



40 Ways to Watch Me Die

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Everyone knows phones and I do not get along...

Who has time to read phone messages? I barely have time to read stop signs or brownie instructions. Spontaneity is what gets my blood going. But not when I have to chase down a talking gorilla. Dylan is thrilled to be finally helping my team of troublemakers. Tracking down humanity's sentient ancestors is not something I ever listed among my job skills.

And now Ben has gone missing. Again. He called me the day I thawed out the fairy and fixed the jiangshi that is thankfully gone for good. Since he writes my paychecks, I tried calling him back, but his phone went directly to voicemail.

I don't know what's happening with Ben or the gorilla, but I guess it's my job to find out both. When this is over, though, the Shadow Breakers will owe me some comp time. I'm supposed to be on vacation. These new problems have totally screwed up the first date I've had in months.

And I don't like the way the female guardian keeps smiling at me.

The look in Zara's eyes makes me regret ever saving her. Thoughts of separating her head from the rest of her occur to me daily.

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Chapter One

Something about Ben's text messages nagged at me. All the magick I'd spent on Mulan's brother-in-law had slowed my thinking, so I was strictly a creature of instinct at the moment.

It had taken me an hour to read through them all twice. All I got for my trouble was more confusion. Ben wasn't answering my calls or returning them. The messages he'd sent hours ago hinted at something rather than saying straight out what was wrong.

Did he expect me to read his mind? I didn't know him that well yet.

In the few months we'd worked together, I'd learned Ben was paranoid and that his favorite word was discreet. Surely, he knew by now that I wasn't good at guessing games. Secrets forced direct people like me to play them, but my brain resisted.

After Jack's betrayal, I feared being too gullible. I balanced that fear by becoming more confrontational. On the bright side, explosive yelling when I got angry made me a little less prone to using actual violence to communicate a point of contention.

A god and a demon had trained me. By the time I drew my sword on a person, I'd already decided how best to remove their head.

What did I know about Ben anyway? I mean, really know.

Certainly, I knew nothing personal. I didn't even know enough to trust this wasn't

some sort of practical joke. Setting up a bogus gorilla hunt might be his idea of an impromptu training exercise.

And that brought up other questions. Did Ben expect me to figure everything out and then chase down the gorilla creature? Maybe I was supposed to call his bluff and deem the search a waste of time before I began it.

Maybe this was Ben's way of giving me a hard time for taking time off from work. Perhaps he was entertaining himself.

Goddess knew, my brain was too tired to develop a concrete theory about Ben's motivations. Unfortunately, I'd have to go check things out or I wouldn't be able to sleep.

After today, Mulan and I should have made an early night of it. We'd both spent all we had. Instead of sleeping, though, I would be doing a cloak-and-dagger favor because Ben's text messages were so angst-ridden. That was my life.

So Dylan and I snuck out, telling no one, especially the two guardians sleeping on the third floor of my home. I left Henry with orders to tell Rasmus and Zara we left on a work emergency but asked him not to volunteer details.

I didn't want the guardians plotting in my absence or coming after us. Mulan said she would summon Conn back to her before joining our search.

After what I'd seen her do to her demonic jiangshi brother-in-law, Conn should fear her more. Casting out demons for a living had been no joke for the Wu Shaman. Convincing that woman to leave her hair business and join my team had been a brilliant move.

At the moment, though, only two of my group traipsed through the park.

In his tall human form, Dylan strode several long strides ahead of me. Tracking a gorilla was a thrilling adventure for him. For me, tracking down a talking animal was like Ben assigning me to track down a troll.

Or maybe I was simply tired. My alleged vacation hadn't been very restful.

The far darrig I'd grown too fond of halted at a serene sanctuary where the overwhelming stillness of the trees replaced the traffic sounds. When he glanced back at me, his eyebrows shot up in surprise, possibly because he hadn't realized how far behind I was.

What could I say? I was too tired to rush tonight. Ben was lucky I hadn't pushed this wild gorilla chase off until tomorrow morning.

I smiled at Dylan and tried to be a better companion. "Have you ever wondered how secluded places like this manage to exist in the middle of a bustling city like Salem?"

Dylan didn't make a big deal out of my sluggishness. That was a smart move for him because I was still feeling testy about having to come out here.

"Conservation is a biological urge," he said. "Most creatures on this planet naturally want to protect the land they rely on. When humans follow those urges without resistance, they do things to save places like this."

I shrugged. If the far darrig was trying to tell me something, my brain wasn't receiving the message. My gaze took in the forest and the quiet. "Do ya have the stone with ya, Dylan?"

Dillion walked backward as we talked. "I carry the stone with me all the time. I hide it in a portable pocket dimension to protect it. I considered turning it into jewelry, but it's too big to wear."

I nodded in agreement. His artifact was a good handful of rock to pack around. Using magic to protect it was the better idea. “Good. Ya might have to interpret a bunch of grunts and grumbles.”

“Most people believe gorillas cannot speak in the same way as humans, although some speculate that gorillas can gain the skill when taught.”

“Didn’t they make a bunch of movies about talking gorillas?”

“Those movies were fiction, not fact, Aran.” Dylan rolled his eyes and pivoted to face forward again.

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He'd gone another ten steps when something fluttered out of the trees to the ground. It landed between him and me.

Dylan turned and watched as I stooped to retrieve it. I let my energy sword go as I swiped it up. When I shook the fabric out, I saw it was an adult man's t-shirt.

Dylan walked to me and sniffed it. "I smell Ben on the shirt. Do you think the gorilla got him?"

"I'm safe. The gorilla didn't get me," Ben's voice reassured us from the trees.

"Where are ya, Ben?" I looked up at the trees as I asked my questions. "Are ya hiding up there?"

"Yes. I'm hiding because I broke my charm."

"Charm? What charm?" I asked as my gaze searched the leaves. He was super bad at hiding because I couldn't see Ben at all.

"I told you to come alone, Aran. Is this how you follow orders?"

"Ya didn't say to come alone. Ya told me to be discreet, which I know is one of yer favorite orders to give. Dylan is the only one with me. Mulan will be here soon, though, and she's bringing Conn with her. If ya want to keep a secret from all of us, ya shouldn't have sounded so desperate in yer texts."

A round of swearing filtered down around me. It was like the trees both amplified and

constrained his voice. It was the strangest thing.

“This wasn’t how I meant to tell you this, and I certainly didn’t intend to announce it to the world.”

I looked at Dylan. He looked as confused as I felt.

I moved my gaze back to the leaves above my head. “Ya’re worrying for no reason, Ben. There are a lot more than three or four people in the world.”

Another round of swearing fell on Dylan and me. Finally, Ben heaved a sigh. “You’re a smart ass, Aran O’Malley.”

My grin at his complaint was wide. “I’ve been called much worse.”

Then, for some strange reason, I laughed. “If ya knew what Mulan and I did today, ya’d know why I’m so mouthy. Yer timing couldn’t have been worse. I’m dead tired and should be in bed recuperating.”

“Well, it wasn’t like I planned what happened. Some jackass ripped the leather holding my charm and took off with it. He was wearing a mask, and I couldn’t see his face. I followed him but lost his scent in the park.”

“Did ya just say ya followed his scent?”

“Yeah. I might as well get this over with. Brace yourselves,” Ben ordered.

A twelve-foot monster dropped from the trees and landed several feet in front of us. The energy sword was in my hand before I could question the action of calling it.

The monster straightened and glared at both Dylan and me. Its gaze went to the sword

and it grunted.

“And this is precisely why I never told you,” the monster said in Ben’s voice. “After watching you chop pieces off your ex-husband’s monster form, I figured you’d swing your sword first and ask questions later. I’m fond of my head and want to keep it.”

I let the energy sword fade away. “By the Goddess, Ben. What happened to ya?”

“Long before the military captured a guardian, they were playing with genetic alterations.”

I blinked at him. “So this is why ya were so sure nothing we did would stop them from experimenting.”

I watched as the monster’s gigantic head nodded. Ben’s shifted form was a frightening sight to behold, but he seemed to be the same old Ben when he communicated.

“You already know a little of my story. I was exposed to a biological weapon that was killing me. Whether that weapon was the result of an enemy or our own scientists, I couldn’t say. Of my entire team, I’m the only one who survived what happened to us. But as you can see, I paid an enormous price for my survival.”

“Ya hid yer secret well, Ben. I assume the Shadow Breakers know.”

“It was Ezra who tracked me down and talked me into sharing the truth. That was two years ago and before I met you. I’d been talking to them for quite a while. The job offer wasn’t really a surprise. It was mostly them wearing me down.”

“They have seers on staff. Ya can’t hide much from the organization. If the Shadow Breakers were looking for someone in this country with paranormal skills, they wouldn’t have stopped until they found one.”

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“After this happened, I took a long military leave and met my witch wife. She crafted a charm—a talisman—with strong enough magic to keep me from changing into this creature. The military has never seen me like this. As far as my military superiors ever knew, I showed some signs of changing forms, but then it all failed. They certainly never knew I found a way to suppress it. I partially retired and became a military contractor. The rest, you know. I temporarily got pulled back into the mess when they captured Rasmus. That’s why my name was on his hospital discharge papers. They needed someone who knew what they were doing and wouldn’t tell.”

Dylan watched Ben in silence. I swallowed hard and tried my best to see the real Ben in the monster his military had turned him into. “Do ya realize ya have pointed teeth and claws? I guess ya look like a gorilla, but ya also resemble Conn in his demon form.”

“They probably used demon blood to make me. I didn’t know demons existed back then. After what they did to people mixing guardian and demon blood, it’s fairly certain they used demon blood as the catalyst for my changes.”

“How long do ya stay in yer monster form without changing back?”

“At least three days. Sometimes it lasts a whole week. And shifting back hurts like hell. The last time I shifted, I couldn’t speak in this form. I could only grunt. I never know what will happen when I change. It’s one of the main reasons I don’t like to do it.”

I rubbed my eyes. It was so hard to think. “Can ya shrink yerself a bit? Ya’re too big to fit into one of the cottages. Or into my car. I’m unsure how we can get yer

monster-sized self out of here.”

“After dark, I can travel mostly unseen. Or you could order an apprehension van. I’d do it myself, but the claws won’t let me use my phone. My clothes are history. When I realized Felicity’s charm had been snapped off my neck, I ran here to hide. It was the closest park to a forest. Most of the change hit me after I got here. I haven’t been in this form in years. It must have further developed even though I suppressed it. My fangs and claws are much longer.”

Dylan shook his head. “Suppression will never be the right answer for you. You need to embrace your beast side and learn to control it.”

I blinked at Dylan’s statement. “Are ya sure that’s the answer?”

Dylan nodded as he looked at me. “Colonel Benson has a similar problem to what the demon wolves are experiencing. Theirs may also be a matter of control. Ben knows his original form. He’s shifted back and forth before. That gives him an advantage they don’t have.”

The gorilla monster shrugged. “I sure don’t feel like I have an advantage.”

“We’ll worry about ya shifting back tomorrow. Right now, I want to get you out of the public eye,” I said as I paced. “There’s a grove of trees surrounding my firepit and greenhouse. Maybe we could build ya a shelter in the trees there.”

“I don’t need shelter, but I do need trees.” Ben’s frustrated sigh whistled through a mouth of fangs. “The thief didn’t do this randomly. He went straight for the strip of leather holding my charm. Someone got ordered to yank my chain. What if whoever sent that person finds out about the Shadow Breakers?”

There was no reason not to tell him the truth. However, it surprised me he didn’t

already know it.

“Someone from the main office in Ireland would be dispatched to neutralize the situation. There are several teams trained to do precisely that kind of work. No one holds them accountable for the measures they take. They function outside normal Shadow Breaker rules.”

Ben covered his eyes with both of his clawed gorilla hands. He looked like he was wearing a deformed Big Foot costume. His true personality was at stark odds with his six-inch fangs and eight-inch claws.

I ducked my head to hide my smile, but he caught me. Ben grunted again. “I should have known you’d find this amusing. It wouldn’t be so funny if you were the one turning into a monster.”

“That will never happen because I’m monster-proof,” I said with a grin. “The Dagda’s bloodline is too strong to be tampered with. I’m glad ya didn’t turn into a power-hungry monster like Jack did. I can handle ya like this. Ya’re scary but reasonable.”

