer relic and a wicked person drained the power from it. Ya could have been a giant and it wouldn’t have stopped them from taking its power.”

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The now six-foot-tall Dylan shook his head. “Am I as big as my human form?”

“I would say so,” I said, smiling as I lifted my glass and saluted him. “I got a headache remedy in my cocktail. Yers looks way more fun.”

Dylan sighed. “No one gets to keep any secrets around you, do they?”

I chuckled. “No, but embarrassment isn’t fatal. If ya pick up a random thought from me tonight, please blame it on the drink. I’ll be getting that problem fixed soon. Henry knows a guy.”

We chatted until dinner came marching into the room. Four white-gloved people carried large plates with shiny domed covers keeping the food warm.

I snorted at them. It was like a scene from a movie.

After they set our dinners in front of us and hustled out, we looked at each other instead of the plates. Fighting not to giggle at our mutual discomfort, I cleared my throat. “Do ya think we all got the same thing? We’ll lift the covers on a count of three. One. Two. Three!”

As I shouted the last number, we each lifted our domed cover to find a thick juicy burger sitting proudly beside a giant mound of sweet potato fries. I suspected the far darrig’s was a meatless version since he’d confessed to not being a carnivore.

It was too bad Henry and Gale weren’t present to enjoy our shock over the common food served with such a flourish.

Despite how big the house was, they must have heard us laughing in the kitchen.

I hoped they were pleased with our reaction because we certainly were pleased with them.

Chapter Seventeen

Gale sought me out after dinner to see if I wanted to take a walk. I'd mentioned in passing that I needed to find a secluded spot for my witching. Normally, I would have asked Conn to help me choose a space, but I didn't want to keep him from enjoying his Wu Shaman's improved mood.

Missing the stupid guardian tonight more than I wanted to admit, I jumped at the chance for some company. The sun would be setting shortly so I asked her to wait until I switched my shoes.

We stopped along the way and let the demon wolves out of the paddock. They trotted beside us as we strolled. I noticed Conn had laid one fierce level of protection down on the border of the property. Not even a squirrel skittered across his ward on our non-existent path.

Gale had brought the demon wolves hamburger treats from the kitchen and they had loved her for it. The drink had helped, but I was too tired to try to read their minds. But it wasn't hard to read the lack of stress in the happy way they explored.

Watching the demon wolves run back and forth proved I wasn't in my right mind. Seeing them so relaxed made me happy to have gotten all this ground for them to run free on. The illusion of freedom was all I could offer them at the moment. Those two young women were still locked in their demon wolf forms and I had no idea when or how that might change.

Realizing I'd been quiet for quite a while, I turned to my companion. "Now that I'm not so intimidated by what to do with the house, this property reminds me of living on my Grandmother's O'Malley's farm. Like this place, it had loads of room to roam when ya felt like it."

"Did you make good memories there?" Gale asked politely.

I shrugged a little. "The worst memory I have is of having to hide Conn from my husband. When Jack was around, Conn stayed in dog form. He slept on the end of Fiona's bed at night like her pet. After she turned three, she asked me why Conn never changed into his true self around her. She loved her father but also knew his moods by them. She never once told him about Conn shifting into human or demon."

"Children always seem to simply know the truth, don't they?"

"About their parents—yes, they do. Right now, Fiona is struggling to find her magick. Her father tried his best to convince her she had none."

"That wasn't very fatherly of him."

"No, and Jack was wrong. Her magick is not like mine but no one's is. I'm one in a long line of The Dagda's chosen descendants but I didn't know it until my grandmother died and Conn came to me. I was the same age Fiona is now. After Conn revealed himself to me, my parents had no choice except to tell me they'd hidden the truth from me. I had just married Jack and was carrying Fiona at the time. That was a very interesting year. I became a wife, a mother, and a warrior witch—all within a few months."

Gale chuckled softly at my story. "All women have a year they never forget. What did you think of Conn during your early years together?"

“Right from the beginning, I thought he was great. He was there for me when Jack wasn’t. I appreciate that more now than I did back then. He could have let me suffer for my decisions, but he didn’t. No matter how crazy my life got, he never ignored me. That’s not to say Conn never got mad at me because he did.”

I could see Gale’s concern in the dark. “What did he do when he was mad?”

“Nothing terrible, but he knew how to annoy me. Conn turned himself into a horse once. I had to groom him and clean up after him. He stayed in that form for months but would never let me ride him. Jack wouldn’t shut up about getting rid of the contrary horse who refused to be ridden. Shifting into an animal form is how Conn broods. He refuses to turn back so I have to take care of him.”

“Your ex-husband sounds like he was a lot of work.”

“Oh, he was,” I said, agreeing with her. “The only peace I had with Jack Derringer was when he was away for work. I don’t know why I didn’t see how unhealthy my relationship with him was when I was living it.”

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Gale shrugged. “You must have loved the father of your child. That’s the only reason a powerful woman would tolerate such a limiting situation.”

I thought of those early days when Jack played at being a loving husband and father, and how contented I’d been with his efforts. On good days, I never had a moment’s doubt. On bad ones, I made concessions while hoping for more good days. It had been a frustrating dynamic in my marriage. But Gale was right. I’d tolerated it because I had loved him, and I’d loved the three of us being a family.

“Yes. I loved him. I hate myself for it now but I can’t undo the past.”

“That’s probably one of the main reasons you hate your ex-husband now. He proved that you were wrong about him and it hurts. You’re probably as mad at yourself as you are at him.”

I laughed. “Well, I don’t love him anymore. I stopped feeling love when Fiona was thirteen. I picked him up from work one day and he had lipstick stains on his mouth.”

The crickets and frogs sang in the night and lightning bugs floated above the grass. “All I want now is nights like this. I want pockets of peace I can count on being there when I need them. A man to share my nights is optional.”

Gale smiled at me in the dark and her white teeth shone. The charming demoness was dressed in snug tan leggings that shaped her curves. The evening was cool so she’d tossed an expensive sweater on over the sheer blouse that hung to her hips. The woman looked as elegant as it was possible to look dressed in sneakers. It was hard not to feel jealous because being that sort of woman was so beyond me.

“Is it magick that keeps ya looking so young, Gale? Because ya look as beautiful as my daughter who’s only twenty.”

“Every five years or so, Henry and I choose to regenerate for three months. When we’re done, we look like we do now.”

“Conn says he regenerates every time he shifts forms.”

“His link to The Dagda makes regeneration different for Conn. He looks the same age no matter what he does. I’m still adjusting to his choice to look like you in his human form. I think it’s sweet of him, but I was used to him looking dark and dangerous like his father.”

I always knew Conn’s sacrifices were many. It was strange how I learned new things about him all the time, and usually from people other than him.

“I never asked him to take a particular form or look a special way. If he preferred the human form my grandmother asked him to take, he’s never said. I know he chose to look like me for practical reasons. Being friends and partners doesn’t adequately describe our relationship. I consider him family and that’s the truth.”

I heard Gale sigh at my declaration. I studied her expressionless face. She kept her feelings and concerns for Conn from ever showing. After all this time, I felt sure she had developed that habit for good reasons so I pushed my curiosity down.

“Henry and ya raised a wonderful son, Gale. Ma raised me well too. Conn—bless his heart—helped me raise Fiona. Children are a hard short-term investment that pays out in the long run. I can only hope Fiona hasn’t been warped by the years Jack stole from the two of us. We had to get by on her visiting me while I was in prison.”

“A situation I now know you tolerated for my son’s sake.”

I shrugged. “It was more for Fiona’s sake. If I’d left prison, Jack would have made Fiona’s life as hard as mine. I stayed to keep the peace until she was grown. After I got out, I learned Conn was only a catalyst for something Jack had been planning to do to me all along. He’d made a deal with demon hunters to keep me out of the way.”

We walked along in silence for a while. It was nice. I didn’t feel the need to interrupt it to keep it from being awkward. I didn’t feel that way with Mulan, either.

I really needed to be more grateful for the women in my life.

Gale blew out a breath. “Henry and I experimented to discover the proper amount of regeneration to keep us at our preferred age. You can’t tell but Henry is three hundred years older than me. His parents were two of the original Fir Bolg created from scratch by Goddess Danu herself. His birth was one of the first natural ones among his clan.”

“Did ya ever see Henry in his natural state?”

“Yes. I knew him when we both still looked like our people. Henare of the Fir Bolg was a hairy giant and very tall in the human form he crafted for himself. By the time I came along, all of Danu’s people had learned to manipulate their bodies. My natural form was true Fomorian—half-beast and half-giantess. The first time Henry saw me, he screamed and tried to kill me for scaring him.”

My laughter rang out in the evening’s quietness. I’d laughed more today than I’d laughed in several weeks. “That’s the kind of story an Irish person like me can’t help but adore. It’s hard to imagine Henry being so scared of ya, though. Didn’t the Fir Bolg look like Bigfoot creatures back then?”

“Yes. He was bigger than me, hairier than me, and far less attractive from my point of view. His reaction to how I looked deeply hurt my feelings. I refused to talk to him

for over ten of your human years. Then suddenly both our clans were fighting all the time. I only realized I loved him when I realized that I feared for both our lives. Henry feared for both of us as well.”

“Yers was a wartime romance.”

Gale nodded. “We met in secret to talk about what we might do to save ourselves and our families. We willingly converted to demonic form to gain the ability to regenerate in case someone ever sought our death. We made many promises to find each other if we were separated for any length of time.”

“My people love war even though they deny it. Peace is the hardest thing for humans to invest in.”

“Soon after our demon conversion, Henry and I made Conn together. He was born a demon—the first to do so. Some thought it made him less. The elders said it made him more. As he grew, it became quite clear that the elders were right. Then Connlander did the impossible by becoming king and uniting our people. He demanded that all clan members convert to demons to prove their allegiance to finding peace with each other. He was also protecting their lives, but no one saw that but him. Henry and I didn’t see it, either. Not until Danu sent The Dagda to conquer us.”

I shook my head in wonder. “And all this happened before the Great War.”

Gale nodded. “Conn’s childhood wasn’t as terrible as it might have been, though. Children were rare among either of our clans and they feared Danu’s wrath if they harmed us. We lived on the edge of Henry’s village and people mostly left us alone. Our son was born in the middle of our people fighting with each other. As he grew up, Henry and I told him of a time when peace had reigned and the hearts of our people were not closed to it. Our stories of peace shaped him in ways we could have

never guessed. We also saw Danu's hand in his life. He was one of her chosen."

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I thought of Zara's jealousy of Danu. "How familiar are ya with the guardians?"

Gale shrugged. "I know the ancient ones sit and watch without helping. They did nothing to stop the deaths of our people from happening."

My mind could never quite stretch enough to see how infinite their involvement was. "The guardians I know claim to be tasked by the creators to not interfere with the destinies of the creatures sharing this planet. They are especially hands-off with humans. Rasmus said we remind him of how his original people were half a million years ago. Oh, and by the way, the guardians are aliens. They came from another planet."

Gale chuckled. "So aliens are real."

I laughed again. "That's exactly what I said to him. Rasmus denied being an alien and gave me his 'all people are one people' lecture. Once we leave off reincarnating, we turn into balls of light. I think he was implying that all balls of light are equal."

"Why would you welcome such a strange creature into your life much less your bed? You deserve someone more normal."

I laughed. "It's the great sex. The man adores me and my forty-year-old body. I'd like to say otherwise and pretend I'm a nobler woman than that but I'd be lying. And once in a while, I see a little light bulb go off inside his brain. When that happens, it makes me smile. On the downside, I never see him taking notes even though I'm sure he's doing it. He's a scientist and I'm his experiment."

Gale was silent for a minute. Then she laughed as well. “No male is perfect.”

I smiled at her. “Yes. Mulan told me that too. She loves your son. It may not seem like it but she does. Can I ask ya about his first wife? Conn’s never talked about her, and with Mulan in his life, I don’t feel right asking. I’m just curious because her banshee sister is a close friend of mine as well as Conn’s.”

“The banshee he loved wooed him with her songs. She calmed his inner beast that raged over being unappreciated. She praised his sacrifice and taught him a higher tolerance for the humans he worked with. The banshee was with him through three of his human keepers. He grieved her death by throwing himself into his work with one of your predecessors. There were no women at all in his life for a very, very long time.”

Nodding, I smiled at Conn’s mother. “If she did all that, I’m grateful for her influence on him. Conn maintains a god-like control over his reactions. My work would be much harder if he was angry and rebellious all the time. We argue enough about what the right thing to do is.”

“Are you arguing about your snake shifter?”

I considered that and was surprised at my realization. “No. We haven’t argued once. Conn insisted we kill him the moment we learned he’d escaped. Stopping Hisser permanently is something we both know needs to be done. Finding him is our dilemma. That’s why I need to find a sacred space. It will take me a couple of days to create it.”

Gale touched my arm. “I may know where we can find a suitable spot. Henry and I work with a lot of different witches. I developed a keen sense of what witches need from a casting space. The place I have in mind is behind the yellow house. There’s a grove of ash trees. Let’s look there.”

We veered by the paddock to drop off the now weary demon wolves. Trekking to Fiona's cottage took little time. All the homes sat on a professionally graveled path. When we passed the patio Fiona loved, I snorted at the pizza oven. I hadn't even gone into the house to see how much updating it needed. It might be the worst one yet and my daughter could not have cared less.

The small grove of trees was only a few hundred feet away from the border of Fiona's yard. The trees were grouped into two sets with a bare expanse in the middle where the sun would shine down through them freely.

Gale waited while I walked to the center and looked up. The breeze lifted my hair and it wafted around me like a living hood. I walked over and put my hand on one tree and heard it whisper my name in welcome.

Goddess, I'd sorely missed having a place to commune. "This is the perfect spot."

Gale smiled. "Good. Do you need help to set it up or is that something you want to do for yourself?"

"I'll get Conn to help me build a fire pit. He will ward it afterward to keep everyone out."

"Perhaps we could build a small greenhouse nearby for your herbs."

The idea of having fresh herbs made me smile. "I've been buying them because I had no way to grow them."

"I see a greenhouse with a small garden opposite it and a rock fire pit in the center. I see a fence around the entire grove to discourage visitors from entering your space."

My excitement grew as she talked. "Do we need to tell all this to Henry?"

“No, because I would like to take care of it. It would make me happy to build it for you.”

I nodded. “That would be wonderful, Gale. How quickly can it be done?”

“As you said, Conn can build the fire pit for you tomorrow. I suggest you consecrate it for your urgent use. In the meantime, I’ll find a tent to put over the fire pit after you’re done. That will make sure no one violates the space, even accidentally, while we’re building the rest.”

I sighed at how easy Gale made it all sound. “Henry and ya are spoiling me with yer help,” I said as I joined her again.

Gale waved a hand at my guilt as we walked toward the main house. “Don’t give thanking me a single thought. Everything we do for you is spoiling our son as well. It feels nice because we haven’t been able to spoil him in quite a long time. It’s been centuries since we could see him two days in a row. I’m still amazed to be able to see him every day. I’m very happy we came.”

One year of not seeing Fiona when she refused to visit me in prison had seemed like a lifetime. I couldn’t imagine ever going that long again without seeing her. It was like I told Fiona before I sent her to Ireland, she was the best work of my life and her survival was the most important thing to me.

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So I understood what Gale was saying. She considered Conn the best of hers. If buying this place had reunited Conn and his parents for five years, I was completely happy to have spent my life savings on it. “Ya don’t have to do a thing to be here. Conn deserves to see ya and I’m glad we could make it happen.”

“You are too generous for your own good, Aran. A bored demon is no one’s friend. We’re training our caste and conducting our business under your roof. The least we can do is reciprocate. Caring for you is much easier than you imagine it to be. Henry and I have served people most of our lives in one form or another. Work takes nothing away from our life together.”

“Do ya promise to tell me if yer caretaking becomes too hard?” I asked.

Gale smiled and nodded. “Henry and I will always tell you when we need something.”

“If ya truly feel that way, then I’ll quit harping about my ego problems with living like someone wealthy. I’ll learn to say thank ya without cringing. Ya have my word.”

Gale snorted and shook her head. “Think of yourself as living in a school where the students only get an ‘A’ if they please you. Does that make it easier?”

“No. That still sounds like I’m taking advantage of them, but I’ll try hard to get used to it. Dinner was great. The drinks were fantastic.”

In the foyer, Gale chuckled and put her hand on my arm before I turned left to head to my quarters. “Praise and a household budget is all we need.”

I smiled and said goodnight to her. There was spring in my step as I headed to my bedroom.

When I entered my space, I found a hole cut into a wall and a hanging door that slid over it to separate the spaces. The two rooms weren't a full set of quarters yet but I saw progress every day. I slid the door open to see what else had been done.

In the sitting room, someone had already removed the heavy drapes over three windows that were taller than Rasmus. Without the distraction of stuff filling the space, the fireplace showed itself in need of a good cleaning. Walls that hadn't seen sunshine in ages revealed themselves to be dingy and gray with age.

I was so ready for white paint and window coverings that let in the light.

And I was excited about buying new furniture. Henry was helping me create a cozy space inside the huge house.

After contributing to the monthly budget for Henry and Gale, I'd buy furnishings with the money we collected from finding Hisser.

Chapter Eighteen

Smoke from my new fire pit wafted up through the trees. I added some naga-made incense, hoping it would guide me to faster answers. Hisser wasn't a naga but his shifter species was in the same family. I thought of Jayesh, who was a naga, and how much I liked him. Thinking of Jayesh put my energy in a good space and kept down the fears of what I might see.

After making all the preparations I could, I lifted the scrying necklace Sarah Templeton had gifted me and eased it down over my head. I'd stopped wearing it as jewelry after my fight with Zara. It randomly showed me people, things, and

situations whenever it pleased. The visions nearly always sent me to the floor, which is why I opted to sit near my fire pit instead of standing.

The necklace was more powerful than my crystal ball and not nearly as easy to control. But I had to use it. Today, I needed the strongest scrying tool I possessed. Hisser didn't want to be found or he'd have sought me out already.

I closed my eyes, focused on breathing, and released my essence so the scrying necklace could guide it. I felt myself drifting upward through the opening between the trees before shooting off at a speed that alarmed me.

When I finally slowed, I was in a cave where a giant off-white egg lay on a nest of straw and moss. A wild-eyed witch sitting by the egg felt my presence and jumped to her feet. She pulled an alder wand from her robe and swung her body in a circle as she searched the surrounding air for me. The woman seemed a little wild. Or perhaps a bit insane.

"I know you're here, spirit. I feel you. You will not harm my master."

Who was the witch protecting? Or should I be asking what?

I floated over the egg and noticed black speckles adorned the shell. Then I realized something inside the egg moved as if my presence was electrocuting it. It stretched as if trying to escape and I was shocked it hadn't broken out yet.

I sensed a snake creature in the egg but it didn't feel like Hisser. Had Hisser produced a child?

I floated around the open room of the cave, inspecting the egg from multiple angles. Its writhing never stopped. I got the distinct feel that the creature inside the egg knew I was there and was trying to break out to get at me.

I shook my head, puzzling over what I was seeing and what it meant.

Suddenly, I zipped away from the cave. When I slowed down again, I floated through woods I didn't recognize. A short distance away from where I floated, I heard voices speaking. I struggled to move closer but something kept preventing me.

I put my hand out and felt a surface. There was an invisible wall that wouldn't let me pass.

Giving up trying to get closer, I focused on the four people talking. All of them wore black robes. The tallest figure had his back to me. He talked to the others but in a low tone that I couldn't hear. The others—witches most likely—revealed themselves by lowering their hoods. I could see heads nodding. No one was familiar.

That vision ended when I was yanked away from the scene. Instead of moving forward, I felt myself shooting like a rocket straight up into the sky. Eventually, I did level out and flew through the dark straight into a metal wall that melted to allow me to enter.

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I passed through several walls until I saw a group of radiant beings surrounding a woman on a table. All but one person in the group had their hands on her body. The pulse of her life increased as they sent healing energy into her cells.

Rasmus bent over the table as he talked to the radiant beings. Curious to see what he was doing, I moved closer. Unlike the scene in the forest, this time there was no barrier keeping me away.

It surprised me to discover that the woman on the table looked like Rasmus—the much younger version of Rasmus I'd finally grown accustomed to seeing. Feeling wicked, I waved my hand in front of his face. He paused speaking, waved his hand in front of his own nose, and looked around.

Did he sense me?

I snorted at the irony. Since I'd come this far, I moved around the space looking my fill. In the end, I could only conclude that it was a lab. A shiver of unease went through me. This room reminded me of the lab Jack's military scientists had used.

But where was I? What was this place?

Before I had time to ponder my location, something tugged at me before actively pulling me away. I passed slowly through the walls of where I was before zipping back through space and down into my body.

I came out of my scrying trance gasping for air. I put a hand on my chest and felt a hot spot where the Dagda stone rested. "Okay. Ya got my attention. Now what are ya

trying to tell me?”

I stretched my legs only to find Mulan staring at me strangely. She looked at the darkening sky and then pulled out her phone. I rolled to my knees and gave my legs time to wake up before standing.

When I trusted my legs again, I stood and turned back to douse the fire. There was nothing left but cold ashes. There was no fire to put out. I'd been gone more than a few minutes.

Mulan rose from her seat on the ground and met me as I broke my casting circle.

I put my hand on my chest over the Dagda stone before I asked the unavoidable question. “Was I gone the whole day?”

Mulan snorted. “Almost two days.”

“What?” My dry throat rasped the question a few octaves higher than my usual. “How is that possible? The scrying necklace only showed me three brief scenes.”

Mulan shrugged. “At least you did not die this time.”

I didn't die last time, either, but I knew what she was trying to say. The last time I scried for Rasmus, I came back with bleeding eardrums and couldn't move for several weeks.

This time I was mostly unharmed, despite feeling that I returned much faster than Mulan said. Being gone had felt like only an hour had passed. It hadn't felt like two whole days.

“We watched you in shifts. Henry and Gale took turns too. High demon paced and

did not sleep.”

I swallowed to ease the dryness in my throat and mouth. “I’m sorry I worried him.”

“Everything worries high demon. He hides it well.”

Mulan reached out a hand and wrapped her fingers around my arm. “Come with me. I make tea while I tell world you live.”

Other than being stiff, I felt fine. But I let Mulan hold on to me as we walked out of the woods to her house. My brain still struggled to believe I’d been out of my body for two whole days. And worst of all, I’d been gone a long time and yet not learned anything useful.

The only real answer I got was where Rasmus was and what he was doing. Taking a page from Conn’s book of tricks, I felt sure the guardian was changing Zara’s appearance so she would look like his sister. Maybe the vision was supposed to make me feel better, but it didn’t. All it did was creep me out on a level I only felt when guardians were involved.

Was I a hypocrite living among demons who chose their form? Yes, I guess I was, but I couldn’t seem to help myself.

I slowly paced the small space of Mulan’s kitchen to loosen my limbs. Conn came in and snatched me up, hugging me tight.

“What happened?” he demanded as he pushed me away.

“I don’t know.” And that was an honest answer. “I saw a cave with a giant egg in it about to hatch. I saw a group of witches in black robes in a forest clearing but a barrier prevented me from getting close enough to hear them. One of the witches—a

very tall male one—kept his back turned to me. His power signature was very strong.”

“Sit now,” Mulan ordered.

I pulled away from Conn and sat at the table. Mulan set a cup of tea loaded with honey in front of me. Beside the tea were several cookies.

“Drink all of it. Eat cookies,” she said.

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I whispered thanks and did as she said.

Conn eventually stopped staring at me and sat in the chair beside me. “Two whole days and that was all you saw?”

I stopped chewing, nodded, and then leaned back in my chair. Mulan brought the teapot and refilled my cup. Why was I so reluctant to share that I’d seen Rasmus? I hadn’t meant to scry for him. That had just happened.

Sure, he’d been in my thoughts a lot since he disappeared, but the necklace had a mind of its own. I rubbed my chest and felt the Dagda stone vibrate under my fingers. Had the stone used the necklace to show me what it thought I most wanted to see? Or what the stone itself had wanted to see?