“I’ve never fought in this form or tried to live in it. The only thing I’m sure about is that I prefer staying close to trees. It’s an obsession I can’t seem to fight. I want to be up high above things.”

I blew out a breath. “Well, ya for sure can’t run around Salem looking the way ya do. Do ya think ya can make yer way to my house?”

“Maybe I can hitch a ride on some big truck. I can run pretty fast in this form.”

I snapped my fingers. “Or ya could lay across the roof of my car and I could put a cloaking spell on ya.”

Ben's clawed hands fell to his sides. "You must be joking."

I wasn't, but his shock had me chuckling. "Why wouldn't it work, Ben? My magic can hide ya. Dylan can drive us. All ya have to do is hang on tight. We could leave the windows rolled down a bit so ya can get a good grip with yer claws."

Ben's grunt bounced off the trees. "You need to buy a truck or a van."

I bit the inside of my jaw to keep from laughing. "I agree that it's starting to look like that might be a good idea. I'll give buying a bigger vehicle some thought."

We waited until dark to leave the park. Ben clung to my compact car with his claws, his giant gorilla-monster frame draped over the top. His feet protruded slightly beyond the hatch, but most of his large body sprawled over the car. The old tires squashed under his added weight, but thankfully none went flat.

I remained convinced this would work.

Dylan drove us all home and kept the speed under fifty. I hummed as the traffic went around us. No one paid much attention outside of honking about our slow speed as they passed.

"Are you humming a song about bananas?" Dylan asked.

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I stopped humming and turned to face him. My guilty giggle filled the air. “Sorry. I didn’t realize what I was doing.” I winced when Dylan chuckled and hoped Ben wasn’t overhearing us.

I had stopped Mulan and Conn from coming to the park with a text. Mulan tried to ask me questions about Ben’s situation, but I begged off because my thumbs were tired. We would have enough time for her to learn everything once we got home.

Henry texted me that both guardians were seated in their window perch on the third floor, watching for us to come back. I asked him if they were laughing or frowning, but he never answered.

I interpreted his phone silence as a clear sign they were amused by me sneaking out, which was nothing new.

But I felt quite sure even Rasmus would be surprised by Ben’s altered state.

Chapter Two

Night had swallowed all light except the artificial one that beamed so brightly over Mulan’s house that it lit up Fiona’s cottage as well.

It was nearing ten and dark as I headed to the grove with both guardians flanking me. I wouldn’t have avoided them tagging along so I’d simply invited them.

I briefly explained the situation and asked Henry to fix Ben a meal that he could eat around his fangs. He’d burst out laughing in our now empty foyer and walked away

from me without saying another word. Regrettably, I hadn't asked about food for Dylan and me, and we both missed dinner. I might have to invade the kitchen later.

Now that Ben was here with us, Dylan had retired to his room and laptop to do research. When I asked why he hadn't consulted his artifact, Dylan informed me that he had. The stone told him Ben wasn't a real gorilla and strongly suggested Dylan needed to leave him alone.

Maybe I was too blindly tired to see the danger but Ben hadn't scared me yet.

Rasmus turned his head as we walked to glare down at me. "Why didn't you involve us earlier? We would have gone with you."

I huffed as I walked. "Why didn't ya tell me Ben could transform into a monster? Being omniscient and all, I'm sure ya knew it the moment ya met him."

"No, I didn't know."

My eyes were wide. "How did ya miss it? Ya seem to always know those things about a person."

"Because I didn't take time to study his essence. Ben carries no guardian blood inside him. Only you and Jack do. My concerns were narrow at the time."

I refused to have this debate at this moment. I also refused to discuss my or Jack's guardian connections.

I glared at Rasmus in the dark. "When ya see him, it's plain that a demon's magic was used to create Ben. His witch wife made a talisman necklace for him that's suppressed his changes. Someone stole it from him today."

“And that could be another reason. The magic in the talisman his mate made may have been too strong for me to read him through it.”

I halted and grabbed Rasmus’s arm to get him to stop. “Hold on. Did ya just admit there was something on planet Earth that could block yer majestic abilities?”

Rasmus sighed as he glared down at me. “I’m simply pointing out that I’m not familiar with the type of magic Ben’s wife practices. I’m sure one of my brethren knows all about it. Once I learn it, I’ll be able to understand it.”

I grunted, let go of him, and started walking again.

Both guardians were much taller than me, but Rasmus towered at nearly seven feet. Yet even he was going to freak when he saw a twelve-foot-tall Ben. I wish I dared to take a picture of his face when he got a look. It was probably too dark for a photo, but it still might have been worth trying if I knew how to use my phone for it.

We stood by the firepit and scanned the trees over our heads. They looked up and couldn’t see a thing. Ben was as stealthy in monster form as he was in his human one. That spoke to how well he functioned as a beast. Did he see it that way as well? I doubted it. Given his first instinct had been to hide, it was obvious he’d never made peace with what he was.

“Are you sure this person obeyed you about coming here?”

I turned to glare at Zara in the dark. “Ben is my superior, not the other way around. I didn’t order him to do anything. He told he was strongly drawn to trees, probably because he can hide his monster form more easily in them.”

When Zara stared at me with a bored and disbelieving expression, I shrugged and rolled my eyes. The female guardian kept accusing me of being some aggressive

bitch who ordered everyone around. She was probably projecting her urges onto me, but there wasn't much I could do about it without coming clean and taking her head off.

The female guardian eventually laughed. "You command a demon to do your bidding. You turn ancient, powerful creatures into statues. Just what kind of creature do you consider to be a true monster, Aran?"

I couldn't see Zara's lips clearly in the dark, but I felt the female guardian smirking at me. "Have ya looked in the mirror lately?"

"Aran..."Rasmus said in a warning tone.

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A nearby thump shook the ground as Ben in his monster gorilla form dropped from the trees. He stretched out his long forearms and knuckle-walked to us with intimidating speed. Ben may not have assumed his beast form in a while, but the man had excellent control of his movements while in it.

Thinking of the stories he'd shared with me, I tried to do the math in my head of how many years had passed since they had transformed Ben.

Then another thought struck. Would Jack have adapted to his monster form if Rasmus hadn't forced him to change back to human? The thought of other man-made creatures roaming around looking like Ben gave me a shiver. If Zara and the military scientists had their way, there would be thousands of them roaming the planet.

Ben's hello grunt revealed his gorilla side.

Rasmus tensed beside me and straightened as he took in Ben's enormous size. I wanted to laugh at the guardian's startled reaction but settled for grinning in the dark. Rasmus hadn't reacted to the giant trolls this much, and they were nearly as big as Ben.

I looked up at the guardian. "Now, ya know how I feel every time I see ya coming toward me, especially when ya have yer wings out."

The guardian turned to look down at me in surprise. "If my larger size intimidates you, it doesn't show in your expression."

"That's because of my excellent training," I said and narrowed my gaze. "Intimidation

is felt by degrees. With size, it's purely biological. This is especially true for shorter humans."

I stopped lecturing and looked around. "Speaking of my fellow shortie—where is Mulan hiding? I thought she and Conn would have been waiting for us in the grove. I don't want to put Ben through his explanation twice."

Mulan and Conn emerged from their house as if they'd heard my question. The grove was located right behind their home. They crossed their patio and the small yard beyond it in less than a minute.

Conn merely chuckled at the sight of monster Ben. I walked over and smacked Conn on the arm when he was close enough. "Do not make fun of him. This is nothing he can control."

Conn laughed at my rant. "I wasn't planning to make fun of anyone. I was just noting how enormous he is and wondering how in the world you got him here in your tiny, decrepit car."

I glared at Conn. "He's here now and in one piece, isn't he?"

Conn smirked at me worse than Zara had. "The man smells like a demon more than a primate. Is Jack involved in scientific mischief again?"

I rolled my eyes at the snideness of Conn's tone. "No. Jack's evil scientists didn't do this to Ben. His transmutation happened years before Jack and his grand scheme. But it was the military who did this to him. They told him it was to save his life."

Ben grunted and held up one of his clawed hands. "Can we move on to the solution portion of this conversation? Someone stole my beast suppression charm, and I can't change back. That means I will be stuck like this for three days to a week."

Mulan crossed her arms and looked him over. “You look like monkey creature from horror movie. We have no tall blonde woman to calm you down. If you get rowdy, I will use Shaman staff to tame you.”

Ben’s soft growl was guttural and low. “I’m not going to get rowdy. Is my problem not clear here?”

Mulan shrugged at his growling. “We see strange creatures every day. Shifting forms is not a real problem.”

Ben blinked at Mulan. “It would be helpful to get my charm back so I can shift.”

I rubbed my forehead. All this chatter was giving me a headache. “Who knew ya well enough to suspect ya were hiding this secret, Ben? I remember ya said Ezra knew and had offered to help ya learn how to control it on yer own.”

A gorilla speaking with a Southern accent was hard to take seriously when your head hurt as much as mine did.

“Everyone on the Shadow Breakers hiring committee knew I possessed a beast form. We discussed it before they offered me the job. Ezra was among the group, but he wasn’t the only stranger who heard the whole story.”

I nodded. “It’s could ya talked to them. They would had dug until ya told them. Trust me.”

“None of them asked me to shift into my beast to show them, and I didn’t volunteer because it’s a painful process. That’s why I refused to list it as an asset when I took their job offer. They decided not to see my reluctance to use my beast form as a problem.”

I blinked in surprise. I'd always known Ben was hiding something. The Shadow Breakers hiring a human never made sense to me. "Do ya remember the names of the others ya spoke with when ya were hired, Ben?"

He shook his giant gorilla head. "I'm sure they introduced themselves to me, but who memorizes all the folks on their hiring committee? Plus, we did it online instead of in person. Once it was a done deal, I never gave it another thought."

I covered my mouth to hide my giggle. His alter ego did not diminish Ben's snarky authority. "I just have to ask ya this, Ben. Is it hard to talk with those fangs? Ya look positively prehistoric with them."

"I do occasionally puncture my lower lip, but I manage."

I giggled a little louder. "I'm only teasing ya. Ya're talking just fine." Then I sobered and sighed. "Is there any chance the military might have stolen yer talisman to see if ya turned into something after all? Maybe ya didn't hide yer talents as well as ya thought."

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Ben braced his knuckles on the ground and sank back to rest on his gorilla haunches. I covered my mouth with my hand again to hide my smile. Zoos would be off-limits for me in the future. I could never see real animals now without seeing the shifters I worked with. It was an odd side effect of my paranormal career.

“With my background, there is always that possibility. I’ve lived every day since you found me caged, wondering if someone was going to come after me again. The people your ex-husband worked with no doubt knew some of my background. The group of men I had with me were part of a special group specifically trained to fight paranormal creatures. The average human might not know much about what’s going on in the real world, but the military is very aware that normal humans are not the most powerful creatures on this planet.”

I turned and glared at Rasmus. “I don’t suppose ya made Jack’s military scientists forget Ben’s history when ya were re-programming them to forget the guardians, did ya?”

Rasmus sighed loudly and glared back. “No. We’ve discussed this many times, Aran. I didn’t make them forget anything. I planted a suggestion in their minds that their experiment using my blood had been a failure. I took no memories from them.”

I huffed, exasperated all over again to hear the replay of his half-ass efforts when he had been allegedly helping me. My gaze returned to Ben. “Then I’m guessing the military is back to thinking genetic alterations might be the way to go.”

Ben nodded his gorilla head and snuffled loudly.

“But I couldn’t say that for sure,” Rasmus said.

It was more like Rasmus wouldn’t say or even make an educated guess, but I would not debate this in front of Zara or Ben. What was done or not done wasn’t the actual issue.

“If it’s the military, we can’t do anything until they outright come after ya, Ben. Ya can stay here and be safe until ya revert to normal. What can we do to make ya more comfortable?”

“I’ll be safe hanging out in your trees tonight. We can talk about this again in the morning.”

Back in our bedroom, I looked around at my creature comforts and felt sorry that Ben had to spend the night in the grove. He’d fought wars and served his country. The man deserved better than to have to sleep in trees, no matter his form.

“I’m trying to understand, Aran. What did I do wrong this time, and when did I do it?”