The hand rubbing my chest dropped to my lap at the thought. Conn needed to know. He knew more about the Dagda stone than I did. If I kept such things to myself, he couldn’t help me deal with what happened.

“I saw Rasmus, but I don’t know why, other than the obvious. I can promise you all I wanted to see was Hisser’s location. If the first vision was his location, it was Hisser or Hisser’s child inside that egg. And it’s in a cave somewhere. Is it local? Is it a million miles away? I’d love to be able to tell ya, but I didn’t linger there long enough to get any other information. I got swept away to watch the witches. I don’t know anything about them, either.”

Conn turned away from me to look at Mulan. Her shrug was deep. “Her energy showed intense panic first few hours. It slowed to near-death peace and never

changed until she woke. She talks sense and seems okay. This is all I know.”

“What causes near-death peace?” I asked.

Mulan shook her head. “Death or... time problem.”

I frowned at her. “Well, I never died. I think I would have seen The Dagda or Goddess Danu if that had happened—or at least Da. Yer ancestors always greet ya. Many times they’re the ones who send ya back if ya’re there too early. Conn would know if I was close to death. He’d be notified.”

I looked at Conn who shook his head. So I looked back at Mulan. “What did ya mean bytime problem?”

I could see Mulan searching for the right words to explain. Finally, she spoke. “Remember our talk about Wu Shaman who risked time travel?”

I nodded. “Yes. Ya said she came back from it and died.”

Mulan nodded. “What I did not say in short version was she left her body for many months. Her body grew young. It grew old. She withered in flesh and filled out like young girl. Many changes happened while Wu Shamans watched over her. She thinks only minutes pass. This she said before death claimed her.”

I swallowed down my panic. What I’d experienced hadn’t been scary to me, but it had felt like mere minutes. “I can see why yer kind outlawed time travel. What did yer people think happened to her?”

Mulan crossed her arms and leaned against a counter. “Shaman elders say her soul traveled through time but her body failed to keep up. Your energy slowed until your heart barely beat. I fought high demon not to try and wake you. I tell him he must

wait for you to return or you might get lost.”

I looked at Conn who sighed and nodded. I reached out to put a hand on his arm. “I would have panicked too if it had been you.” Conn put his hand over mine, but I looked back at Mulan. “I think yer shaman elders were right.”

“Explain,” Mulan ordered.

I slid my hand from Conn’s to wave it in the air. Before I knew it, I was using both hands to illustrate my story. “During the third vision, I flew upward and through a wide expanse of space. Off in the distance, I could see planets and stars. Then I passed through a metal barrier that gave gently and sort of popped me out on the other side of it. I went through several walls of some sort of building before ending up in a lab. Rasmus was standing over a medical table saying things in a language that sort of hurt my ears to hear. With him were a bunch of beings I think were made of light because they seemed transparent. They had their hands on a woman lying on the table. The woman looked like Rasmus. I think it was Zara.”

The room was silent as Mulan and Conn both stared at me.

I cleared my throat to tell them what I sensed but couldn’t prove. “I think I visited the guardians. Rasmus didn’t know I was there. Well, he sort of sensed me when I waved my hand in front of his face but he couldn’t see or hear me. It wasn’t like when the three guardians I saw all knew I was there in astral form. He went back to his work.”

More silence.

I finally broke it again. “Now I sort of understand why Rasmus is always gone so long without realizing how much time is passing for me. He told me once that time passed differently for him when he was doing guardian work.”

Conn stared hard at me. “How long did you think you were there?”

I turned to look at him and lifted both hands in the air. “A couple of minutes at most. The trip back into my body felt like when we rode on that bullet train. I settled back into my body and woke easily. Other than feeling stiff, I had no idea how long I’d been gone.”

“Her energy sped up moments before Aran returned,” Mulan said.

Conn wiped a hand over his face. “This didn’t happen when you screamed for Zara and the demon wolves.”

I sighed at the anxiety I’d accidentally caused him. “No, it didn’t. I don’t know if the Dagda stone took over or just protected me. But I feel like it was involved.”

Nodding at my suggestion, Conn took the cup of tea Mulan set in front of him. “We may need to contact The Dagda and get him to teach you how to use the stone, Aran.”

I lifted my hands. “I’ve been thinking non-stop about him but The Dagda hasn’t appeared.”

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Conn grunted. “Leaving your body for days on end can disrupt your human life cycle. The connection of your energy body to your physical one is complex. It takes demons years to learn enough physiology to control their change from form to form. There are a million details to get right. Humans are not equipped. If they were, they could alter their physical forms and most would.”

I picked up my tea and sipped. “How do I keep this from happening? Ya know as well as I do that scrying is the surest way to locate our targets.”

Conn’s gaze cut to mine. “Rasmus was your unconscious target. You need to resolve your need to know where he is and why he’s not with you. That can be accomplished in several ways.”

I nodded, understanding what Conn meant. If I trusted Rasmus completely, I wouldn’t need to know where he was and I probably wouldn’t feel so abandoned. Another option to ease my thoughts of him is when he left me, Rasmus could ask someone to let me know what he was doing and how long he’d be gone.

Guardians didn’t think like we did even when they walked among us in human form. For Rasmus, it was probably like he left me a few moments ago. His work kept him too busy to miss me or question how much human time was passing.

I rubbed my forehead. “I’ll do what I can. I like yer idea of calling The Dagda to teach me about the stone.”

Mulan’s phone dinged with a message. “Gale says come home. She will send dinner to your new room.” Her confused gaze met mine. “Did you change rooms?”

I shook my head. “No. They’re making me a private sitting room next door to my bedroom. Henry calls the connecting rooms myquarters.”

“Good idea,” Mulan said. “Powerful woman needs private space and big bathtub.”

I chuckled at her comment. “I agree with ya.”

Mulan snorted. “First time for everything,” she said rudely.

I grinned and rose. “Thanks for looking out for me. I’m fine walking back on my own. The two of ya need some rest.”

“What is next step?” Mulan asked.

Honestly, I had no idea. So I said the first thought that popped into my head. “We’ll look into caves and check out any we find. Fiona helped me research covens in Salem but I think we need to do that again. I may go see Sarah Templeton about the scrying necklace. She has a coven and might know one with a tall witch.”

“Conn and I do cave research. You visit witch. This gets research done fast.”

I nodded. “Yes. Splitting up the research does sound like a good idea.”

“Now we rest and sleep. No more scrying,” Mulan ordered. “Tell ancestor stone to behave.”

Smiling, I hung my head and nodded. “I’m sorry I scared ya, Mulan.”

“At least you scare somebody. Next time scare snake man.”

Feeling blessed to have Mulan and Conn in my corner, I said my goodbyes and

walked back to the main house.

My sitting room had been painted in a fresh off-white color while I was out. Near the lit fireplace was one of the magickal chairs from the library and a small round table with a tray of food on it. The fire was only a gas insert but the flames and heat gave the still barren space a cozy feel.

Best of all, the coziness chased away my need to dwell on my surreal scrying experience.

I lifted the lid of the tray and found a big bowl of soup and two sandwiches. I ate like a starving woman and dreamed about the furniture I wanted to buy. Before I finished eating, I had it all planned out.

I'd buy a rocker to go by the fireplace and a large reclining chair for Rasmus to use when he could pull himself away from guardian duties long enough to lower himself to visit me.

I wanted to find a small sofa—a loveseat really—for guests like Mulan and Conn when they visited. And I'd wanted some sort of coffee table for tea trays and evening meals when I ate alone.

I also wouldn't block the light with heavy draperies like the ones that had come with the house, but maybe a few layers of sheers to filter things in the evening would be nice.

Before I gave myself up to sleep, I said a prayer of thanks for coming back from scrying safely and for all the blessings that found their way to me. My life wasn't perfect but it was good.

A year ago I was still in prison. Now I owned a mansion.

As I was slipping under, I thought about how my prosperity never looked like the picture I carried around in my head.

Chapter Nineteen

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“Hello. Is Sarah here?”

The girl behind the counter shook her head. “Sarah’s gone to a coven meeting. I’m filling in for a few days. Can I help you with something?”

“I stopped by to chat with Sarah. Are ya a member of her coven as well? I’m a witch and looking for active covens in Salem to visit.”

My disappointment to have missed Sarah was keen. Maybe that would teach me to call first before paying for a ride downtown. The magick in the shop was nearly non-existent in Sarah’s absence but ya never caught a fish without tossing out a line.

“I’m not a witch yet but I want to be one.” The girl said boldly. “There are three official covens in Salem.” She rattled off the names of all three.

I leaned on the counter. “I didn’t realize there were so many and I don’t have anything to write on. Could ya write those names down for me? If ya don’t mind, write Sarah’s name next to hers. That one will be my first choice to visit.”

Smiling, the young woman searched and found a piece of paper. “Are you the Irish witch Sarah talks about so much? I love your accent.”

I grinned at her. “Well, now, how I answer yer question depends on whether what Sarah said about me was bad or good.”

“Oh, it was all good,” the girl assured me, giggling at my teasing.

When she handed the paper over with the coven names, I smiled at her. “Thank ya for yer help. Have ya worked for Sarah long? I don’t think I’ve seen ya in here before.”

She studied the ceiling as she did the mental math. “I’ve been here a couple of months. If you need something, I’ve worked hard to learn all her inventory. I even know what real witches buy versus the stuff she sells to hopefuls and pretenders. We get a lot of those in here.”

Since I’d paid for the ride here, I figured I might as well ask the question I’d hoped to ask Sarah. “A few months ago Sarah gifted me a scrying necklace. It was right after she got them in. Have ya heard any feedback from customers about using them? I’ve had some unique experiences with mine. I was coming here specifically to let her know that.”

The girl nodded with wide eyes. “We’ve had the craziest bad luck with those locketts. Most of the magickals who bought them have exchanged them for crystal balls. They said the necklaces were too powerful. For giggles, I wore one of the returned ones around my neck for a whole day while I worked. Honestly? I never felt a thing.”

I could have told her she didn’t feel anything because her non-magickal body wasn’t sensitive to its power but that would have been cruel since she wanted so badly to be a witch.

I found it a bit strange that Sarah allowed a non-magickal to run her business in her absence. The hereditary Salem witch tolerated non-magickals but seemed to still carry a grudge about her ancestor’s unfair execution. When one of them made her mad, she cackled, waved her wand, and grinned as they ran off.

“One necklace we took back had gotten broken. The person was a good customer so Sarah took it back even though it was damaged. Would you like to see what it’s like on the inside? We found something written on it. It was so strange.”

And there went my inner alarm bells. I nodded and tried to stay calm. “If it’s no trouble, I’d love to see.”

“Sure. Let me get it,” she said and hurried off.

As I waited, I glanced at the tiny calendar tucked next to the cash register. There was equally tiny writing on it. I squinted but couldn’t see it clearly from where I stood.

“Here you go,” she said, laying the pieces on the flat surface in front of me. I pulled them closer and looked at the back of the largest piece. Part of a symbol was scratched into it.

The girl pointed. “Sarah said the symbol came from the language of the fairies and that I was not to duplicate it or draw it. Can you read what it means?”

“Maybe. I took two semesters of languages in school. One was a language used by fairy folk. The other was the language demons speak. I’m better at the demon one.”

The girl mock-shivered. “I would banish all demons to the veil if I could.”

I shook my head as I stared hard at her. “Demons won’t harm ya, but the fairy folk will make ya their slave. They think themselves superior to all creatures.”

“Seriously?” she asked.

“Yes, seriously.”

My gaze went back to the pieces. I lifted the largest piece of the broken stone to get a closer look. What was left of the symbol on it was legible but not enough for me to figure it out. I picked up the smaller piece and held the two together with my fingers. It was a command in elvish that said the strangest thing. As best I could interpret it,

the symbol would have commanded the wearer to “serve yer true master”.

I found it very confusing. Why was that command on a scrying stone? Was it on mine as well?

I laid the broken pieces back down. There was no energy left in them so Sarah’s non-magickal store clerk should be okay putting them away again. “Do all the scrying necklaces come with this symbol?”

The girl’s face lit with excitement. “You know, I wondered that myself. Some of them you can’t tell without breaking them. Sarah took a few apart to check and I know she didn’t find it on all of them. It’s mostly on the returned versions that people brought back. She said she was going to check if it was on the ones she gave to her coven sisters. They’re getting super active again. A visiting witch has been teaching them new ways to harness their powers.”

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This time warning bells rang even louder. I wanted to rush home and check my necklace. “Have ya got a necklace that for sure doesn’t have that symbol? I’ll buy one from ya if ya have it.”

“Sure. I’ll just go get one of the new ones for you,” she said and rushed happily off.

I took that moment to check the calendar. Sarah had marked several vacation days on it that covered a two-week period. She would be gone for several more days. I returned it to its spot when I heard the clerk returning.

She carried a new necklace and the box it came in.

Smiling, she held it out for me to see. “This is one of the nicest ones we received. In the new shipment, the stones easily come out. It’s like the early ones shipped from an entirely different company.”

I took the new necklace in my hand and easily popped out the smoky topaz stone. I could shape any stone to fit inside it. The necklace would outlast several. I inspected the topaz, saw no symbol, and returned the stone to the metal pocket made for it. This necklace was much smaller than the one I possessed.

I retrieved the credit card from my back pocket and handed it over. Moments later, the necklace was back in its original box and bagged.

“It was a pleasure talking to ya. Tell Sarah that Aran said ya deserved a raise.”

Her giggle followed me out.

Desperate to get home as fast as I could, I flagged a taxi down. The ice cream treat I'd promised myself would have to wait until next time.

Conn and Mulan had a lead on a cave and had gone hiking to look for it.

Plan A to get Sarah's help hadn't worked. Plan B would be finding someone to do an online search for the covens. I sincerely missed my daughter who loved doing this kind of task.

On a whim, I climbed up the stairs to the second floor of my house. Climbing them was a workout all by itself because the fancy stairs were steep. At least I got to the top without huffing and puffing. I was proud that two days of sitting hadn't set me back too much.

The door to Dylan's room stood open when I stopped. Looking like a cartoon character in his red jacket, he sat feet on the floor in one of Henry's magickal chairs staring out of the window.

"I need technological help, Dylan. Are ya interested?"

He turned his head to look at me. "Anything is better than sitting here brooding about what I can't change."

I nodded in approval. "I need ya to search for information on Salem covens. I have their names. Most specifically, I want the one Sarah Templeton belongs to. I also need to know where her coven meets."

"Right," Dylan said, rubbing his jaw as he stood. "And how many months do I have to get this information for you?"

I grinned at his complaints. "I need it today, far darrig. Ya can use the desk in the

library. I'll bring my computer to ya."

He laughed. "Okay, but Henry's not going to like me using your personal stuff. I'll need your passwords."

"No worries. I don't use any."

Dylan stopped walking to stare at me. "But you have to use passwords, Aran. Everyone has to use them. It's critical to protect your online privacy."

I snorted. "No, ya don't. All that stuff is a good idea if ya're worried about people breaking into yer private stuff but they're not mandatory to use the machine. I've taken extra measures to make sure all that complicated shit is turned off."

Dylan rolled his eyes as we started down the stairs. "That's like inviting thieves to rob you. Maybe I'll take a look at your financials while I'm doing your research since you don't feel the need to protect yourself."

"Ya won't find any financials on my computer. I don't keep them on there. I keep the private stuff on my phone."

Dylan sighed. "Yes, but Aran, your phone syncs to your computer."

"I swear. Ya sound just like Conn and Mulan. I don't need a technology lecture this afternoon. What I need is help finding those covens, Dylan. My friend, Sarah, may be in trouble." Or in the middle of some hot mess.

Goddess, I hoped that wasn't the case.

Dylan held up a hand to stop my ranting. "Fine. Go get your computer. I'll wait in the library for you. It may take me a while to find something to rest my feet on. I'm not

as tall as you are and I don't feel like changing forms."

"Fine. I'll be right there. If ya can't find a stool for yer feet, I'll ask Henry for help. I'm sure there's an empty box lying around somewhere. Or maybe we can drag one of those magickal chairs from the fireplace over to the desk."

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Downstairs, Dylan headed to the library and I jogged across the foyer to my bedroom. It dawned on me that I might lose a few pounds living in this house simply because all the rooms were so far apart.

Henry and crew were in my sitting room hanging the three layers of sheers I'd requested this morning.

I grabbed up the computer and stuck my head into the room. "The curtains are perfect, Henry. Do ya have a moment to help me with something?"

"Isn't the far darrig going to do your research?"

I shook my finger at him when Henry grinned. "Goddess, I can't wait for ya to get me a teacher. Normally, I'd ask Conn to help me, but he and Mulan are off exploring a cave. What I need yer help with is disassembling my scrying necklace."

"Why is Connlander and the Wu Shaman out on a date while you and the far darrig are stuck working?"

I chuckled at his assumption. "No, it's nothing like that. The love birds visit art shows and go out to fancy dinners on their dates. Today, they're looking for a giant snake egg that I think is about to hatch. I had a vision and they're checking it out."

Henry blinked in shock. I think I stunned him with the strangeness of my explanation and what I had Conn doing.

"Anyway, Henry," I said with a smile. "I need your help taking my scrying necklace

apart so I can see if there's an elvish symbol on the back of the stone. I think one of the covens in Salem is under its spell."

That last part seemed to snap Henry out of his shock and back into his more normal disgruntled mode. He looked at me and nodded. "I'll find some tools and meet you in the library."

I smiled in relief. "Thank you, Henry."

When Henry showed up with tools, a demoness trailed behind him with a loaded tea tray. "Thanks, Lisa," he said to her.

"My pleasure, Henry."

The demoness looked at me and bowed her head slightly. I smiled back at her, but inside I was groaning. Was this my life now? Would I have to be unfailingly polite to every strange demon I encountered?

"There is nothing wrong with being polite," Henry said, frowning at me.

My eyes narrowed. "I never said there was. I was standing here quietly appreciating that one of yer people brought us tea."

"That's a lie," Henry said.

I smirked at Henry. "Only a white one. Those don't count."

"You and my son are just alike. I don't know why he never tried to woo you."

"Your son and I are never happening," I told him, patting his shoulder. "I could never be with a man who turns into a goat just to spite me. Have ya ever cleaned up goat

poop, Henry? Once was quite enough for me. Conn won't do that to Mulan. She's not afraid to shake her staff at him."

"Are you always so giddy when you're following a lead on one of your cases?"

My forehead wrinkled at the accusation. "I'm not giddy."

Henry took the necklace dangling from my fingers. "What do you call this elated mood of yours then?"

"Determination?"

"I swear, you're like him in so many ways."

"Who? Conn?"

"No. You're like your infamous ancestor."

If he meant The Dagda, I was flattered. I watched Henry pry the metal pocket open and remove the stone. He turned it in his fingers, searching for the best angle. He frowned as he traced the symbol with his thumb.

"That's an elvish symbol, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yes," Henry said tightly. "Where did you get it?"

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“A witch friend runs a magick shop. She’s the one who gave me the scrying necklace as a gift. She’d just gotten them in at the time.” I nodded to it with my chin. “It’s an elvish command to ‘serve yer true master’, whatever that means.”

Henry nodded. “Some of the Tuatha de Danann’s descendants never agreed to enter the mound. Those fairy folk tried to take over the other clans by enslaving as many of Danu’s people as they could. The fairy folk charged highly valued stones with that command and gave them out as gifts. The problem was that some of the people who received the stones were immune to their magick, which included all of Danu’s people. These stones are very dangerous to humans because they can make the person forget who they are.”

Henry rolled the stone through his fingers, now glaring at it.

“The fairies still use them on people who cross the veil into their realm and later want to return home. Since they can’t let that happen, wiping their minds and giving them a memory seems the more compassionate choice to them.”

“Would the stones work on witches?”

“I’m not an expert on these sorts of enhancements but I would imagine they work on any creature not related to the tribes of Goddess Danu. Something in our blood prevents the symbols from working on us.”

Did Sarah know what the stone was when she gave it to me? Or was she enslaved by then? I had sensed no malice in her and no wish to do me harm. In fact, Conn and I had chased bad guys away from her shop.

“I believe the proper question to ask is why someone would want to control an entire coven. My understanding is that allowing each member to reach their full potential is the path to the most magick.”

Across the room, Dylan called out, “Gotcha.”

I turned to look at him. “Did ya find her?”

“Sarah Templeton? No. But I found her coven.”

My phone dinged with an incoming message. It was Conn saying that they’d found the nest and the egg. He said it hadn’t hatched yet but looked ready to. The coordinates were in the next message.

I stood. “Thanks, Henry. I appreciate your help.”

“Of course,” he answered, nodding briefly.

I looked over my shoulder at Dylan. “Want to come with me?”

“To visit the coven?”

“No. We’re going hiking to find a giant snake egg.”

Dylan’s sigh was loud. “Do you always recruit the nearest warm body for your missions? If your boyfriend was here, he would go with you.”

“Yes, he would, but Rasmus is not here. Are ya going with me or not?”

“I asked to see this through to the end so I’m going,” Dylan said with a frown. “I’m going.”

Chapter Twenty

The trek to the coordinates Conn sent took over an hour. The far darrig chose to make the trip in his human form since it was outdoors. His long human legs allowed him to keep up with me despite him not being used to expending so much effort to get from point A to point B.

The cave was darker and danker than I anticipated. Conn ignored my phone calls but I got a text back telling me he was too busy to talk. I nearly summoned him to make sure he knew I didn't like being ignored.

Mulan had just snapped out of her funk, though, so I didn't go there. Instead, I grumbled only on the inside, while I made small talk with Dylan. I'd gotten too good at pretending things were normal.

Then a fire lit in my chest. The heat flared right where the stone lived.

I put a hand over the spot and felt a vibration stronger than my phone made against my hip. Feeling heat from the stone wasn't unusual to me, but this vibration was different. If this was the stone's attempt to communicate something important, the vibration definitely felt like a warning.

And I hadn't drawn a sword or called Conn's mantle before I walked in here like I should have. I'd been too busy worrying about the elvish enslavement symbol to take my normal precautions.

I reached out a hand and stopped Dylan from going forward. "Something's wrong. Go back to the entrance and wait for us to come out. If we don't come out in an hour, go get Ezra and tell him what's going on. I have a weird feeling that I may be walking into a trap."

Dylan stared at me. “But won’t you need my help?”

I patted his arm. “I don’t want ya to get killed by Hisser. His fight is me. Now, go.”

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After giving the darkness in front of us a last hard look, Dylan finally nodded and headed back the way we'd come. When the far darrig was out of my sight, I held out my hand and called my sword. I felt a tiny tingle in my fingers but the sword never came. For the first time since I'd accepted my contract with Conn, his power failed me.

Panic shot through my body. I drew in a deep breath and it shuttered out of me in fearful gasps. Whatever was preventing Conn from helping me was my worst nightmare come true. In the beginning, it was the one thing I'd asked him over and over. He'd waved my concerns away because it hadn't happened with any of his other keepers.

Before my breathing could become even more erratic, my chest vibrated again. I put a hand over the stone. "If ya plan to help me, I'd like something sharp enough to cut a snake's head off and pointy enough to stab my other enemies."

My hand tingled again. I glanced at my fingers, which I could barely see in the near darkness. I closed my eyes and thought of what it would take to kill Hisser, the worst bad guy I'd ever faced. He was a being I feared had grown more powerful than me since I'd last gone after him. What would I do if Hisser had proved to be more powerful than Conn? Conn said even Ezra was more powerful than him.

My mind drew a blank. I had no plan that didn't include Conn, but he and Mulan were probably in more trouble than I was. His not calling me back had been a clue, but I felt a sense of dread now. Or rather I didn't feel Conn at all. When Conn was this close, I always felt him. If he was dead, I was going to wait until he regenerated, and then I would kill him again for scaring me.

I choked on the knowledge that two of the most powerful beings I knew might be counting on me to save them. What if I couldn't? I squeezed my eyes shut and fought my urge to scream.

Instead of screaming, I talked to the stone. "I appreciate ya getting in touch in my desperate moment. Can ya at least give me a sword?"