I stared at the obtuse guardian. Rasmus had been smart enough to remove his shirt before pressing me into a serious conversation. He’d learned the value of distracting me, yet he wasn’t smart enough to figure out how his overly neutral interference might have caused Ben’s predicament.

The facts were plain to me and probably to Conn and Mulan as well. Neither of them had bothered trying to get him to see it, though, but I was stubborn.

I was also foolish enough to let it matter to me. Why? Because I wanted the man I was sleeping with to be on my side and not just give lip service to wanting to be.

I looked away when Rasmus went for the snap on his jeans and fought a sigh when I heard the rasp of his zipper moving down. No other man had ever reduced me to this air-headed version of myself merely by watching him undress. It wasn't fair.

Fiona had laughed at all my warnings about the allure of non-human men, but Rasmus was proof of my wisdom. The guardian could make me weak in the knees without laying a hand on me. Once he touched me in that intense, passionate way he had, my determination to educate him about evil humans became nothing more than wishful thinking.

"Why is it hard for you to understand? Zara understands. She might not remember her thoughts as clearly, but she still has a good grasp of human motivations. Most people are restless and curious and selfish, Rasmus. For some people, this means seeking money above all else. For others, it's about power. For scientists, it's about knowledge and fame. Regardless of what a human seeks, they won't stop seeking until they have either acquired it or had a massive change of heart."

"Precisely," a completely nude Rasmus said with his most serious expression. "I solved your problem with the military scientists at the moment it was happening. I stopped all the killing and redirected their energies to something productive. That bordered on interfering with their free will, but it was the only way I could see to help you."

My sigh was loud because I was tired of hiding how much he frustrated me. "Every interaction one being has with another affects the free will of both. Some philosophers even argue that free will is a myth. They say it's just a word we assign to the natural push and pull creatures have with each other."

"I'm still not clear on how what I did caused Ben's problem," he said, trying to pull my shirt off over my head.

I laughed at his efforts to undress me while we argued, but it was impossible to ignore his interest in getting me naked.

“Ya changed the minds of the scientists a little, Rasmus, but what would have happened if ya changed their minds a lot? They might have gone off and become shop owners or janitors without a thought in their heads to harm anyone. Instead, they’re back to studying how to make better monsters. They’re likely after Ben now, so they can study him.”

“I still don’t see how I was wrong. Intervening is not something we randomly decide to do. The consequences are carefully considered before intervention occurs. I had no time to go through that process. My need to protect you overrode my wisdom. Indirectly, this is your fault. If I hadn’t been so worried about someone killing you, I would have given the situation more thought, and perhaps Ben’s situation could have been avoided.”

I blinked a few times and rubbed my eyes. “Talking to ya gives me a headache, Rasmus.”

“That is regretful. My wish is to make you feel desired enough to desire me back. Is there anything I can do about your headache?”

My gaze fell to his erection and then raised to his sparkling eyes. “It’s a metaphorical headache.”

“That’s the absolute worst kind,” he said in a whisper. “I must think more about this discussion tomorrow. Tonight, I can no longer concentrate on your words.”

He had to bend a bit to reach the snap on my jeans. I locked my knees so I wouldn’t fall when he slowly undid the snap and slid down the zipper. His hands slid inside my jeans and lifted me out of them. He hoisted me up his body until my clothing fell to

my ankles.

By the time our bodies hit the bed, I cared too much about the present to worry about the past.

Chapter Three

It was the build-up of magic that woke me. I could feel it gathering in the air and suddenly found it hard to breathe. Whoever was doing this was drawing it from the house, from us, and... well, everything within reach.

My clothes seemed to be missing, so I grabbed the shirt Rasmus shed yesterday and slid it on to hide my nudity. His body required tall sizing. His clothing was so long that it fell to my knees like a gown.

The room was in shambles after our hasty strip show last night. All I had time to grab for my feet were a pair of comfortable slippers I wore only in my quarters.

A sleeping Rasmus didn't stir as I ran to the front door. I nearly collided with Henry, who was heading outside as well. "What's happening?" I asked.

"There is a witch at the gates. I asked her to identify herself, but she refused. Now she's trying to break through the wards."

"Are the wards holding?" I peered toward the long driveway that led to the house and cottages.

An explosion suddenly split the air. Our security gates crumpled before being lifted out of the way and flung aside. A woman wearing a long, bright shift and matching headdress now slowly walked down our wardless driveway.

Behind her, I saw a parked car just beyond the entrance. She'd driven here intending

to break in but wasn't taking the time to drive the lane.

I sighed and rubbed my forehead. Why did my life have to be this eventful every Goddess-blessed day? I hadn't had a break since the day Mulan's parents arrived.

"I guess the wards weren't strong enough," I muttered in frustration. "Excuse me while I greet our guest."

I elbowed my way in front of Henry and called for Conn's mantle. It covered me in glittering gold. In my hand, a green energy sword instantly appeared. Wearing nothing but the guardian's shirt under my armor, I felt more dressed for Mardi Gras than to fight a magic battle. However, I'd learned to be wary of visitors after the jiangshi also made it through our wards.

It was now glaringly obvious that we needed to up our warding game to keep people away. I should have taken Zenos, my dragon mentor, up on his offer to help set better ones. Pride had gotten the better of me, and I'd refused his help.

The brightly dressed witch hadn't just set the wards off like the jiangshi had, though. She'd obliterated them, so I pointed my vibrating energy sword at her and glared. "That's far enough. Why did ya break our wards?"

She crossed her arms. "I have come to free my husband. You have no right to hold him prisoner. He isn't an animal. He's a human."

Her husband?

My sword lowered a little as I thought of who in the world that might be. Snarling when I came up blank, I glanced over at Henry.

"Do ya know who she's talking about? Please tell me it's not Connlander."

Henry made a strange sound, like choked laughter, and then stroked his chin. “The only energies clinging to her are some human’s and your guardian’s.”

“My guardian’s?” I squeaked out before clearing my throat. “That’s impossible, Henry. Rasmus couldn’t be married to that woman.”

“Why not?” Henry asked.

I rolled my eyes when I saw his mouth twitching.

I looked back at the witch again and raised my sword to point it at her once more. “Who are ya calling yer husband?”

“Do not play me for a fool, witch. I know he is here. I feel him. His beast calls to me. It has always been so. That is how we met.”

“Beast?” I repeated.

“Hmm... the plot thickens,” Henry said with a smile. “Perhaps she is talking about your boss.”

“Good Goddess,” I said, staring at her. “Are ya Ben’s wife?”

“I’m his woman...and his witch. You should fear my wrath.”

I lowered my sword and let my armor fade away. “Ben’s hiding out in the grove. If ya give me a moment, I’ll show ya where to find him. Ya could have just asked us if he was here instead of breaking down our gates and destroying our wards.”

“I intended to kill whoever was in my way. Breaking the gates was a warning about my power.”

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“Ya ruined our security. Now I have to send Ben the bill. Next time, just identify yerself like a normal, civilized visitor. We’re not heathens, ya know.”

“I insist you produce him right now.”

I patted the air in front of me to console her. It may have also looked as if I was pushing against her concerns. Both were true.

“Didn’t ya hear what I said, woman? No one kidnapped yer man. None of my people would ever hurt Ben. We didn’t even hurt the wicked fairy when he was doing Ben’s job and treating us all like shit. That’s not how we handle things.”

Had Ben seriously not told his wife where he was or what had happened? I shook my head and rolled my eyes at the irony. If I had remembered he had a wife, I would have asked him about her last night.

A half-dressed Rasmus appeared behind me. “Good morning,” he whispered in my ear. “What is Ben’s wife doing here?”

Rasmus had lived with them briefly when he first returned in his new human form, so it was no surprise to me that the guardian knew her on sight. I’m sure the powerful woman would have been a challenge to forget, even if Orlin had tried to make sure Rasmus forgot everyone.

I chuckled at the strangeness of her randomly showing up and destroying our wards. I smirked at Rasmus. “She’s come to rescue Ben from our evil clutches.”

“It was a serious question. Why is she here?” Rasmus asked again while totaling ignoring my teasing.

A grinning Henry chuckled at our conversation and walked away. “Breakfast will be served in the dining room at eight-thirty. Please give me the actual number I will be feeding when you can. I’ll prepare for ten.”

“Thanks, Henry,” I called after him. Then I turned to the guardian beside me. “What time is it now?”

Rasmus shrugged in answer. Neither of us wore a watch because neither of us cared about time, especially this morning. That was the beauty of a sex hangover. All I wanted was to go back to bed with him and forget it was morning at all.

As if reading my thoughts, and he probably was, Rasmus grinned at me and plucked at the shirt I’d stolen from him. His fingers tugging on the material gave me all kinds of ideas about taking it off and rubbing my naked body against his.

I blew out a shaky breath and smiled through my lust. “Will ya fetch my sandals for me? I left them in the sitting room the last time I wore them. I’ll keep our guest company until ya get back.”

Rasmus smiled at me for calling Ben’s wife a guest and quickly left to do as I asked.

When we were alone, Ben’s witch wife turned to me. She wasn’t glaring any longer, but she still looked worried. “What happened to Benjamin?”

I sighed before explaining. “Ben said someone ripped the charmed necklace ya made for him off his neck. He turned into his beast shortly afterward and wasn’t able to change back. He sent several of us a text asking for help.”

His wife closed her eyes and swore in a language I didn't recognize. When she opened her eyes again, she looked even more worried. "Can he speak as beast?"

"Yes," I said, nodding to back up my words.

"That is a relief," she said with genuine emotion as she patted her chest. "If his beast is back, why did he not call me instead of you? I was worried sick when he didn't come home last night."

I shrugged and made a face. "I don't know why, but I can tell ya Ben can't use his phone right now because of his claws. If he'd asked me to call ya, though, I would have let ya know. Ya could have stayed here last night."

She looked around. "Where is here?"

I looked around. It still felt strange to claim it. "This is my home. My friends and I bought this place together."

"It is large." Her direct turquoise gaze turned to drill into me. "Why is an ancient bird man bringing you your shoes? Did you enslave him?"

"No," I said, trying my best not to laugh. "Rasmus is my..."

I stopped talking to look for the right word. I was too old to call him my boyfriend. We weren't engaged or married. The guardian was just here on vacation, and I was his human hookup woman. Normal human terms didn't fit our arrangement.

Labeling our relationship was impossible, so I asked her a question instead. "How did ya know what Rasmus was?"

The woman made a disgusted sound in her throat. "I felt his power when Ben dragged

him into our home. That one reeks of ancient magic. When I was a child, his kind visited my mother's family. They do not think like we do. If our village got set on fire, his people would have handed matches to the arsonists before they ever picked up a pail of water to help us save our homes. I can't believe you're sleeping with him."

"Me neither," I said with great honesty. "But I will say that Rasmus isn't quite that bad. He's picked up a pail of water for me now and again. That's mostly why I let him stay."

The Caribbean witch understood guardians even if she didn't have a name for what they were. But I would not be the one to enlighten her with nomenclature. The fewer people who knew what Rasmus truly was—the better off we all were.

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She frowned at my answer. “The bird men keep away from us. How did you meet his kind?”

“I rescued Rasmus from a bunch of military scientists. That’s how I met Ben as well. Rasmus has left me several times, but he always returns. And as I’m sure ya know, Ben hired me.”

The woman laughed then, and it sounded like music. I could see why Ben found her intriguing.

“Then I was right—you have enslaved him. Well done, witch. His kind is very powerful.”

Rasmus returned, smiled at both of us, and held out my shoes. I dropped to the concrete steps in front of the house and switched them out. “I’m not sure why ya’re smiling at me that way. Ben’s wife thinks I’ve enslaved ya.”

Rasmus scratched at the stubble on his chin as he grinned at both of us. “From a certain perspective, she’s not wrong.”

“Oh, stop,” I said with irritation as I stood. I reached up and scratched his stubble myself. I’d seen him shaving, but his human disguise didn’t fool everyone. “She knows you’re not human, Rasmus. Her comments weren’t meant as a compliment to either of us.”

It was bad enough that I’d met Ben’s wife wearing nothing but a man’s shirt, but her admiration of my relationship with Rasmus wasn’t any less bothersome. While he’d

been retrieving my shoes, Rasmus had pulled on a clean shirt exactly matching the one I was wearing. Having duplicates was such a human-male thing that I couldn't help sighing.