I instantly felt something cold in my hand and lifted my hand to look at it. Not a sword as I hoped. It was a black dagger with a white handle, the kind of weapon only appropriate for close-in kills. A giant snake would be able to strike at quite a distance. It was hard to hide my disappointment. I needed a long sword... or even a spear.

I seldom fought without help but today there was none. Who could I call? I cursed Rasmus for being gone, and then I cursed myself for leaving Orlin's feather at home. I couldn't be more unprepared.

Foolish—I'd been so foolish. I hadn't even bothered to tell Ezra where I was headed.

And I wouldn't have called Ben even if he'd been around because I considered him a rookie.

Goddess, I wished I'd spoken to my daughter yesterday. I wish I'd told Fiona and Ma one more time how much I loved them. If Conn had been killed, he'd eventually regenerate as himself. If something happened to me, I'd return as some strange woman's helpless babe never remembering this life.

I believed Rasmus about human life cycles. It resonated with me as the truth. The truth wasn't kind, though. Orlin flatly told me that I wouldn't get born in the line of The Dagda next time.

So this was it for me. This one life as Aran of The Dagda was all I was going to get.

Goddess, I wasn't done with this life. I didn't want to die.

I closed my eyes again. Please, Danu. Help me. Send The Dagda. Send me someone.

Panic closed around me like a fist, squeezing all the air from my chest. No being I'd ever fought had defeated Conn. What kind of being could keep him from talking to me?

Venom, I suddenly thought. I needed to protect my body from snake venom.

I opened my eyes and put a hand on my chest. "Give me armor. I need ya to cover me from head to toe with something to fight snake poison."

My bones ached and pulled. I gritted my teeth to keep from calling out as I felt the skin on top of my bones change. I ran my dagger-free hand over my arm and felt a raised texture of some sort. I winced at the pain but had to trust the stone. What other choice did I have?

Wishing I could see what it was doing to me, I gripped the dagger as I silently crept forward. My hearing began to sharpen as I moved through the continued darkness. I heard someone drag something roughly over the ground. It sounded like me when I had to drag one of those fifty-pound bags of dog food from the trunk of my car into the house.

I couldn't see yet but there had been light in my vision. Where was the light now? I needed to see what was happening.

I moved forward slowly, taking one careful step at a time until I emerged into the room from my vision.

Light filtered through an opening above the creature's head to highlight the massive

body below it. It was a snake so large that it barely fit in the room.

Had this monster hatched from that much smaller egg?

There was no sign of the witch in my vision but a person-sized lump moved down through the snake's rippling body. Every small slide of its scales moved the lump further through the snake's digestion system.

Goddess Danu, please don't let that be Conn or Mulan that it's eaten.

I entered the room, blinking in shock at what I saw. A man's head and torso towered at the top of the snake. The creature was an oversized naga—an unnatural one. Somehow Hisser had managed to convert himself.

“Finally,” Hisser said, looking down on me. “I thought you'd never get here. Today, I will use your blood to repay the debt I owe.”

“Turning yerself into a naga didn't make ya any less the low-life, Hisser. We're all adults here. Why don't ya simply call it revenge?”

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“I’ll have that as well,” Hisser said, hissing at me as his long, forked tongue extended out.

I followed in the direction it flicked, trying to judge how much a danger that wicked, forked tongue posed to me. But what I saw were Conn and Mulan lying in the dirt. They were covered in green slime. The slime’s color reminded me of mucous and I quickly pushed that thought away. A woman couldn’t fight when she was grossed out and retching.

Poison, a voice whispered in my head.

I straightened at the word. Who sent that to me? I squinted at Conn and Mulan. They lay motionless but I could hear their heartbeats—slow and steady.

Conn? Is that ya talking to me?

We were never, in any form, a demon.

I wanted to smirk and accuse the voice of being ‘Captain Obvious’. I was beyond feeling snarky. I’d entered a zone for the insanely stressed. But somehow I knew the being owning that voice wasn’t with me in person.

Adrenalin had ramped up my intuition from a five to a ten because the answer came easily. Are ya the sentience of the Dagda stone?

We are.

We?I waited for more of an explanation.

No more questions. Pay attention.

To what?I demanded, but all I got was silence.

“Stop feeling so proud of yerself and do what ya promised,” a familiar voice ordered.

At first, I thought the stone was now talking aloud and meant me. I thought it right up to the moment I noticed Ezra glaring up at Hisser.

“Ezra? What are ya doing here? I sent Dylan out so he could contact ya.”

The fairy’s gaze switched to me. “Yes, I ran into yer far darrig outside. Snake scales are not a good look for ya. I love yer new dagger, though. Ya need a thigh holster for it. I’m sure it would look dead sexy on ya.”

The rest of the puzzle pieces fell into place as I stared at him. Ezra had been the tall, black-robed witch from my vision. My grip tightened on my dagger. “Ya’re the one behind Hisser’s transformation. Ya let him out of prison, didn’t ya?”

Ezra chuckled. “No, of course not. I influenced a guard and made him help Hisser escape.”

“Did ya leave Dylan alive?” I asked.

“Yes. I had no choice. The damn relic was still in his pocket. Even in its death throes, it has enough energy to protect him. A death blow would mean I’d soon face one myself. Relics of that sort are set up with tit-for-tat consequences. I outsmarted it once but I can’t risk doing that a second time.”

Ezra looked away from me and back to Hisser. “Stop stalling, or I’ll call the other witches. Well, I’ll call the ones ya haven’t eaten already. Yer name should be Glutton instead of Hisser.”

“I was hungry,” Hisser exclaimed.

Ezra chanted something and gripped his fist. Hisser curled into a ball and put human hands over his snake ears, which were now only holes in the side of his mostly human head.

I stared at my life-long friend who now wanted to kill me. “What game are ya playing, fairy? What is it ya want?”

Ezra turned to me and snorted. “This is no game, Aran. If ya weren’t so besotted with yer ancient one, I would have bedded ya and then made yer death painless. Ya forced me into doingthis.”

He pointed up at Hisser who was standing upright on his coils again. “He’s as insane now as he ever was but I had no choice except use him. It would take too much power from me to kill ya in a fight. I had to create a customized killer for the job.”

“What makes ya think Hisser will beat me in a fight?”

Ezra grinned and pointed at my dagger. “I couldn’t kill yer demon without risking the wrath of the gods, but Hisser’s venom is powerful enough to keep Connlander of the Fir Bolg unconscious. I bet ya don’t remember telling me that ya couldn’t call yer demon weapons without Conn knowing about it. That got me wondering if ya could call them at all if Conn’s power was suddenly unavailable to ya. And look at ya now—all panicked and sweaty. That spell ya put on yerself isn’t going to matter.”

“Ya can’t kill Conn, Ezra. It simply isn’t possible. And when Conn comes out of this

he will remember what ya did to him.”

Ezra shook his head. “The poison will eventually rot yer demon, which will make him have to regenerate. His shaman girlfriend was the perfect bait. She was so easy to influence. Do ya seriously think it was her idea to split up yer search for Hisser?”

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I blinked in surprise. Yes, I had thought that was Mulan's idea. And I had thought it was a good one. Had I been influenced too? How strong was the fairy's power?

"Ya might as well be shouting at me, witch. I'm strong enough to get yer far darrig's parents to tell me all they knew about the relic. Turns out that if ya know the right incantation, ya can make a naga from a snake shifter. Once the egg was formed, taking the rest of the relic's power was a bonus for me. The troll was supposed to throw the stone away."

Goddess, I seriously needed to learn how to keep people out of my freaking brain. "Ezra of Airing Dale, ya have more power than any fairy has ever taken back across the veil. Why are ya doing this? Yer greed dishonors ya."

"People on this side of the veil remember only the scandalous, exciting parts of a story, such as a fairy's physical limits. And ya're right—I'm full. I don't want to absorb the magick of yer relic, Aran. I want to take it with me. It will be my ticket back or my claim to fame among my kin. Either of those will change my fate."

"Ya'll have to kill me to get the stone."

"Yes. That's what ya said... and what yer husband confirmed. Jack Derringer is such an idiot. How did he ever get the idea that he was more powerful than ya were? Did ya let yer worthless husband think he was more powerful so he'd stay up for ya in bed?"

I snorted. "I finally figured out why ya never bothered to share magick with me, fairy."

Ezra chuckled. “Ya’re as naïve as ever. No female on this side of the veil is worth sharing my power with her with for any reason. I told ya I wasn’t planning to settle down in this realm and I meant it.”

“Ezra...” I don’t know what I intended to say. I guess I was still trying to grasp that the fairy I worked side by side with for so long had played me for a worse fool than Jack had.

What kind of shitty-man magnet was I? Did I need therapy for that crap?

I sincerely hoped Fiona hadn’t inherited this—whatever this was. Maybe I needed to ask Conn what kind of woman Murieann had been before Orlin came along.

My curiosity about Ezra’s motives disappeared when I felt a tremendous amount of slime hit the top of my head. Half-digested fingers and toes rolled off me as my head dropped to avoid as much of the slime as I could. Pieces and parts of Hisser’s not-yet-digested victims passed in front of my eyes before bouncing off my feet.

He hadn’t just spit his venom. He’d barfed on me.

I screamed so loudly in horror that Ezra and Hisser both jumped back from me. It was a full-out girlie moment—I admit it. Any woman I knew would have screamed as well. I’d warned Henry and Gale my work was gross, but this was disgusting times ten.

Rage swept through me as the dripping slowed. The venom sizzled all over me and caught fire as I looked up at the evil naga staring down at me in surprise. His bile burned around my feet and all over my body. Yet nothing harmed me despite the flames and smoke.

I put a hand on my chest and sent thanks to the stone.

Then I dropped my hand and glared up at Hisser. “Conn was right about ya. I should have killed ya like I killed yer witch girlfriend back when I had the chance. There will be no mercy for ya this time.”

Enraged at my remark, Hisser’s human torso shifted into a massive snake’s head with a hood that fanned out like a king cobra’s. Fangs descended from his hissing snake mouth as he struck at me. I jumped back and ran. Hisser got a mouthful of slime ashes, regurgitated body parts, and cave floor dirt.

Ezra’s laughter echoed in the space. “Ya can’t win this time, witch. I’ve been planning yer demise for years. Hisser is going to kill ya and I’m going to carve the stone from yer chest. Then he’s going to dispose of yer body so no one will be the wiser. Yer demon is going to have to start all over with a new descendant once his skin grows back.”

I gripped my dagger and wondered how I could fight a mountain-sized snake and a power-bloated fairy with something so small and insignificant. It was two against one and the odds were not in my favor.

Rasmus, I called in my head. If ya hear me, I seriously need yer help.

The guardian never heard my plea, but fortunately, the universe did. A struggling portal sparked, sputtered, and finally stretched into reluctant existence.

Ezra muttered swear words about it and stalked away from me to inspect the sparking oval. I was completely shocked to see my daughter come flying out of it, screaming her head off. Her body slammed hard into Ezra’s and the force took them both to the floor.

They rolled off and away from each other. I saw one chance.

“Fiona... run!”

Instead of running, Fiona groaned and rolled in the dirt as a grunting Ezra got easily to his feet. He started toward her, drawing a sword from the air. “Ya should have stayed in prison where I put ya, girl.”

I blinked in shock. When had the fairy learned to draw energy swords? I had specifically refused to help him do that. Yet here Ezra was, drawing one from thin air with no effort at all.

“Fiona!” My next scream got cut off as Hisser’s mouth widened enough to close over my entire body. Inside his mouth, I screamed in rage. I stood on the curve of his fangs trying not to panic as his mouth scraped closed.

Terrified to get venom on me again, I stabbed at him with my dagger. The tip of the dagger sizzled and burned a hole straight through his skin. Instinct had me spinning and carving a door for myself through the front of his mouth.

I vaulted through the opening I’d made and found myself hanging momentarily in the air.

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“Shit!” I said loudly and then screamed again as I fell.

Hisser was rolling in pain and thrashing his coils now. One of them rolled hard against me and sent me sailing toward a stone wall of the cave. In my panic, I struck out at the wall with the dagger. The weapon sizzled as it sank into solid rock. Still screaming, I slid down to the floor leaving a melted gash.