It wasn't like I wanted Rasmus to be more human. Or at least, I didn't think I did. But it was the little things like having two identical shirts that made him less intimidating. It made me forget he wasn't like me.

He probably did things like that on purpose. I knew not to trust his appearance or his human actions, but I couldn't shake my urge to want him to be simply what he seemed.

The three of us walked toward the grove in near silence. Rasmus and I looked like odd twins—or that's how I felt we looked.

Ben's wife gave us a few side glances and sly smiles, but her smile instantly switched off the moment we neared my sacred space. Her gaze swept the area, taking in my fire pit, seating, and a greenhouse that smelled of magical herbs.

“You put him in your sacred space to protect him.”

It wasn't really a question, and we both knew it. She was a powerful enough witch to destroy all the wards on our property, yet Ben had never discussed her magick with me. That meant he knew from the beginning what I was and that I would have understood his life, but he'd chosen to keep her power a secret. Since I'd done the same to him about Conn and myself, I had no room to complain. However, knowing might have spared us having to replace our driveway gates.

I smiled at Ben's wife. “His beast form was too big for any building except the barn. I put him here to cloak him from outsiders. In his beast form, he could probably protect himself in a fight, but I was trying to give him some temporary peace from having to.

He said he could be like this for days before reverting to human.”

“The longest I’ve known him to take his beast form was a week.”

With that pronouncement, Ben’s witch wife strode into the grove, careful to keep a respectful distance from my firepit. She walked under the canopy of branches and stared up into the leaves.

“Benjamin,” she called in a near shout. “Get down here.”

All twelve feet of Ben landed close to her with a loud thump that shook the surrounding ground. A low growl rumbled through him as he stared at her. He thumped his chest with a giant fist, growling loudly each time his fist connected. It was very Tarzan of him.

But I guess his wife didn’t find it as romantic and sexy as I did. To my amazement, she drew back her arm and punched him hard in his gorilla stomach with her fist. I had to laugh when the monster doubled over and groaned.

“You could have had them call me, Benjamin. I was worried sick, you old fool.”

“Sorry, Felicity,” Ben said roughly, still trying to get back his breath.

“First, it was the stupid fairy betraying you. Now I have broken the wards of the witch you bragged so much about hiring. Because of your thoughtlessness you must now pay to replace their entrance gate. Consider it your punishment for forgetting your wife.”

Ben gaped at her. Felicity’s name escaped his lips with a mixture of annoyance and anger. “Felicity... you could have just asked them about me. What did you do?”

“Why do you use that tone with me? I’ve had enough of your lies, husband. We will retire from the military nonsense, you said. The two of us will sip cold tea and swim in the pool you insisted on having installed.” She swept out a hand, indicating the grove. “Yet this is what we get instead. You have once again turned into your beast and have to sleep in trees. And your military is likely after you again.”

Ben moved away from her. A disconcerting symphony of choking animal sounds accompanied his knuckle-walking. It was only when I noticed the menacing set of fangs that I realized he wasn't a real gorilla.

Ben’s wife grunted in disgust. “Should I take a dangerous job as well? Is that what you want for us? I am not young any longer, Benjamin Benson. I am now thinking I chose the wrong man to commit to. Skills in bed are not enough—I told you that when we met. When you left your military job, you promised me a peaceful life so I could practice the magickal craft of my people.”

Her words caused Ben to speed up to a knuckle run while the noise he was making grew louder. Any fool could see he was putting distance between him and the witch he’d married. Her glare could have leveled a building. Was he gorilla laughing at her rant?

Ben would need to watch his human back when he returned to normal. His wife might stick a knife in it. Goddess bless, those two seemed married worse than Jack and I had been. Yet, I couldn’t help but grin at the two of them.

“Did they mix yer monster cocktail with saber-toothed tiger DNA, Ben? Ya don’t read as a total primate to me. The more I’m around ya, the more curious I get about what ya are. Those fangs don’t belong to a gorilla.”

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Like the scientist Rasmus was, he turned and studied Ben like he was a new bug he'd recently discovered. "With a sample of blood, I could easily determine which sentient creatures were used to create Colonel Benson. Have you ever been genetically tested in this form, Colonel? If so, do the records still exist?"

Felicity Benson turned her glare on Rasmus. "My husband is not your science experiment. He is a cursed man."

"Or a very blessed one," I countered lightly, trying my best to sound as rational as possible. "It's all about what Ben does when he's in this form. He's been nothing but rational with us so far."

Felicity rolled her eyes at me. "You are as bad as those who did this to him. They created a monster to use for their purposes, and my husband was smart to keep their success from them. Benjamin does not wish to be a freak of nature."

I smiled back at her. "I've seen a lot of monsters, Mrs. Benson. Your husband is not one in either of his forms. His monster side could be an asset to him. Instead of hiding from his beast, maybe Ben needs to learn to master it. I hate to say this, but Ezra—the betraying fairy—was right about that."

Felicity shook her head. "No. My husband has retired from that madness." She pulled a necklace from her ample cleavage. "Here, Benjamin. Stop acting like some Goddess-forsaken beast and put this on."

His swift obedience was the most amazing thing to watch.

Ben bent his enormous form in half when she motioned him down to her level. She slipped the necklace over his giant head. The leather strips got hung up on one fang. Mumbling under her breath, she patiently undid the tangle before slapping his massive gorilla shoulders. The most impressive part was that the force of her push shoved Ben back a few steps.

“Now stand still while I perform the spell,” she ordered.

Then she chanted and moved her hands around, forming an energy ball between her palms. Chanting louder and louder, she raised her voice, barked out a loud magickal command, and slapped the energy ball against the new talisman.

The energy ball pulsed like a heartbeat, and then the talisman sucked it in.

Ben’s giant form pulsed as well, and then his beast was simply... gone.

He’d reverted into a human so fast I couldn’t recall seeing him transform. Where once a twelve-foot monster stood, a completely naked Ben now stared at his wife, looking equally relieved and confused.

I covered my mouth to hide my smile. I hated to be the one to tell Felicity Benson, but Ben’s body looked nowhere near retirement. The man had muscles on muscles all over. That didn’t just happen because of his inner creature. Ben obviously kept himself in prime condition. While Felicity might have been one reason he did that, Aran would bet she wasn’t the only reason.

I gazed at Ben in all his masculine glory and wished with my whole being that Mulan had been out here to also appreciate the sight. We could have talked about his astoundingly nude body for days.

Rasmus bent to whisper in my ear. “I consider that amusement in your eyes to be

highly suspicious. Are you lusting for your boss?"

I turned to the man wearing a shirt that exactly matched mine. Despite his ability to read my thoughts whenever he wanted, it would be mean of me not to explain the nuances.

"Ben has sculpted his body into a piece of art. A woman would have to be dead not to feel admiration for his physical beauty. Haven't ya admired women other than me?"

"Yes," Rasmus admitted easily, "but I was never tempted to do more than look. My lust for you is for much more than your body. I crave all of you."

I smiled because he truly understood... for once. "Good. I feel the same about ya. I'm quite sure it's the same for Mulan as well. It's very human to look and admire, but most of us tend to be loyal to our chosen mates. It creates a serious lack-of-trust issue when ya do more than look."

"Well, I strive to blend in with your species. It's good to hear I'm succeeding with my fidelity to you." Rasmus smiled at me. "I greatly enjoy being called your mate. Is that the term you wish us to use?"

This was one of those times that I wished I hadn't asked for the real guardian back. I had called him my chosen mate, and he'd referred to me as one of a species. Words mattered so much more than most males ever got around to realizing.

My disappointed sigh was loud.

Felicity Benson chose that moment to step fully into her husband. Her voluptuous body blocked most of him from my view, which I decided was a shame but quite understandable. I would have done the same in her place.

“I made an extra charm long ago in case you broke the first one,” she told him. “It shocked me when I felt someone tear the other one off you. Since I didn’t want anyone studying it, I spelled the old charm to turn to dust. Let them study its ashes if they wish. They will learn nothing from inanimate bits of clay.”

“So his talisman stays linked to your magickal spell?” I asked.

Her nod was curt. She didn’t trust me with complete answers, and I didn’t blame her. I dealt with this every time Zara questioned me.

I wouldn’t have been any more comfortable explaining my magic to Ben’s witch wife. But already I respected the woman’s power.

More—I respected what her magick had allowed her to do to help Ben. What she did with the talisman was fascinating. In a way, it would have been good if Zara had been present. My instincts were singing about Ben’s talisman.

Zara combined the magic of an ancient civilization with a transmutation spell that the gods of my people had once used to create wolf shifters. What if the female guardian could program the reverse of those spells into a talisman the demon wolf women could wear and use?

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The other guardians confirmed that the demon wolves were linked to Zara's magic, and there was no way to break the connection.

It would be great to learn more about Felicity's magic and how it worked. It seemed to be a natural counterbalance to all things science. That fact alone made it more valuable than she realized.

Conn walked out of his house in a torn t-shirt and a pair of old sweats that had seen better days. Mulan walked out behind him.

In his hands, Conn carried a second outfit matching the one he wore. Henry must have caught him up on the situation. I think my demon caretaker had demon spies posted all over the property. I'd nearly grown used to his clever omniscience.

But I'd never seen Conn looking so unruly. Mulan must have given him a hard time about his fancier workout clothes. My fashion conscious demon loved his brand names.

I smiled when Conn handed the extra clothes to Ben. He'd brought a pair of men's sandals too. In human form, they were about the same size.

Turning his back to the rest of us, Ben slipped the clothes on. It was a shame when his fine backside disappeared from view. Mulan had missed the best show but I'd bring her up to speed later.

"Let's go to breakfast," I said when Ben was fully dressed.

“What about your gates?” Ben asked.

I shrugged. “Henry’s people will keep watch on the place until we get new ones. We’ll replace the mechanism easily enough. The warding was the true loss. Now I will have to come up with some new ones that can’t be broken as easily by powerful strangers.”

I saw Felicity look guiltily at Ben, who shrugged and shook his head. My grin included both of them. “Come on, I’ll tell ya about what we did to Mulan’s brother-in-law over breakfast. It will give ya a good laugh.”

Felicity turned to her husband. “I can see why you protect her, Ben. Her refusal to allow herself to be disturbed by trouble makes her a mighty magickal.”

Ben chuckled. “Well, Aran isn’t always rational. She’s just good at knowing when to be.”

“That comes with my advanced age,” I said as we walked back to the house in a group.

“What age is that?” Felicity asked.

I judged her to be somewhere in her late forties or early fifties. “Forty, and so far, I’m enjoying my maturity.”

“Ah...” Felicity said. “Forty is the year we confront our eventual death.”

I grinned at her comment. “I’ve had some aging anxiety about turning forty, but I wouldn’t say I worry much about dying.”

“That is because you face your death every day and consider such fears to be a

foolish waste of time,” Rasmus declared.

I shrugged at his accurate summary. “Risking my life has always been part of my job—part of what I was created to do. That’s why protecting my home means so much to me. It’s the one place I get to stop worrying about dying for a short while.”

My morbid declaration seemed to silence everyone. We completed the rest of the journey to the house without speaking.

We were almost at the doorstep when the sharp metallic twang of an arrow slicing through the air caught my attention. Just as I looked up, I saw a winged man suspended in the air, aiming his bow directly at me. My body jerked as the arrow he’d shot pierced my upper chest just below my shoulder and exited out of my back.

My fingers touched the entry point and came away red. An inch or two lower, and it would have pierced my heart. My entire chest exploded with fire, and I fell to my knees, unable to help doing so. Blood poured from the wound on both sides. I could see it staining the front of my clothes and feel it running down my back.

I looked up again. The bowman who shot me still hovered there, watching me bleed. There was too much distance between us to determine his identity, but his intent to kill me was unmistakable.

Given that I was rapidly bleeding out, he might have even succeeded.

I saw the winged man lower his bow. He made some sort of frustrated sound and then flew away.

Pain from my wound gripped me so hard I nearly couldn’t breathe.

Was my attacker a guardian, a vengeful angel, or some other winged creature? Maybe

it was one of those fake guardians like the ones Jack's military scientists made. If I died, I would never know.

Goddess, why did my ex-husband and his mischief always pop into my mind when things went badly? Sometimes I felt like I would never get over the sneaky bastard I married and divorced.

My last clear but crazy thought was to wonder if Rasmus had any more shirts matching the one the bowman had just ruined trying to kill me.

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“Conn, take care of her,” Rasmus ordered. I watched as black wings sprang from his back before he launched himself into the sky.

Do not fear death, Aran of The Dagda. We can heal you. The ancient one knows that.

I nodded to the voice speaking in my head as Conn scooped me up. I couldn’t find my way past the pain to think clearly enough to answer. “The stone says it can heal me, Conn. Try to stop the blood flow if ya can, though. I’m growing weaker because of it.”

Conn growled in anger as he carried me to my bedroom. Mulan muttered something to herself in her native language before dashing ahead of him to fetch towels from the bathroom to protect the bed covers. I wanted to laugh at her worry about sparing the blankets when I was so close to dying on top of them, but it hurt too much to smile.

“Did ya see what he was?” I asked weakly as Conn eased me down onto the towels. Mulan reached around him and put a thick, folded one under the back of the wound.

“I saw wings. They looked like guardian wings. But he spoke without harming us. It was all irritated cursing when he discovered his aim hadn’t sent the arrow through your heart,” Conn said, his sharp demon fangs grazing his bottom lip as he talked.

I reached up and pecked on one fang with a fingernail. “Rasmus went after him. Let the guardian figure this one out. Take care of everyone else, Conn. Please do this for me.”

“I would have done so without you asking,” Conn said flatly.

“I know. Ben... his problem... I...” I tried to say more, but speaking became too hard. I couldn’t get my breath any longer.

Conn growled again as I stopped trying to speak and let my head roll to the side.

Closing my eyes at that moment seemed to be an excellent idea, so I let the approaching darkness take me.

Chapter Four

When I woke from my nap, I found myself alone in a cave. Or at least it looked like a cave. Was this a dream?

Curved stone walls and a dirt floor fit well with my theory. The flicker of torches casting shadows on the stone added more ambiance.

I strolled through the cave, thinking it felt like a medieval castle hallway. Where in bloody hell was I?

I put one hand on my chest over where the stone lived in my body, only I couldn’t feel it like I normally did. My fingers nervously explored my skin in a frantic attempt to find the sacred artifact that I had fused with to stop these situations from happening.

“Hello, beings of the stone. Are ya hearing me?”

I pounded my chest several times with a flat palm, but the stone still didn’t respond. Nor did I find it with my fingers. As impossible as it seemed, I felt like someone had ripped the Dagda stone out of chest.

Was I dead? One of my trembling hands reached out in panic to grip the nearest stone

wall. A shooting pain tore across my upper chest. When my wounded shoulder gave out, the rest of me fell against the cold rock wall.

My body obviously hadn't yet recovered from being shot.

I pushed myself away from the wall with my good arm and continued walking. There was a bend in the stone hallway, and I followed its curve into a large, open space. It was part library and part magical practice room. A small cauldron hung in the fireplace that contained a small wood fire.

I felt quite at home until I saw the two still bodies stretched out on rock beds. There was one man and one woman and they looked actually dead. Someone had put them there and then folded their hands over their stomachs like ya saw when a person lay in a coffin.

I stood staring at them until I heard footsteps behind me. Swinging around, I tried to draw a sword, but the energy wasn't there for me.

Goddess, this was worse than when Hisser captured Conn. I felt nothing inside my body except my fragile humanity. Plus, my physical injury was too great to protect myself.

A man wearing a cloak Merlin might have worn walked into the space and raised a hand palm out to me. Feeling no magic in myself, it was good that my presence alone worried him. I hoped this was just a really vivid dream and not some astral event.

I cleared my throat. "Where am I? How did I get here?"

"Let's start with introductions," he said. "I'm One of The Three."

My gaze returned to the prone people lying on the stone blocks. "Are they the other

two of yer set?”

His gaze followed mine. He looked as if he'd never seen them before. “Yes. They are with me but not in my form. It was a kindness that The Dagda allowed them to sleep at the same time.”

“So The Dagda did this—created this?” I asked.

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“We did not finish our introductions. Who are you?” he demanded.

I glared at him as much as I could. Pain made me want to drop into a ball. “My name is Aran O’Malley. I’m a daughter of The Dagda and the current keeper of the Dagda stone.”

The man looked at me and blinked several times. “I see,” he said, then laughed. “Actually, no, I don’t see, but this is obviously possible since you’re here. Is your body still alive? I’ve been diligently working to keep your body alive.”

“Well, I hope it is,” I said, feeling strange to be saying it. “Some flying man shot me with a metal arrow. It went straight through me.”

“Yes, I’ve been working many healing spells to counteract its effects. I cast those in a room that contains the regeneration magic of the fairy folk.” His hand reached out of the cloak to rub one side of his face. “Perhaps I brought you here with one of those spells. They are old magic and sometimes cause side effects. How very strange that you found us in the void. But then, you are the first to genuinely call on us in a very long time.

“Are ya one of the mages powering my Dagda stone?”

“I am,” he said.

“What is your name?”

“One of The Three. I know that’s odd, but I have no other. Perhaps I did at one time,

but I no longer recall it.”

I blinked at his answer and inclined my head toward the two sleepers. “So the three of ya chose to power my version of the Dagda stone.”

“We were friends—are friends. In our time, we were accomplished mages. We thought we could challenge the gods and rule the people. Our foolishness cost us our humanity.”

I shook where I stood. “Is there a place I can sit down? I’m not feeling my best.”

“Almost dying will do that to a human. It fascinates me that your ethereal form retains your feelings. That must be from the connection you maintain to your physical form. Can you walk with me? The healing chamber is much nicer. I only fight from this room when I need the help of Two of The Three and Three of The Three.”

“Do they wake up to help ya?” I asked as I stumbled after him.

“No. Only their minds wake to join with mine in battle. The two of them chose eternal rest rather than for one of them to live without the other. I bear the burden of constant awareness for all three of us. I haven’t minded this fate since the first century.”

I frowned at the dirt floor. “It’s been thousands of years since the Great War. It seems like The Dagda might have released ya from this burden by now.”

“My corporeal body is long gone. I appear to you only as the echo of it, frozen in time.”

“Like a computer hologram?”

“Yes. That comparison works closely enough. I’m surprised you understand that technology.”

I shook my head. “I saw it in a movie once. A friend and I watch a lot of science fiction.”

“Ah... I see,” One said.

I stared at him. He looked real to me. I felt real to myself. “So you’re not a real person then? How does that work?”

“I’m not real the way you are real. I exist in a way your limited human mind can’t yet grasp. I had to live this reality before I understood it.”

“Ya sound like this guardian I know.”

“The comparison does not insult me. I do not understand why those you call guardians feel superior. I share your philosophical questions about their attitudes and thinking. But they are very powerful.”

One of The Three agreeing with me about Rasmus and his kind made me feel better. However, I was still struggling to accept the explanation of his fate. “Don’t ya ever want to escape this place?”

“No. There is no returning to what once was. Besides, I am happy here. I find discourse with you to be quite challenging. Your predecessors feared our magic too much to communicate. They issued the occasional command but weren’t talkative. You are the first to visit. I do not know how that is possible or even why you would do so.”

“I woke up in her stone hallway. Or rather, some part of me woke up. I don’t know

how it happened. The last thing I remember is losing so much blood that I passed out in my bed.”

One of The Three guided me to a large, well-worn chair. “This furniture is old and unused because I no longer require the pretense of sitting. It’s solely made of magic but should hold your spirit form well enough.”

I lowered myself down with great relief. “The chair is fine. Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

“Do ya have any idea how I can get back to my body?”

One of The Three looked up and studied the stone ceiling. It had to be at least twenty feet over our heads. “Perhaps it will work similarly to your out-of-body travel while scrying. That is your term for astral travel, is it not?”

Of course. She was currently unconscious in her physical body and traveling in astral form. Why hadn’t she thought of that?

“Do ya think ghosts might be people who’ve left their bodies and find they can’t get back to them? I’ve heard that happens when people are killed traumatically. Ya lose yer physical form too fast to process the loss.”

One of The Three chuckled. “It is a viable theory. Do you fear becoming a ghost?”

My shoulder still hurt, but I no longer felt like I would fall. “Are ya truly able to save me?”

“Yes, even if I have to regenerate you completely. So long as your dying takes time, we can restore you. Now, if you lose your head in battle—well, that’s something we won’t be able to fix. I suggest you allow your various parts to pass on if that happens. Lingerin would indeed make you a ghost or even something worse.”

“Sounds like good advice,” I said, trying not to sound sarcastic. I had a hunch that One of The Three wouldn’t get it. “Since I’m for sure not dead right now, dying is

something I prefer not to do anytime soon.”

One of The Three walked to a cauldron. No fire was under it, but the cast iron lit from within when he stood over it. He selected a long crystal wand from a nearby table and tapped the edge. The sound it made resonated in the room. He chanted until the sound faded away.

He paused and looked at me. “You are correct. Your physical body still lives and breathes. Those you consider friends are watching over your physical form. Only one of them knows your true self does not currently inhabit it. I believe it was wise of you to cultivate so many connections with such powerful beings. Lust aside, I get a sense that your bed partner likes you more than you like him. I found it quite amusing that the dark witch believed you’d enslaved him. And she was being totally honest.”

So he had insights into everyone and not just me. “Does Felicity Benson practice dark magic?” I asked.

“Dark versus light is a matter of belief, Aran. She calls on dark gods for some of her power. The life she once lived built up a reserve with them. Once she uses up their magic, though, she will be powerless or have to make other arrangements. This is true of many witches. However, your magic is limitless because of your openness to all the many possibilities in your realm. You are very much like The Dagda himself.”

“Is that an insult or a compliment? Don’t ya hate him for what he did to yer friends and ya?”

“I felt anger and sadness in the beginning. Eventually, I accepted his gift of redemption. I could be reincarnating every few years and starting over all the time. Instead, my soul is full of light, and I have more magick now than ever. Immortality suits me. My companions do not feel the same. They miss being physical with each other.”

Yet they had all made a deal to keep their magick over dying. Did I feel like that about my power?

I practiced little magick in the seven years I'd spent in Demon Hunter prison. I'd stayed in prison for Fiona's sake and would do the same again.

But it hadn't been the practice of magick I'd missed the most during my incarceration. It was the absence of those I loved and not being able to be with them. I missed the laughter and the hugs. I missed spending time in their company.

I rubbed my shoulder, which was feeling much better. "So, which of my friends knows I'm not in my body? I hope ya don't expect me to guess because I suck at guessing. I either know or I don't. Right now, I don't."

"You know instinctually which one knows. It is the being you share magick with every chance you get. Do you realize that you're mostly an experiment for him and his kind? The watcher was celibate for centuries before you. I can tell that from reading his energy. You're the only female energy he's been exposed to that permeated his aura."

"Don't ya miss having bedroom companionship yourself?" I kept asking personal questions because it was hard to believe what I was seeing would ever be enough for any being in any form. He watched over his comatose friends and waited for me to need him.

One of The Three smiled. "My light form feels no hunger, no thirst, and no lust. The primary drivers of humanity do not affect me any longer. I am like the watchers were when they first came to our planet. I exist as a being of light but with my human conscience mostly intact. The watchers try and try to learn to be human, but most find they cannot achieve it. Your grandfather had more success than most. That's how he won your grandmother's heart."

I laughed dryly. “I don’t think Orlin’s human form reveals much about what makes a good human. I’m not even sure Orlin makes a suitable guardian—or watcher, as ya call him. I know you like to use the old-school term for his kind.”

One of The Three smiled at me. “It was a great tragedy that your powerful grandfather lost his life so horrifically and that he couldn’t tell your grandmother what happened. His regeneration was neither joyous nor victorious when it was done. His grief over her loss remains with him still. Perhaps your watcher grandfather succeeded at learning the most about humans because he suffered like one.”

“So Orlin truly did love Murieann.”

“Yes. And she loved him deeply in return. They connected in ways most beings never get to do. Her only mistake was not being honest with your father from the very beginning. Just like a chronic disease, living with regret can have long-lasting and detrimental effects on one's well-being. Your father deserved to hear the truth from his mother.”

A wave of dizziness washed over me. “I think I need to go back soon. I’m feeling woozy.”