I yanked the dagger free of the wall and stared at it in shock. Melted rock dripped off the blade. “Thank you,” I whispered.

Then I heard the portal crackle again and I looked wildly around for my child. I saw Fiona yelling at a stranger while the still struggling portal closed behind him.

A few feet away from Fiona and the stranger, Ezra and his energy sword had been frozen in place. His hand and weapon were poised in front of him—poised as I last saw him leaning toward my daughter with full intentions of killing her.

Freezing a person was something I’d only seen Rasmus and Zara do. That thought filled me with dread about who the stranger was.

I shook my head at the chaos. I’d wanted help to fight but this didn’t feel very helpful. Part of me knew that was unreasonable since both Hisser and Ezra could have killed me and I was damn lucky they hadn’t.

Hisser wasn’t able to use his fangs now. I’d split his mouth and the muscles between his fangs. In a great deal of pain, he continued his distracting thrashing. It took me a few moments to tune Hisser out enough to listen to Fiona’s ranting.

“Never do that again. You could have flown us here, you big idiot,” she yelled.

“You can’t fly into a cave, woman. Use your brain,” he ordered.

“Cretin!” she yelled.

“Wimp,” he replied calmly.

Fiona muttered more under her breath but I didn’t take in what she was complaining about. The loud, painful hissing and the adrenalin from fighting for my life had my ears ringing.

Over the ringing, though, I heard the stranger laughing at my daughter’s fussing the same way I often did. The man looked older than Fiona, but the lustful look he gave her was in no way familial. I could only imagine what she’d said to him that I hadn’t heard. My eyebrows shot up when she blushed and stomped her foot.

Then she turned and saw me.

“Mom!” she yelled, making me wince enough to grab my ringing ears.

My daughter ran over to me arms out to hug but then stopped abruptly a few feet away.

“What kind of outfit are you wearing? Snakeskin does not suit a short woman. It makes your hips look big. And you’re covered in ashes and stinky goo. Mother, you need a shower.” Reaching out, Fiona pulled something out of what was left of my hair. It had been caught in a curl. “Eww...is this someone’s finger? The nail has a pentagram on it.”

She promptly dropped the finger on the floor and squealed. “Gross, gross, gross,” she

chanted, wiping her hands on her jeans.

My brain abruptly hit the reality that both Fiona and I were still alive and I laughed. I reached behind me, shoved the dagger in the back of my jeans, and threw my arms around my protesting child. Despite her size, I proved to be much stronger. I swung her around, laughing like an idiot the whole time.

She hadn't figured out that she'd saved me yet. But then it hadn't been her, had it?

I glanced over at Fiona's companion who was watching me with a grin on his face.

"Put me down. Mother, put me down, right now! There will be no more touching until you wash all the dead people out of your hair."

I lowered her to the floor but my smile stayed in place. "Thank ya for the help, daughter. Hang on while I finish my job. I have to free Conn and Mulan. I'll only be a few minutes."

I pulled the dagger the Dagda stone gave me from my belt and turned toward Hisser. Then I discovered I couldn't move my feet.

"Sorry, but I can't let you kill him. Not while I'm around," the stranger said, sighing with obvious reluctance to stop me.

"I appreciate yer help, stranger, but this isn't yer fight."

"It is now, and I totally blame your daughter for that," he said.

Held in place by stronger magick than the constraint spell I liked to use, I looked at Fiona, who I could see revving up to fuss at him over stopping me.

Shouldn't I be panicking again? Oddly, all I felt was a weird kind of relief.

Chapter Twenty-One

Iglared at my rescuer and wondered what I would owe him for his intervention.

I also wondered what he'd make me do before he freed me.

“I’m grateful ya stopped Ezra, but the snake fight is my battle. There will be no mercy for Hisser this time. He ate several of the witches that the fairy had forced to serve him. One of them might have been my friend. I can’t live my life wondering who else he’s going kill, use, or eat. So turn me loose and let me end this.”

The stranger’s second sigh was even louder. “I can certainly see where your child gets her stubbornness from. But I still can’t let you kill him. Now that I’m involved—thanks to your daughter’s insistence—I’m tasked to find an amenable solution for everyone.” He turned his head and pretended to retch. When he turned back to face me, he grinned even wider than before. “Doing good is my eternal punishment.”

Fiona snarled as she stalked toward him. “Look here, you six-fingered, silver-winged hooligan.”

Rolling his eyes, the man waved a hand and Fiona froze in place. She was as frozen as Ezra. I had met only one species with that sort of power over people. Normally, I’d have wanted his head for freezing my daughter, but I could understand him taking that action after she’d resorted to name calling. Getting your children to be polite even when angry was a talent all parents longed for, even the hypocritical ones like me.

I promptly decided I wasn't in the mood to chastise the being who'd saved my desperate Irish ass. So I smiled at him instead. "Six-fingered?" I asked.

Snickering at my question, which made no mention of the rest of Fiona's insult, he held up both hands. The stranger—whatever he was—indeed had six fingers on each hand.

My smile grew wider. "Fascinating. Were ya born that way?"

"Something like that," he said.

I could tell he was trying hard to come up with some story he'd thought I'd believe. I jumped right to the heart of things. "Are ya a guardian?"

"Well..." he drawled, looking up at the ceiling. "I'm not supposed to tell people what I am, but since your daughter can't keep her mouth shut, you might as well hear it from me. No, I am not a guardian. The ancient ones replaced my kind. They got called in after those like me were judged to have screwed up the job of watching over humanity. But have they really done a better job? I think that's debatable."

I laughed and rubbed my face. Should I feel guilty for laughing at someone who froze my child? When I tried to turn toward Fiona, I discovered my feet were free.

I fisted my hands on my hips and stared at him. "So what do think needs to be done? Prison is out. Hisser thinks he's a god and twenty years behind bars never changed his mind. I refuse to send him back there."

"Whereas a single day in prison changed you forever. I can see why you'd be disappointed in him. Prison did you some good. You don't tolerate bullshit the way you used to, do you?"

I narrowed my eyes and glared. “Are ya sure ya’re not a guardian?”

The stranger snorted. “You say that like you interact with them daily.”

“Can we get back to yer problem with my fight? My slimed friends on the other side of the room still need saving. Their skin is rotting away while we chat about yer reluctance for me to kill the creature who did that to them.”

My rant caused him to roll his eyes at me. “They’re not rotting. The demon would never let that happen to his magickal Asian. He’s too much in lurve...”

I should have been offended by his thick sarcasm about their relationship, but, Goddess bless, the man was a kindred soul. If he wasn’t a guardian, what was he? My mind scrambled to come up with a label. He was wicked. That much was for certain.

What was it Orlin said about the overseers of King Solomon’s twin rings?

Oh, right... one ring had a demon overseer and the other had an angelic one. This guy wasn’t a demon. I’d have sensed that in him. That narrowed my choice to him being the other type of being no matter how hard it was to believe.

Laughter nearly burst out of me as I tried to speak. “If ya’re an angel, ya’re certainly a wicked one. No radiant robes. No halo. Good Goddess, yer kind is nothing at all like people imagine them to be.”

“And you are so verypagan,” he said with a haughty sniff.

I laughed at that too. The angel—if that was his kind—seemed to see right through all artifice and into a person’s soul. This being was not the kind of angel Bridget O’Malley longed to meet. I bet Da hadn’t liked him, either.

But I liked him. I liked him a lot.

“So what’s yer name, angel?”

“Stop calling me that. I never told you what I was... and my name is Tony.”

I laughed again. “No, it’s not. Tell me yerrealname.”

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He pursed his lips and crossed his arms, not answering me. The angelic being didn't seem to want to do any of this. I think what he wanted to do was walk out of the cave and leave me to do what I pleased. But he couldn't because he was compelled to do something different than what made sense to him.

I understood that more than he knew.

I grinned at him as I crossed my arms. "So...Tony. Would ya like to hear a few suggestions about how we might mutually resolve this situation?"

Tony tilted his head and studied me. "Well, I can see your heart feels warm and fuzzy toward others most of the time—much more so than your testy daughter's."

"Fiona's father raised her during her teenage years. I regret that every day but she'll have to fix it on her own."

"Her self-centered sperm donor used Fiona's well-being to control your actions. I know all about your life from Fiona's stories, Aran of The Dagda. That's why I'm up for hearing what you have to say. It's very difficult for me to work out warm and fuzzy scenarios. I've gotten better over the millennia but still find it to be so very tedious."

A noise at the entrance to the room had my head swiveling on my shoulders. Dylan in his natural form stumbled in and stared at Hisser's giant snake form. His human torso had returned at some point. He had a bloody face and was still writhing in pain, but tiredness—no doubt increased by all those witches he was digesting—had slowed his thrashing to a slow slithering of his coils as he moaned.

I waved Dylan over and around Hisser. He looked up at me and Tony when he stopped beside us. Then he turned and stared at Fiona. To make sure he saw the whole picture, I pointed behind him too. Dylan jumped and rammed into me at the sight of Ezra in attack mode.

I chuckled as I pushed him away. “Ezra can’t hurt ya.” I smiled at Dylan as I made introductions. “Dylan, this is Tony. The frozen woman is my daughter Fiona. Tony had to shut her up for a few moments because she wouldn’t stop ranting. And Ezra... well, Tony stopped him as well. I would say Tony was the answer to my prayers, but I don’t think he’d see that as a compliment coming from a pagan like me.”

Tony held up a warning finger. “The only reason I stopped the fairy was because he was going after Fiona. My power is for protecting her and the life she lives while we’re doing her training. My power increases or decreases based on my emotional decision-making about who or what I’m charged with guarding. It’s very complicated and I can’t talk about my actual work. It’s forbidden.”

“It sounds like yer work involves being forced into thinking only good thoughts even when ya’re feeling wicked.”

He held out his hands, closed his eyes, and nodded solemnly. “It is a wondrous blessing to be so understood.”

I laughed and scrubbed my hands over my face. “Okay. Here’s what I think. Hisser was not born a naga. He was just a snake shifter. If ya can change him into an actual snake, we wouldn’t have to kill him. We’d give him to a zoo where he’d live out his evil serpent life. We could make him a hooded black snake. He’d be an anomaly and make the zoo a lot of money. They would treat him like the royal being he believes himself to be. Is that enough of a win-win scenario for ya?”

Tony’s eyebrows rose. “That’s brilliant.” Then his face fell. “Well, I’m not allowed

to do that to him, but your tiny friend can.”

“Tiny?” Dylan asked.

I rolled my eyes at Dylan. He really needed to get a handle on the whole being short thing. The far darrig totally missed the point that he was talking to a creature who stopped a power-bloated fairy mid-attack.

“Give Tony yer relic, Dylan. He’s offering to fix it for ya.”

“Yes. I can do that. Gimme,” Tony demanded, holding out his hand.

Dylan looked at Tony’s outstretched hand and then up at him. “I’m not tiny. I’m tall for a far darrig.”

“Get over yourself and give me the relic, leprechaun,” Tony ordered.

I nudged Dylan’s shoulder with mine. “He’s an angelic being, Dylan. Not the angel of the relic, but close enough to help ya.”

“Are you seriously an angel?” Dylan asked, clearly not believing it.

Tony shrugged. “I have six fingers on each hand. What do you think?”

It amazed me what great lengths Tony went to simply deny what he was.

Dylan leaned forward to count the fingers of the hand Tony held out. Finally, Dylan set the relic into Tony’s six-fingered palm.

“It’s all right. You can trust me,” Tony said with a grin. “At least this time.”

He took the relic and walked to Ezra, circling the fairy a couple of times. “Ah ha... found it! The fairy has stored the energy he’s absorbed in bubbles. He’s certainly well-organized for a power thief.”

I’d have to remember to tell Mulan that an angel confirmed her bubble theory. It would be interesting to see if she cared about Tony’s opinion. I smiled just thinking about the conversation.

Murmuring words that had me and Dylan covering our ears from the pain of hearing them, Tony drew out a stream of green power from Ezra’s side. I watched the green energy move into the relic. Dylan’s dead relic came alive in Tony’s palm, stretching like a person waking up.

When the green energy stopped, some brown followed it.

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Tony looked it over and then moved to the other side of Ezra. He pulled out some white energy and directed it into the relic as well.