“Yes. I agree. I will withhold the irrevocable part of the recovery spell until you are back in your physical body. It would be unfortunate for it to enter a coma state because you were not present.”

“Did I come here because I was very close to death?”

One of The Three shrugged. “I can’t be completely certain, but I would say no. I think you just wanted to have a concrete reason to believe that the mages in the Dagda stone truly meant to heal you. Seeing us in person was your way to do that.”

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That reasoning made complete sense to me. “It was good to get to know ya, One of The Three. I’m sorry ya’re stuck here forever. It doesn’t seem fair.”

“I am not alone, Aran of The Dagda. My comrades are always with me... and now I have you to converse with. This is more life than I’ve had in times past.”

I rose carefully from the chair. My legs were like jelly, and I wavered on them. “Could ya help me get back? I’m not sure I can make it.”

He blew out a breath. “Well, I could help you, but you probably should do it on your own. It’s for the best. Please tell Connlander of the Fir Bolg hello for me. I appreciate the great care he took of the stone all these years. Tell him I finally believe he was right.”

“Right about what?” I asked.

One of The Three chuckled. “There’s no time to get into the details. It’s a very old matter between us, but he might want to know how much I have changed. Is he happy these days?”

“Yes,” I said. “Conn has fallen in love again. Mulan is a Wu Shaman.”

“Is she the strangely amusing woman you consider a friend?”

“Don’t ya already know what I think and feel for Mulan? She has people like ya powering her staff as well. A dragon mage explained things to me.”

His unconcerned shrug surprised me. I felt my eyebrows raise.

“I can see why you would think that we would know. But we know only what we need to know, and that amount varies from day to day. It is a concept you wouldn’t understand, but the primary effect works like short-term memory loss. In times of trouble, though, I can access those memories as if I thought of them every day. I just don’t walk around with them all the time.”

“Ya might be surprised by what I can understand,” I said to him with a smile. “The guardian—the watcher ya mentioned—he thinks I can’t understand him, but I know him better than he realizes. I don’t always like him, but I know him.”

My host pointed his finger. “Hurry now. Go back through the hallway. Don’t let any dead ends bother you. Beings of light pass through stone with no problems.”

Beings of light? Was that what I was? “Will I ever see ya again?” I asked.

“I’m not sure, but we’ll be in touch. If you need me, simply tap on your chest. I have no choice except to respond. We have a contract with you and The Dagda. It is much like the one you made with the demon king.”

“Okay,” I said, limping away. Half of my body felt like it would never work again.

“Watch your head, Aran. Don’t beat it against the stone when you pass through it.”

“Okay. I’ll be careful,” I said as I hobbled back through the room with the other sleeping mages.

When I found the hallway walled up at the end, I sighed in frustration.

“I’m going home,” I said aloud, announcing my intentions.

Then, I made a run for the stone wall blocking my exit. I hit the wall, bounced off it, and found I hurt more physically than I ever imagined I could.

Then, suddenly, I got sucked up and passed right through.

I screamed at the same movement and sat up in bed with every cell in my body protesting the effort.

Rest, One of The Three ordered in his commanding voice. The recovery spell needs you to remain as still as possible. Stay in bed, stay still, and think healing thoughts.

Strong arms caught me in reality and gently pushed me back down on the pile of pillows under my head. “Where did you go?” Rasmus asked softly.

“I fell unconscious from the blood loss. I traveled astrally and met the mages who power the Dagda stone. Not all of them, though—just the one that is awake for all three of them. He doesn’t remember his old name. He calls himself One of The Three. He was pleasant enough but refused to help me get back here. I had to run through a stone wall to escape.”

“The void is not a tranquil place to be. It can be very confusing to someone who isn’t dead.”

“Is that where I was?”

Rasmus searched my face. “Do you not know where you went?”

Now, I was doubly confused. “No. I think I went there to ask if they could keep me from dying. One of The Three said he would regenerate me if necessary. He told me not to be afraid.”

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Rasmus blinked in surprise several times before speaking. “So the artifact in your body is a sentient entity in its own right.”

“Specifically, he said he and his two comatose friends were light beings.”

My guardian arched an eyebrow. “To live within the void, he would have to have evolved beyond his physical human form. I spent some time there but found I missed the stimulation of being physical. That’s why I opted to take on guardian duties. I prefer having some sort of physical form.”

“My head hurts as bad as my shoulder now. I’m going back to sleep.” I closed my eyes only to pop them open again. “Wait... did ya find the bowman?”

Rasmus nodded once with no expression at all. “He will no longer be a problem for you.”

“Why not?” I asked, wincing as I twisted my shoulder, trying to turn toward him better.

“I called my brethren to help. He was one of the manmade guardians. A faction of the military sent him to neutralize you. The attack on Ben was related to the attack on you. They know Ben’s secret.”

I laughed, even though it hurt. “Say it like it is, guardian. The bowman came to kill me because the military knows I ruined their experiment. I knew I should have killed those scientists and all those soldiers they experimented on. I knew someone would retaliate if I didn’t. We’re not talking about a dark coven. Ben’s part of the military

believes they can erase anyone they consider a threat.”

Rasmus made a face. “Your bowman was not one of those you faced during your monster battle. He had nothing to do with that incident. He was elsewhere at the time doing other things.”

I frowned at his statement. “Maybe he wasn’t directly involved, Rasmus, but ya can bet whoever sent him to shoot me was. Whoever that is doesn’t fear me, and it would serve me better if they did. I bet the manmade guardian was watching us and waiting for someone to take out our wards so he could catch me off-guard. Talk about strange coincidences.”

“One of his comrades stole Ben’s talisman. It was a lucky guess on their part that you would rescue Ben and deal with his issue. They didn’t know about Ben’s witch wife, but they probably do now. If Felicity hadn’t broken your wards, the arrow might not have gotten to you.”

“How many of them were there?”

He ducked his head. “Must I give you a number? They are no longer relevant.”

“I know ya didn’t kill them, Rasmus. How many of them were there? I want to know what I was up against.”

“Three hundred sixty-seven. We gave them all amnesia. They will remember who they once were but not the last five years of their lives. It will cause chaos for many of them. The risks of not doing something were too large. The guardians value your health above their neutrality. Congratulations, Aran. My people care more about you than about the general welfare of humanity.”

“So ya didn’t neutralize them just because it was important to stop them,” I

concluded.

“No. But saving you indirectly brought about that effect.”

She didn't have any frustrated sighs left in her. Rasmus still didn't get it. He didn't understand the difference between good and evil humans. At least he understood the concept of protecting the people ya cared about. I guess I should be grateful for that, at least.

“Thanks for going after the bowman. Were all of them man-made guardians?”

“Less than twenty of their number had been weaponized with genetic changes. The others were mostly soldiers trained to fight paranormal creatures. Since I had the most experience, I altered the man-made guardians and changed them back into humans. They may retain more memories than their full human peers.”

I nodded against the pillow. “Hopefully, we can postpone setting new wards until I'm healed.”

Rasmus lifted my hand and held it in his. “Ben's wife laid some basic magickal protection of hers around the property. Her power should hold most threats at bay. Felicity said she couldn't leave your home unprotected after you protected her husband. She feels terrible about how she handled things.”

“That was nice of her. I want to like her because Ben loves her.”

Rasmus inclined his head in agreement. “You should rest now and heal. I don't like watching you come so close to dying.”

“I don't like it either. That's as close to death as I've ever been,” I said, smiling when he laughed. “Thanks for going after the bad guys, Rasmus. Ya saved me the trouble

of doing so. I hope yer amnesia plan works.”

“My brethren were thorough in carrying out the task.”

I sighed heavily, suddenly exhausted. “If ya haven’t already, tell Ben what ya did. He needs to be aware of the danger. It’s that I don’t trust his wife, but Mulan and I want to make sure his property has the same level of warded protection as ours.”

Chapter Five

Despite Mulan’s efforts to keep them blood-free, the covers and sheets got ruined. The next day, Rasmus carried me into the bathroom to soak in the tub.

While I was getting clean, Henry's people swiftly removed the bloody bedclothes and replaced them. By mid-morning, I felt nearly strong enough to get up and walk around but decided not to chance it. I was too tired to protest when Rasmus told me I needed more rest. And he was right.

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I put a hand on my chest and sent my gratitude to the mages of the stone, particularly to One of The Three. True to his word, he'd healed me faster than I would have said was possible.

A mild vibration tingled my fingers in response to my whispered gratitude. I sighed at the drama of it all, but things could have gone much worse.

Henry brought in several pizzas that evening for dinner and arranged them on the bottom of our enormous king bed. Rasmus propped himself on the pillows beside me, his long legs folded under him.

Everyone else carried in chairs from the sitting room.

Conn looked me over. "Are you sure the being you met wasn't a near-death hallucination?"

"The mages in the stone were as real as you are, Conn. The one I talked to said he exists as a light being. I don't exactly know what that means, but I know it's a thing."

Mulan stopped eating and sighed. "Since Aran talked to it, shaman staff never shuts up. It is as bad as nagging family was. There is no peace now. I must clear house energy every day."

I ate my pizza in silence. There was nothing I could add. The light beings of the Wu Shaman's staff always spoke kindly to me. I had no clue why they were giving Mulan a hard time.

I looked at them all. “My scheduled vacation time is nearly over. Ben would probably give me an extension, but I’ve had enough of this chaos. I’m ready to do something normal, like chase a troll down or bust up a dark coven of witches.”

“That’s fine, but you still owe me a date,” Rasmus said around a bite of pizza.

My mouth twisted at the reminder. “We’ll have weekends still, and there will be downtime after we close cases. I’m sure we can work a few dates into our schedule.”

“That’s all I needed to know,” he said and went back to focusing on his food.

Rasmus had taken care of me non-stop since I’d gotten shot. I couldn’t justify teasing him about his one meager ask of me. He was trying to court me and wanted to be more than my bed partner. I appreciated his efforts, as any woman would.

Zara waved her half-eaten slice of pizza in the air. “Would your witch friend talk to me about her husband’s talisman? I understand her magick differs from yours, Aran.”

I chuckled at the thought of Felicity Benson and me being friends. “She’s not really a friend, but I’ll ask her. I’d like for her to talk to you as well. Maybe she’ll do it because she feels bad about destroying our property.”

“Thank you. I’m excited to learn her secrets.”

I smirked, knowing for sure the female guardian spoke the truth with those words. Zara soaked up magickal knowledge like a sponge. It was the application of that knowledge that concerned me. Rasmus would need to keep close tabs on that conversation if it happened.

I turned to the one person I always called my friend. “Have ya recovered from yer family visiting, Mulan?”

“Yes. Good riddance, they are gone,” she said, wiping pizza sauce from her mouth. “Brother-in-law makes them treat me with respect now.” She grunted in disgust. “Family fears my Wu Shaman power, which is improvement over their disgust.”

“So, are ya ready to get back to work?”

“More ready than you, witch. You still look near death. I can go back to hair shop if I get bored. It is no big deal to me what you decide.”

I grinned at her rant and looked to the demon who loved her. “What’s yer vote about going back to work, Conn?”

“I just hang around for the food,” he said to make me laugh.

And that’s what I did. I laughed at myself for having felt the need to even ask. “I guess I’ll call Ben tomorrow then. Where’s Dylan?”

Conn grinned. “The far darrig had a date tonight.”

My eyebrow arched. “Well, that’s nice. Is it with anyone we know?”

Conn dabbed at his still-grinning mouth. “Sort of... she’s one of Gale’s people.”

“Are ya talking about her DNA people or Gale’s demon tribe?” I asked.

“Both, actually,” Conn said with a chuckle. “Her name is Rachel.”

I chuckled at the idea of Dylan mustering up the courage to date a demon. “Well, I did push on him to be social. He needs to make new connections after his parents sent him away.”

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Everyone stopped eating at my announcement. I winced before explaining.

“Sorry. I thought ya all knew, but I guess Dylan’s not the type to gossip about his life, is he? So yeah... the far darrig went home after he disposed of Hisser, and his parents threw him out. Dylan said they were highly upset when he told them the artifact talked to him. Poor guy was devastated by their outright rejection. He never even got a chance to explain about working with an angel or that he’d found a magickal calling.”

Conn frowned at his last bit of food before wolfing it down and shrugging. “Disappointed parents can change their minds. I hope the far darrig remains open to them.”

I nodded. “I told Dylan the same thing. Then I called Ma and told her that I loved her. I’m also grateful my daughter and I get along. These are among the many things I no longer take for granted in my life.”

Henry appeared in the doorway and looked directly at me. “I’m sorry to interrupt your meal, but could I speak to you about a business matter when you’re done?”

“Absolutely,” I said. “We were just discussing getting back to business ourselves.”

“Let me know when you’re available,” Henry commanded, and then he left.

I sighed at Henry’s non-reaction and went back to eating.

Conn’s thoughtful throat clearing got my attention. “Henry and Gale have scheduled

their first retreat guest. The spa and pool are being finished this week.”

I lifted my chin. “Thanks. That explains his formal request.”

Conn shrugged. “Some of their guests are not easily confined to their retreat areas, Aran. Are you truly willing to have a bunch of magickal strangers walking around the house? What good are wards in that instance?”

“Don’t ya trust Henry and Gale to vet the guests and keep them from intruding?”

“Yes, but their concept of acceptable risk might differ from yours. I think you need to run your own security checks on the guests. I would volunteer for that task, but it would cause a familial disturbance none of us would want to hear about. I doubt Henry and Gale would ever forgive me.”

“Why? Because ya’re their king, and they have to obey ya?” I asked.

“No. Because I’m their child. They still think they know better than me in every circumstance not associated with making kingly decisions. It’s an illusion they refuse to give up and one I decided long ago wasn’t worth fighting about. I simply do what I want and let them fuss.”

I chuckled at the demon drama going on under my roof. Of everyone in the room, I could definitely claim having had the best parents. “I don’t want to insist on doing my own checks. That makes it seem like I don’t trust them when they’ve done nothing so far to make me question their judgment.”

“And this is why they adore you,” Conn said. “They consider you gullible and easy to persuade. This is why I brought the subject up. If you take the head of one of their guests, their retreat hosting career will be over for good.”

Conn's summary made me laugh. I gave Rasmus a look. "Do ya remember yer parents, Rasmus?"

"I do," he said, studying the amusement on my face. "Not all beings on my native planet chose to procreate and raise progeny. My father and mother had fifty-seven children born over their six hundred years together. As far as I know, all of us became scientists. My parents complained because none of the children they created chose to be poets or musicians. Both were flatly against my pursuit of enlightenment after only living a single lifetime on our planet. Their wish was for me to incarnate many times and experience other professions."

"So ya were a rebel even back then," I said with a smile.

Rasmus arched one eyebrow. "Not in the manner you mean, but I did evolve into a light being against their wishes. They sent me off with sadness when I surrendered my physical life. I held hope that my parents would understand once they experienced it themselves. I was not present to witness their evolving, nor have our paths crossed again."

"Did ya truly have fifty-seven siblings? Where in Danu's name were ya born in that lineup?"

"Is that all you heard of my explanation?"

I laughed nervously. "Mostly."

"I was one of the last four children they created," Rasmus said.

Zara sighed. "I wish I could remember my time with them."

Rasmus and I both turned to her with wide eyes. He cleared his throat. "One day, you

will remember both the good and the bad of your childhood, Zara. I hope your memories of it are filled with experiences that make your heart glad you were born.”

“Do you not remember what they thought of me?” she asked.

Rasmus shook his head and smiled warmly. “You were older and already evolved into a light being by the time I was born. You lived your original life without me ever being part of it.”

“How intriguing it is that we are together now,” Zara said quietly. “I’m not sure I enjoy being your older sibling. That has not been the impression I carry about our relationship.”

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“Ya might be the older sibling, Zara, but ya’re not the most serious one. Rasmus is far more serious than ya are. I’m sure that makes himseemolder. It’s also the fact that he’s male. I can say that because Conn has been like a brother to me, and he’s hundreds of years older.”

“Not that anyone can tell I’m old at all. I make sure they can’t,” Conn said with a smirk.

Zara chuckled as she rose. “Thank you for saying all that, Aran. I appreciate the moral support.”

I winked at her. “Don’t get me wrong, though, I do like your serious brother. I wouldn’t let Rasmus be a bad sibling. I’d fuss at him until he did right by ya.”

“I’m quite sure your fondness for my brother makes Rasmus much less serious than he would be in his normal state,” she said.

I smiled but didn’t reply. I think it was the nicest thing she’d ever said to me.

After everyone left for the night, I texted Henry. His people discreetly popped in and cleared our dinner remains with impressive speed.

I looked at Rasmus after they left. “Any chance ya could carry me to the library? My tired butt feels the need for a different chair. Ya can put me in the one that adjusts to my size.”

“I’ll do that so long as you let me return and carry you back.”

“That’s a good deal,” I said, grinning up at him.

The guardian lifted me from the bed and carried me out of the bedroom in his arms. It would have made any princess green with envy.

Henry arrived alone, carrying a tray with two mugs of his special hot chocolate. It was a decadence he plied me with often. If the demon laced it with some special magick that made me more accommodating, so be it.

Now that Conn had made me wary, I’d have to ask Henry about what was in it one day. But I’d nearly died this week. The drink was delicious and reminded me why being alive was such a wonderful thing.

I happily sipped as I smiled at Henry. “I’m guessing ya want to tell me about the guests ya have coming to stay.”

“Yes. The two of them are a clandestine couple. He’s a centuries-old warrior centaur who is having an affair with a diplomatic fairy sent to broker peace between his herd and another. They are hiding the recent turn in their relationship from both centaur herds. Discretion and privacy are their primary requirements.”

“Did ya tell them our wards were broken this week? Ben’s wife laid some down, but Conn said they weren’t strong enough to prevent attackers from getting through. Rasmus said he stopped the bowman and those who sent him, but his idea of solving a problem is very different than mine. Conn and I think aerial attackers are still a risk.”

“Yes, I did go over that with them. They have agreed to remain in their quarters and on the floor for the duration of their stay. The pool and spa will be finished by that point. As the only guests, they will have complete privacy. Their meals will be served in their suite.”

I nodded at the explanation. “I saw a centaur herd once. They were all growly and stabby with their magickal spears. I found them combative and unfriendly.”

Henry shrugged. “I strive not to judge my guests. It’s part of the allure of staying with us. The centaur agreed to stay in human form the entire time he was here. I informed him we would not clean horse waste out of the pool.”

I couldn’t see a fairy turning herself into a horse, so human sex was their only choice. Henry promised me his contracts carried ironclad clauses about guests being on their best and most modest sexual behavior.

“How long will they be here?” I asked.

“Three days and nights. They will depart on the fourth day.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said. There was a brief knock on the door, and then Rasmus entered. I finished my hot chocolate and set the cup on the table beside me. “By the time your guests leave, we’ll be back to normal.”

“Do you need help getting back to your room?” Henry asked.

“I arranged for a lift. Thanks for the hot chocolate, Henry. It was yummy.”

Rasmus grinned at Henry as he scooped me up into his arms. It nearly made me believe he had a sense of humor.

Henry inclined his head to my guardian and held the door open for us as we left.

Chapter Six

The next day, a quick text to Ben about going back to work got a return text asking if

he could come to see us. I delayed his visit until the evening. Mulan and I had a task to do first.

We currently stood side-by-side, facing the long driveway from the house to the main road that passed by our location. Henry said new automatic gates were being fabricated and would arrive next week. Since I had no desire to be shot again, I felt the core of our protection couldn't wait that long.

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“I do not share your confidence about this,” Mulan said.

I turned to look at her. “Keep in mind that the people powering yer staff were once magickals like us. Sure, it was a long time ago, and they’re beings of light now, but they still remember what it was like to be human. And I think they like being given new challenges.”

Mulan huffed and shook her staff. “We are not boring heroines. We bring them big challenges every day.”

I giggled at her statement and put a hand on my chest. “Based on what I’ve learned so far, they can refuse to help us. But I don’t think they will in this case.”

Shrugging, Mulan planted her staff a foot in front of her. I put my hand over hers on the staff. “Don’t act so resigned about dealing with them. Open yourself to the possibility that their protection might be better than ours. Their power is great and we can learn from it. They are with us to serve our greater good.”

She blew out a breath. “Fine. I will be open to staff’s poor attitude, even if I think this is wasted time.”

Chuckling at Mulan’s drama, I rolled my eyes a bit before I turned loose of her and her staff. “I’ll try to spare ya all the frustration I can, lady shaman. I’ll consult the Dagda stone first.”

Mulan leaned on her staff and held out one hand, urging me to do as I wanted.

One of Three, I called. I need to ask ya a question.

His voice instantly popped into my head. We are listening.

Can ya help me ward our property against attackers? The original wards were broken twice recently. We need something unknown to modern magick and much harder to break by physically powerful creatures.

Yes. We can help you, he said. We can send a better guarding spell. Prepare to receive it.

Before I could ask One of The Three how to prepare to receive something from him, one side of my head abruptly exploded with pain. "Ow..." I said, gripping that half of my skull. The pounding there hurt so much that it felt like I was dying again.

Your fresh fear of death could become a problem for you, Aran. You need to get control of yourself.

I held the throbbing side of my head as I summoned the strength to walk off the hurt. That is not helpful advice when the pain is this great. Haven't I suffered enough this week?

I thought I heard One of The Three laugh at my response, but I couldn't be sure. The next time I saw him in person I would ask more questions about how many of his evil human traits had evolved along with him when he became a light being. I found it disheartening to think people remained jerks after they died, or even worse, reincarnated with those same terrible traits.

You may share the spell with the Wu Shaman. It is not from her culture, but her mages will understand it.

I dropped my hand to stare at Mulan as I asked him about the obvious. Do ya know the mages powering her staff?

Yes. The same penultimate magickal trained us. They are weaker in their craft. My group of three kept on learning. If they haven't changed, her three mages do as little as possible.

"Fascinating," I said aloud.

They fight among themselves. I chose my forever companions more wisely.

The guarding spell suddenly burst in my brain like it had escaped from a giant bubble. The words appeared as a memory of magick I'd cast a hundred times or more. It instantly integrated into the rest of my knowledge. Ya're going to cause me to have a brain aneurysm if ya keep doing that.

I knew I heard male laughter after I sent the chastising thought.

We will heal your brain if that happens. We have spells to heal many human conditions.

His promise of healing did not give me ease. Plus, I was tired of hurting.

Mulan lifted a hand as if to ask me what was going on.

I held up my hand, palm facing her in answer. "I'm fine. I need to write down a spell for ya before ya talk to the staff. I was told ya could use what they gave me. They also said your mages fight with one another, which holds them back from magickal development. My mages said their group and yers went to school together and were trained by the same teacher."

Mulan held out her staff and glared at it. She shook it until the turtle shells clacked loudly. “Stop fighting, or I will get new mages.”

I felt one of my eyebrows arching. “Can ya replace them?”

Mulan turned to look at me. “No, but I can make new staff and put this one in dark closet. It will stay there until next shaman needs them.”

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The staff vibrated in her hand. I could feel it even where I stood. She nodded at it. “Good. We have understanding then.” She looked at me. “Write down spell. Staff and I are ready now. You chose best mages for yours.”

My lips twitched, but I managed not to laugh. “I didn’t choose them, Mulan. The Dagda did. The stone was his before it was mine.”

“Oh. Handsome ancestor very smart then. If I ever get tired of high demon, I will ride him like stallion and make him love me forever.”

With the visual of Mulan’s fantasy now unfortunately bouncing around in my brain, I hustled into the house. Everything I owned was so technologically up-to-date that my search for pen and paper took far longer than it should have.

I remembered to make sure that the downstairs library had genuine office supplies in stock. Nothing electronic could substitute for boxes of smooth-writing pens and stacks of pristine notebooks.

I ended up using the back of an envelope because it had a blank surface. I carried the spell back out to Mulan. Snorting at my creative solution, she took the envelope from my fingers. She read it several times and then closed her eyes.

I watched her closely. Was she committing the spell to memory?

It wouldn’t surprise me to know she was that good at learning magick. Spells I found in books often took me weeks to learn. I bet her mages had never have done that instant downloading crap to her.

Only because they lack the ability, a masculine voice bragged in my head.

I rolled my eyes without debating the matter. I guess One of The Three was hanging around to make sure we performed his spell correctly.