The questionable angel smiled when he was satisfied. “Here you go, little guy. All fixed.”

Dylan glared at him for speaking to him like a child. “Thank you,” he said.

Tony shrugged. “I gave it an extra little zing for calling you a leprechaun. When I called you that, I didn’t know your kind considered it an insult. You should be flattered, actually. Most people like leprechauns but consider your kind to be thieves and pranksters. I can see you’re a nice guy, though—mostly. You need to stop cooking those books for your parents and find better work.”

Dylan snorted before looking guilty. “Did you really fix the relic?”

Nodding, Tony grinned at Dylan. “Yes, but the catch is that you have to do what Aran said to do to the giant snake thing—I mean, creature. Naga. Or whatever she said it was.”

Dylan shook his head. “The relic doesn’t work for my family. We only guard it. We’re not the least bit Abrahamic.”

Tony rolled his eyes. Then he put both his hands on Dylan’s shoulders. “We are all one, little brother. Watching it and not using it was yesterday’s work. The museum even made a clay replica for the Viking display. See? There’s absolutely nothing for you to feel bad about. The relic is yours now. Go forth and use its power well. ”

Dylan stared down at it. “I believe the relic is powerful, but it doesn’t talk to me. Aran said angel relics talk to their keepers.”

Tony turned to glare at me. “Of course, she did. Because if Aran hadn’t said that, you’d not believe that was a requirement. I swear, every species on this planet is so hard to help.”

Dylan glared at him. “You’re not very nice. I thought angels were nice.”

“Oh, ye of little faith...” Tony sang.

Then he put a hand on the relic and the other smack on top of Dylan’s head. The angel—who did not act like any angel I’d ever read about—hummed as some energy cord formed between Dylan and the relic.

When the cord faded from visible sight, Tony said, “Ta freaking da,” and stepped back with both his hands in the air.

I looked at Dylan. “Are ya okay?”

Dylan nodded. “I think so. Give me a minute.”

The far darrig walked away to stand at the exit. He held the relic in his hands. I watched his head bobbing up and down.

“It’s talking to him,” I whispered.

“Shush,” Tony ordered. “I can’t eavesdrop and listen to you at the same time.”

It was my turn to glare. “Dylan’s right. You’re not very nice.”

Tony, who I now saw was well over six feet tall, looked down at me. “Being nice is not a requirement for my work. All I have to do is be good at my job.”

I turned back to see Dylan walk directly to Hisser. He reached out with the relic, laid the stone on a giant coil, and closed his eyes. As Tony and I watched, Hisser shrank and transformed. Dylan followed the snake down until it was thrashing wildly on the floor.

When the change was done, an eight-foot black snake with a cobra hood remained. Dylan caught the snake behind its head and lifted it.

After tucking the relic into his pocket, the far darrig transformed into his human form, which was tall enough to hold the snake off the ground.

Dylan turned to me, smiled, and held up a thumb. “You have an empty animal crate in the back of your car. Can I put the snake in it?”

I hoped it wasn’t the animal crate Mulan had used for the kitten. A tiger cat on the verge of adulthood wasn’t the kind of animal ya locked up in yer bathroom when ya left the house.

“That’s a great idea,” I said, smiling at Dylan.

Sighing, Tony turned and waved a hand at Fiona. She snapped instantly back into yelling at him until she caught me staring at her.

“Did he freeze me? Tell me the truth, Mom. Did that SOB freeze me again?!” she demanded. She turned to Tony and glared at him, not waiting for my reply. “Freezing me cannot in any way be a legitimate part of my training. You are a despicable person. I insist you stop freezing me right now.”

And then Fiona stomped her foot like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum. I covered my mouth with my hand, hoping my daughter was too focused on her staring contest with Tony to notice my amusement.

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His sigh of resignation was loud—so very loud. “Okay... she’s not calm enough yet.” Tony waved a hand at Fiona until she froze again.

Then he turned and looked sadly at me. “Your father was such a calm, easy person. His training took only a month of human time. Your daughter’s training is going to take years... or even decades. I was so surprised by her caustic personality that I double-checked whether or not she was the one. But the ring adores her. I have no idea why. I don’t understand why it had to be her.”

He sounded so generally confused that my smile remained even while I used my new dagger to burn the slime off Conn and Mulan. Flames melted the goo off their bodies but never harmed them. It made me wonder else the dagger could do.

Tony instructed me not to worry about the remaining witches. He said he and Fiona would free them from fairy influence. It would be, he assured me, a valuable training exercise for her.

Tony smirked at me while Conn in demon form carried a frozen Ezra out of the cave like a football. A still-mad Fiona chose to exit with Mulan who was still reeling from what she’d gone through. The Wu Shaman wasn’t used to enemies who slimed her. She looked pale and like she needed a cup of her special tea.

Dealing with Ezra was a bigger decision than I could make alone. Absorbing power by itself wasn’t a magickal crime. It was what ya did with it that mattered to those keeping the balance. Even after all Ezra had done, I still wondered if he’d truly been bad the whole time I knew him, or if something had flipped a switch inside him.

As Tony and I walked out of the cave together, the not-so-angelic Tony put his hand on my arm. “Not outright condemning the fairy to death after he tried to kill you is very Abrahamic, Aran. Do pagans believe in turning the other cheek too?”

I tried to give his question some real thought. Then he laughed and I realized my soft heart did nothing other than amuse him.

Goddess, I hoped Henry found me that teacher soon. The parade of people walking through my mind was starting to annoy me.

After meeting Tony, I was never telling Father Lieberman what angels were really like. It would break Peter’s heart to know angels weren’t perfect and that they needed as much redemption as humans.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Isat on a plastic outdoor storage box on Fiona’s back porch enjoying the late afternoon breeze and soft rain. In the distance, I saw a green tent covering my new fire pit. The color of the tent faded into the greenery of its surroundings.

Nearby, someone had painted the ends of sticks in bright orange and used them to outline what I assumed would one day be a greenhouse.

Tony hadn’t allowed Fiona to even walk into her new house. Once he’d seen a frozen Ezra safely stashed in the foyer, he’d dragged resistant Fiona back outside. Before ya could say, “Bob’s yer uncle,” or “Fanny’s yer aunt,” he’d popped out a set of shiny silver wings, snatched Fiona up in his arms, and off they’d flown to fix the witches that Hisser didn’t eat.

I’d run outside after them and watched the two disappear in the sky.

It hit me hard that this was the moment I had to accept my daughter was truly not a child any longer. After Fiona's timely intervention today, worrying about her relationship with her angelic trainer was beyond me. I hadn't even waved goodbye because I knew in my heart she'd be back. Tony wouldn't let anything hurt her. He'd proven that.

I was a truly blessed woman. That hit me too when I realized that Henry and Gale hadn't even blinked at me making a frozen Ezra part of our foyer furniture so I could keep an eye on him. They'd even followed me outside when I'd chased after Tony and Fiona to see what the wicked angel was planning to do with my only child.

Henry made a sound of disgust as we all stared at the sky. "Is that irreverent being truly an angel? He doesn't act like one."

I turned to Henry and smiled. "Have ya met many?"

Gale giggled before confessing. "Henry knows because he dated an angel once."

"Stop," Henry said to her. "I told you that Seraphina and I were just friends. Angels are asexual."

I remembered the lustful look Tony had given my attractive daughter. "Yes, well, I don't think Tony is an asexual kind of angel. We need to keep an eye on him when he visits."

Henry huffed. "You have to know that Tony is not his real name."

I grinned and chuckled. "Yes, I know, Henry. But that's what he wants us to be called. What else can I do? Tony will be training Fiona to use the magick she inherited from my father. There's magick on both sides of my family, but only a few of my relatives got it."

“Your daughter’s type of magick is called apotropaic.”

I had turned him and blinked. “It’s called what?”

Henry rolled his eyes. “Your education is sorely lacking. Apotropaic means she has access to protector magick, but not all the time. Most of the time she will energetically read as a very non-magickal human.”

“She does read human, but Conn and I have always known Fiona was magickal. Ya can feel it when ya spend time with her.”

Henry frowned at me. “Apotropaic magickals usually end up protecting a powerful relic. The most famous was probably King Solomon’s ring. That relic—and its twin—can evoke an ancient contract with demonkind. The Abrahamic overseers refuse to risk letting it fall into the wrong hands. The responsibility tends to be inherited, but once in a while, it changes to others outside the family of the protector. Oddly, they choose non-Abrahamic magickals. No one knows why.”

I studied his serious face and tried not to think of Da’s ring. I didn’t want Henry or anyone else to know the truth. “Are there books on that in the house library? Or are those books in there just for show? Because I would love to read that kind of book. Humans don’t have many good books about angels.”

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Henry turned to me. “The books about the first angels burned in Alexandria. Humans never bothered to stop that from happening. I concluded from my studies that no overseer wants the beings of this planet to have any kind of complete knowledge.”

I sighed. “I don’t suppose ya made copies of the angel books when ya read them, did ya?”

Henry walked away without answering me. I heard Gale laughing as she followed him inside the house.

Fearing I’d offended Henry with a request he couldn’t fulfill for me, I’d left the house and come here to let him cool down. Was I brooding or hiding out? I couldn’t have said for sure, but I was enjoying the peacefulness of Fiona’s covered back porch.

If I’d had the ingredients, I might have made myself a pizza in the pizza oven that had convinced this cottage was her perfect home. It had been a long day, though, and I was too tired to fend for myself. Gale had promised me dinner in my room tonight and I was going to let her spoil me.

I was waiting until I thought Henry would let me go to my quarters. He had pulled up the carpet in my sitting room and refinished the wood floors under it. Henry had let me shed my gross clothes and grab a shower in the bathroom attached to my bedroom. But he’d also waited for me to finish to make sure I didn’t get curious and walk on the still-drying floor stain.

That sort of hovering control made me feel like I was living with Jack again. Like my ex, Henry liked to micromanage the details of everyone he served. But since he’d

helped Conn find a place for the statue of my frozen former lover in the foyer, it would have been churlish of me to fuss at Henry about anything today.

So I'd come here instead. Wishing the rain would stop so I could take a walk, I had just leaned back on my bench and closed my eyes when I heard Conn stomping toward me. The man stomped everywhere when he was in his human form and tense. I wouldn't be fussing at Conn today, either. I was too happy to see him.

I opened my eyes and smiled. "How are ya feeling, Conn? How's Mulan?"

Conn sighed. "We're both fine. I've been searching everywhere for you. The venom did something to my energy. I couldn't sense where you were."

The snake skin that had coated me during my fight with Hisser was nearly gone now, but some still lingered. "I think something is interfering with our normal senses," I said as I patted my chest where the stone lived.

"Well, I hope that's not permanent. Henry says you need to come back to the main house right away. You have unexpected company."

I blew out a frustrated breath. "Is it Ben? I told that man we'd talk about everything tomorrow."

"No, it's not Ben."

"Is it Tony and Fiona back to report on the witches?"

"No, and I can't tell you how much I do not trust that creature training her, Aran. He is not a real angel."

"Is he demonic?" I asked.

“No,” Conn grudgingly said.

I chuckled at his belligerent tone. “Then Tony’s an angel, Conn. Orlin said Fiona’s trainer would be one or the other.”

Giving up his argument, Conn held out a hand and pulled me to my feet. I moaned as I noted all my aches and pains. I hadn’t hit the cave wall but sliding down it while holding onto the dagger had strained all the muscles in my arms and legs. Carving my way out of a snake’s mouth hadn’t been easy, either.

“Can’t a warrior witch have a moment or two to herself?” I grumbled.

Conn laughed and hugged me. “Quit complaining. After what you faced today, facing down a guardian should be no challenge for you.”

“Is my visitor a guardian? I’m too tired to tell.”

“Henry thinks he is. I sense nothing right now.”

Today had been a wake-up call for Conn and me. There was no room in our work for complacency or arrogance.

We strolled across the connecting driveways in the mist. The property was so quiet that it felt like a park. I remembered a question I had meant to ask him. “I appreciate the wards ya put in place. Did ya have to ward out all the animals? I miss seeing squirrels and rabbits.”

Conn grunted as he turned to me. “Do you want the demon wolves getting in touch with their prey drive and feasting on local wildlife?”

“Good point,” I said, chuckling at his forward thinking. My smile faded slowly into a

frown. “I thought ya died today, Conn. It was the first time I ever realized that I could lose ya.”

Conn stopped and stared at me. I waved away his shock. “Oh, I know ya wouldn’t have really died but would have made regenerated in my lifetime? I thought I might die too, and realized I wasn’t ready to die. I want this crazy life we have together.”

“So do I.”

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I nodded. “I need to get better at protecting myself. I’m older, and maybe not better, but I’m still powerful. I barely survived today.”

Conn draped an arm around my shoulders as we walked. “Were you frightened to fight without me?”

I snorted. “No, I was scared shitless. Then the Dagda stone talked to me and that scared me too. The snake scales it gave me are fading finally, but it let me keep the fancy dagger. I’ll tell ya something I learned, Conn. Weapons, even the interesting ones, don’t have yer special way of reassuring me. I’d rather have ya fighting at my side than all the new weapons in the world.”

Conn nodded. “It was nice of the Dagda stone to help when you needed it, though. Things might not have worked out as well without its intervention.”

I grunted. “I asked it for a sword, ya know. I felt like fighting with that dagger was a test I barely passed.”

The demon I loved chuckled. “Let’s take a break from jobs for a while. We need to rest. Besides, I think you’re going to have enough to worry about in the next few weeks.”

“I know. I still have to send Ezra home. Is yer sexy fairy friend allowed to cross the veil whenever he wants?”

Conn nodded.

“Get in touch with Murray for me then. Maybe he can take word back to Ezra’s family. Tony said Ezra wouldn’t unfreeze until he was back in the land of his people. I’d drop-kick him through the mound portal if I could, but I can already hear Ben fussing about how unprofessional that would be.”

Conn’s smirk was a welcome sight. “On the upside, we’re getting hazard pay for Hisser. Ben interviewed the far darrig who showed him the hooded black snake. He’s using that, Ezra’s betrayal, and your visions to justify the extra money.”

I snorted and shook my head. “Great. Because more money makes everything better.”

Conn laughed at my whining. “It does most of the time,” he said. “Are you good to deal with your visitor?”

“It’s probably Rasmus. It would be like Henry to say Rasmus was unexpected. His sense of humor is drier than even yers.”

“Probably,” Conn agreed. I dreaded the fight I would start with Rasmus, but it was unavoidable. The best I could hope for was to delay it until tomorrow. “Go home to yer cranky Wu Shaman. Tell her I said not to lock that tiger cat in the bathroom because it will escape.”

“You’re such a worrier, Aran. The cat is in a cage in a spare bedroom. I retrieved it from Katie’s basement and Mulan built a giant cat tree in it. The kitten can’t climb the tree yet but I don’t think it will be long now. She plans to leash train the tiger cat.”

“Goddess, I don’t want to know this. That tiger cat is going to eat somebody and then she’ll brood for the rest of her days. There’ll be no living with her.”

Conn walked off laughing and I walked into the house. Once I’d cleared the threshold

I instantly felt him. My head raised to stare at my guardian ancestor who was sitting on one of the leather couches looking like a singer from an eighties hair band.

I smiled across the foyer at him, but not because I was glad to see him. I smiled because Henry hadn't deemed Orlin worthy of waiting for me in the library. He'd made Orlin sit in the foyer and there wasn't a drop of tea in sight.

I covered my mouth to hide my smile as I walked toward him. "Are ya here to tell me Rasmus isn't coming back?"

Orlin stood and shoved his human hands into the pockets of his holey jeans. Maybe he wanted to hug me and was afraid I'd reject the gesture. I probably would have.

"No," Orlin said. "He's standing by to return. I felt it best to announce us. He's bringing Zara with him. Because he was able to do her programming himself, it went very quickly. Together, we came up with an identity that we believe suits the situation and will ease her adjustment."

"Yes, I know Rasmus made her look like him so they could pretend to be siblings."

Orlin's hands dropped as he stared in surprise. "How could you know that?"

"Just a lucky guess," I said, fighting not to think any thoughts of scrying that he might pick up. "Where are they standing by?"

Orlin gestured toward the door. "He was escorted here. We need to do this outside."

"Yes, that's probably best," I said, walking outside with him.

Were the escorts here for Rasmus or because they weren't sure about Zara? This poor little human witch who outsmarted her wanted to know. But I didn't ask. I settled for

rolling my eyes at all the guardian drama.

“I regret that Rasmus wasn’t here to help you, Aran. Your demon butler told me what you went through today.”

I turned to glare at Orlin. “Henry is not my butler. And I’m used to Rasmus being gone all the time. Each time he leaves me without a word I miss him a little less. One day I’m sure I won’t miss him at all. When that happens, I’ll send him back to ya. But don’t worry, Orlin, I won’t do it for at least five years. I keep my promises. At least I have plenty of bedrooms upstairs. Yer name is on one whenever ya want to visit. I can even put ya next to the new room that Rasmus will be using.”

Orlin didn’t comment as we walked to the side yard of the house. Last week it was brown and barely more than dirt. Now it was a sea of manicured green. I assumed Henry had told someone to fertilize it.

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“I can tell you’re only being polite to me,” Orlin finally said.

I shrugged at his conclusion. “It’s been a long day and this is the best I can do with my attitude at the moment. Henry tells me there’s nothing wrong with fake politeness. I’m not convinced he’s right, but I’m trying it for his sake.”

Guardians descended from the sky like giant birds landing. I counted thirty-five before I stopped. What did the number matter? One or a hundred—they were all alike. They all thought the same.

I watched Orlin walk through the middle of them like a king. When he stopped, his body radiated the golden glow he had in his guardian form. Orlin ran his hand in a circle and a golden oval appeared. The energy brightened at the edges while it also flowed like golden clouds into the center.

Rasmus emerged from the portal carrying a woman who looked like him in his arms. It was the woman I’d watched him working on in my vision. A pleased looking Rasmus followed Orlin back to me.

Maybe I would have been less upset if he hadn’t left me without even saying goodbye. But he hadn’t and now I seethed inside at the unharmed sight of him. Yet I knew it would gain me nothing to be angry at him for any reason. My anger wouldn’t increase the guardian’s understanding of my feelings of abandonment. Fussing at him wouldn’t soothe the hurt in my soul.

I put a hand over my chest and felt a slight vibration. Rasmus might not know how I felt, but it seemed the Dagda stone did. The vibration calmed me enough to stop

resenting my feelings.

But seriously... how could I be so elated to see a man who left me behind without even looking back? I could have died today. I almostdiddie.

I wasn't up to dealing with this.

Rasmus should have waited until tomorrow. But what was tomorrow to him? He only cared about time when he was forced to vacation here.

"Is her name still Zara?" I asked.

"Yes," Orlin said. "We left as much knowledge of shifter transitions as we could. We hope her natural curiosity to learn will make her want to figure out how to convert the demon wolves back into humans."

"I hope so too," I said. "Thanks for escorting them, Orlin. Don't let me keep ya. I've got this."

Orlin tilted his head. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's not like Iactuallydied today. I just came close. But I'm fine now."

Surprising myself, I stepped forward and hugged him. His arms came around me and squeezed back gently.

Then I pushed away to talk. "Rasmus can brief me on how to handle the situation. We're going to be fine. I'm sure him having a sister will be yet another interesting experiment for him."

Orlin nodded, glanced at Rasmus, and then moments later walked away. Despite the

grossness I'd suffered with Hisser, I made myself watch Orlin's violent change to his true guardian form.

I never flinched once. I even gave him a smiling wave.

I'd gone to see the guardians in a vision and they hadn't known I'd been there. Now I knew for certain that they were not as omnipotent as they thought.

As one they all spread their wings and shot upward into the now early night sky like white rockets.

I turned to Rasmus and smiled as much as I could. It wasn't much, but it was all I had.

"Henry's put ya and Zara in two connecting bedrooms on the second floor. There's a bathroom between ya for sharing. If she isn't going to wake up in the next twelve hours, we can talk tomorrow. I don't have the brain power for a detailed discussion this evening. My weak humanity caught up with me today."

"How long was I gone?" Rasmus asked.

"Two weeks this time, I think. I was too busy to keep track."

Then I walked away and waved for him to follow me.

"Whatever I did to hurt you, Aran, I'm deeply regretful. I wanted to be here."

"Sure, ya did, Rasmus. And I'm sure ya're just as regretful as ya were all the other times ya left without a word. I'm sure no one else could have fixed Zara. I can even respect ya for putting her welfare ahead of everything else. Work is the reason ya're here on my planet, right? Resenting that would be illogical of me."

“You seem angry at me but I don’t know why.”

I stopped inside the foyer. One of Henry’s demons appeared at the bottom of the stairway. Goddess only knew what Henry heard of our conversation or picked out of my tired brain, but the young demon smiled as he nodded to me.

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I stopped and turned to Rasmus. “Okay. This is where I’m going to say goodnight to ya. It’s been a long day and I’m still not over what I went through.”

Rasmus stared down at me. “I’d like to hear all about it.”

I shook my head. “Not tonight. Tonight, I’m going to respect my own needs, which is to sleep alone and be grateful that ya’re not the person responsible for my happiness... or my safety.”

“I want to be,” Rasmus said softly.

I shrugged at his statement. “Yer decisions don’t show it, Rasmus. I admit that I don’t know what tomorrow holds. I’m tired tonight and I need some space. What I don’t need is ya warming my bed and not understanding what I’m feeling. I can’t explain it ya sufficiently and don’t want to try. I’m done with that and with letting ya put me last.”

“I know two weeks can be a long time in the human realm.”

I snored. “The two weeks ya were gone gave me experiences that showed me how out of balance I am.”

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“Well, yer scientist brain is going to have to wait to learn it. It’s yer turn to know what it’s like to feel shut out. And until I feel differently about yer repetitive abandonment, ya’re sleeping upstairs wither new sister. Everything else stays the

same between us. I'll train ya for yer job with the Shadow Breakers. I'll train Zara too if ya can interest her in it. Ya're welcome to stay here for now. That's the best I can do."

Rasmus looked at the woman in his arms. "I'm not that easily discouraged, Aran. I came back here for you."

I snorted at his declaration. "No, ya didn't. Ya came back to finish yer guardian vacation and spend yer nights in my bed. That may seem okay to ya but it's not okay for me. I deserve to bed a man I can count on to be there."

We glared across the distance between us until my lingering tiredness caught up with me.

"I need sleep. Let's see what happens tomorrow. I have to send Ezra back to his people and I have teachers coming. Plus, Mulan's parents will be here in a few weeks. We're still not moved in yet as ya can tell. And frankly, I need a vacation from my life."

The demon at the stairs cleared his throat. Rasmus glanced at him and nodded. His gaze stopped to stare at a frozen Ezra on its way back to me. "No one told me about this. The fairy looked like he was going to attack someone before he got stopped. That's an energy sword in his hand."

I snorted. "No one told ya about it because it wasn't a guardian who froze him. An angel did this to save Fiona. He indirectly saved me while he was saving my daughter. Everything is fine for now. Ezra's betrayal has been handled. I'll be sending him across the veil soon."

Rasmus shook his head. "I'll have to disagree with you, Aran. Everything is not all right."

“Suit yerself,” I said with a shrug. “I’m sure Gale will send food up to ya later. Henry moved yer clothes to yer new room already. Goodnight, Rasmus. I’ll see ya tomorrow.”

I was very proud of myself for not looking back. Even better, I got to my bedroom and didn’t feel any need at all to swallow my pride and go chasing after him. It helped that I found something better in my sitting room to swallow. The drink wouldn’t drown my sorrows completely but it might at least help me sleep.

Contentment flowed through me as I sat by the sitting room’s fireplace in one of the perfectly-sized chairs from the library and sipped a glass of Jamieson’s.

Goddess, I was a lucky woman.

Henry could be a bear at times, but when I hit my lowest today, he’d been every bit as thoughtful as his son. Ya couldn’t put a price on a man who made it his job to give a woman what she needed.

Maybe he could give the guardian I still loved some lessons.

— THE END —