I cleared my throat to bring her attention to me. "I think we should layer our efforts. One of us will put down her ward first. The other can layer hers on top. If you want, I'll go first. My mine will sit over the one Ben's wife laid down. Yer magick is more mysterious here in Salem and more likely to turn attackers away just for its strangeness. I think yer spell should be put on top of mine."

"You are chaos witch," Mulan muttered, her tone laced with contempt. "Whatever you say, we will do."

"Yer staff is not the only one with attitude. What is your problem today?" I finally asked.

Mulan moved her shoulders around. "I'm restless. Pay me no mind."

"Ya're all but vibrating," I said, motioning for her to move a suitable distance away. "And ya're messing with my magickal juju. Go stand over there somewhere."

With her troubling energy no longer in my space, I shook my hands and chanted. I made a call to the four elements to make sure I covered every sort of contingency. The words tripped off my tongue and vibrated against my lips.

The magick inside me built until it exploded from my fingertips, spreading like streaks of light across the property, ultimately blanketing every inch of the land we had purchased.

I factored in allowances for the people we worked with, and the ones Henry and Gale

let in. I had given both resident guardians permission to come and go as they pleased, including the ones in human form.

Orlin hadn't returned for a visit yet, but I didn't want him destroying our wards to get through. And yes, I believed he could do that. The guardians appeared unfazed by the magick I could conjure. They would acknowledge its power if I made them aware of its existence, but I think that was mostly to humor me.

Wondering where my guardians were, I turned and looked up at the third floor. Zara waved from the window. Rasmus was nowhere in sight.

"Show off," Mulan said from behind me. "Your magick is color of red wine. I envy you."

I grinned at her. "Yer turn, Wu Shaman. Any color will do as long as it gets the job done. Remember to make exceptions for our guests like we discussed."

Sighing heavily, as if I'd asked her to clean my bathroom instead of laying down a ward, Mulan trudged ahead of me until she could spin in a circle.

She called nature's energy to her until it swirled like a tornado around her body. When her eyes shifted from brown to bright gold, I inched farther away from the tornado to give myself room to run, just in case.

She drew in energy through the air and breathed it back out in one long breath. Gold rippled in a wave that went in all directions. The Wu Shaman's magic covered the land—and my ward—like a comforting blanket. It was the color of green grass.

"Satisfied?" she asked.

I smiled and nodded.

We'd done all we could to prevent another bowman from taking me out.

I took Ben to the firepit for our discussion. I built a communal fire and sprinkled it with cleansing herbs. I also added some cinnamon to soothe the demon side I now knew he had.

"I got your message," Ben said.

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I grunted in answer. “Did ya get the one I didn’t send?”

“Yes. You don’t think I’m safe anymore.”

My head moved up and down slowly. “Ya know better than I do what the military is capable of, Ben. Ya also know that Rasmus may or may not have done enough to stop those who sent the bowman. His guardian sensibilities dictate the depth of his actions.”

A grunt escaped from Ben. “You’re saying you don’t trust the guardian’s take on things.”

“I trust that Rasmus thinks she’s solved the problem.”

“But...” Ben prompted.

“But no... if it had been up to me, I likely would have killed all of those who were colluding and plotting against us. Or at least, I would make them completely forget we existed. His best action was to revert the man-made guardians into full humans. Not that they’ll stop experimenting. Ya were right about that. No amount of killing will change the military’s idea that they can genetically engineer the perfect soldier.”

Ben rose from his seat to pace. He slid his hands into the pockets of his pants. “Do you think Felicity’s talisman is a crutch for me?”

I felt sympathy for Ben’s dilemma. He was having to come to terms with himself at last.

“I think ya need to embrace yer monster side and learn to control it. Yer lack of control might one day be used against ya. Dylan and I have been researching in our spare time. The far darrig is remarkably skilled at what he calls getting into secure systems. I thought Mulan was a whiz at that stuff, but Dylan got into databases ya wouldn’t believe.”

Ben stopped pacing and pulled one hand out of his pocket to scrub at his face. “For now, let’s set aside the fact that a member of your team is a computer hacker. We’ll come back to that later. What did you two learn about me?”

I smiled at Ben. It didn’t surprise me he knew that we’d looked him up. He was sharp, and his mind needed to keep busy. I felt some genuine sympathy for Felicity’s dying dream of Ben retiring. Maybe that’s why I kept working with him. Ben and I were kindred souls about our dedication to our work.

“Dylan told me it took him only a single day to hack into the records of yer experiment because scientists brought it out of paper storage and digitized the files... whatever that means. All I know is that he read about it online and printed it for me to read. I’ll send ya home with a copy.”

Ben stared at me. I held up a hand. “I only read the stuff concerning yer monster side. Dylan marked it for me with sticky notes.”

“Do you know how many crimes you two committed?”

I crossed my arms. “Do ya want to know what we learned or not?”

Ben lifted a hand in defeat and let it fall. “I might as well hear it.”

I grinned at him. “We learned ya weren’t the only one of yer team who survived. They lied to ya, Ben. More than half of yer team lived, but they kept them in a secret

program where they became permanent test subjects. They're listed as dead to the world, but they're not dead at all. Ya were the only one they couldn't control with promises of gobs of money. They also considered yer failure to initial shift as not worth pursuing. This is why they let ya serve out yer military time. It made them look caring instead of like heartless bastards. They had ya marked as normalized and used ya as a cover for what they did otherwise."

I sighed when Ben pushed a frustrated hand through his hair.

"Who lived?"

"Dylan marked the page with their names. All of them have a beast form, which is listed beside it. None of them have any that compares with yers. Goddess only knows what their forms are now, though. Unlike you, they've been living and probably fighting in them. They also got more done to them than you had done. Yer form has evolved naturally. In that regard, ya're one of a kind."

"Are they prisoners?"

I spread my hands wide. "They're not being held in cells or even all in one place. They're flung throughout society with new identities and new lives. Some are married, but none of them have children. Dylan said the no children part was intentional. They made sure ya couldn't have any."

"I knew that part. We were supposedly sterilized by whatever agent we were exposed to during the war. Our equipment is still fine, but we're shooting blanks."

I pondered "shooting blanks" for a moment. That was not a cliché about guns. Eventually, I figured out what he meant. The military had taken away his ability to have children. It was a terrible thing to do to someone who'd been serving his country.

“I’m sorry, Ben.”

“Me too now that I know it wasn’t involuntary,” he said.

“Dylan thinks—though this is just speculation—that yer natural development is a better situation. The last thing he found in the files was a reactivation order. Given that ya’re technically retired, they can’t get ya to come in. They may be goading ya into coming after them because they want to see ya.”

“You mean they plan to capture me. That’s pretty clear.”

I leaned forward and nodded. “Yes. My gut said ya weren’t safe from them, and now Dylan’s research proves it. I also don’t think this will be going away on its own. Conn is warning every caste he can reach that giving blood to the scientists will be a death sentence.”

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When Ben arched an eyebrow, I rolled my eyes. “Well, not actual death, of course, but we’ll take their heads. Decapitation takes nearly a thousand years to heal. That’s a lot of living to lose out on.”

Ben grunted. “But that won’t cover the demons who might have been captured.”

“Nor does it cover other guardians getting captured as well.”

Finally, I lifted my hands in the air. “This is going to go on, just as ya said it would, Ben. I think all we can do is constrain the scientists and make sure they suffer serious consequences for their meddling with Mother Nature. I don’t know how to discourage them yet, but we’ll think of something. They’re worse than a coven of dark witches bent on harvesting the power of the entities they serve. They know their goals are stupid, but the risks of dying for their craft aren’t enough to deter them.”

Ben’s voice dropped low. “If the military is coming after me, then Felicity is also at risk.”

“Yes. Yer witch wife can protect herself from a direct assault, but she can’t fight a tranquilizer dart being shot at her from a long distance away. If the military took her, they know ya’d show up to rescue her. That would be a two-fer for them.”

“I’m starting to appreciate your penchant for outright killing all the people causing your problems.”

I chuckled. “Well, it’s not like I do that right off. Usually, I try to reason with them first. I don’t find yer scientists to be reasonable in a common sense sort of way. They

only care about what they learn from their experiments. I let them live because Rasmus tends to overrule me about them.”

Ben came back and dropped into a seat. “I’m going to have to send Felicity to her home country for a while. I don’t know how she’ll take that bit of news.”

“Will she go?” I asked.

Shrugging, Ben chuckled. “I doubt it. But sometimes she surprises me. It never dawned on me that she would break into your home to come after me. I figured she would pace the floor all night and leave a thousand mad voicemails on my phone.”

I grunted in disbelief. “I wasn’t surprised at all that she showed up here. Yer witch wife didn’t impress me as a woman who waits well.”

Ben smiled for the first time since he came to talk. “Felicity is remarkably patient with me. I probably take that for granted too much. I should have asked you to call her but I was too freaked out that someone took my talisman in the first. Because I knew what that meant and it wasn’t good.”

I smiled back at him. “Mulan and I can come ward yer house, but when yer wife goes for groceries, they would still get her. When I fought Zara, I sent my daughter to Ireland to stay with my mother. It was the only way I could be sure the female guardian couldn’t use Fiona’s life as a bargaining chip when we fought.”

Ben scrubbed his face with both hands now.

“Speaking of chips, like the tracking kind,” I said.

Ben’s eyes widened. “Are you saying the military chipped me like a dog at the vet’s?”

I sighed and nodded. “Dylan said all of ya were because the military tracks everyone important to them. It’s how they can find yer body these days if ya get killed in a foreign country while doing yer duty. I actually can’t hold that against them. Too many people go missing in this world and never get found.”

Ben frowned. “Everything the military does looks legit. Complaining to them would do me no good at all.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” I said in agreement.

“So I guess I go home and try to talk my wife into leaving the country until this is settled.”

“Or...” I bit my lip before continuing. “There is another possibility. The two of ya could stay in the blue house. It’s not cozy, but ya might feel safer.”

Ben’s long-suffering sigh nearly made me laugh at him. But I held strong. Allowing my wicked sense of humor to express itself wouldn’t make it easier to deal with his new reality.

Chapter Seven

This was the first time I’d called a meeting in the blue house. Depending on Ben’s persuasiveness, it might also be our last one here for a while if he and his wife came to stay.

We sat around the table. Dylan and I shared all we’d learned. Even before the far darrig hacked into Ben’s records, I had guessed that the bowman tried to kill me because of my connection to Ben. And also because of my previous fight with the man-made guardians. This was what I’d expected after the success I’d had taking them down with Conn’s help.

It might have also been the fact that I'd freed Rasmus from their hold on him as well. I was a threat to their scientific future, and they needed to neutralize me.

My death would have yielded far greater results for the man-made guardians than they or their support group could have ever imagined. If they killed me, it would also sever Conn's bond with me. His contract would pass to another of my kin, and not to Fiona, who might have continued my work in shutting them down.

When we finished explaining what we'd learned, everyone was frowning. Rasmus frowned so hard that I thought his jaw might lock into place.

He glared at the missing bad guys even while his gaze stayed locked on me. "The dilemma is that genetic experimentation on this planet is inevitable. Our problems arise from their relentless attempts to weaponize every single one of their findings. Less-biased scientists should be doing the genetic study."

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“Aren’t all scientists biased one way or another? Research takes money. The source of that money is the root bias they must follow. Ya have to support the interests of the people paying yer bills.”

“The monetary price humans use to value their work is yet another issue. Nothing productive will be done about that until many centuries from now. We must seek a solution to the current problem within the limitations of current thinking.”

Zara smiled at Rasmus’s careful yet pompous ranting. His superior thinking was projecting into the future. I didn’t know whether to worry about what the female guardian was thinking or like her for finding Rasmus as amusing as I did.

When Zara turned her laughing gaze to mine, I nearly winced at my suspicious thoughts. But I just couldn’t trust her completely. I doubted I ever would.

“Colonel Benson and his witch wife should definitely come here,” Zara said. “We could protect them better. Rasmus and I both think the new wards will hold off future attackers. Someone from inside could betray us, but your efforts have reduced the capacity for another surprise attack.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask why neither she nor Rasmus had offered to do anything but I didn’t want to start an actual fight among us. I diplomatically returned to discussing Ben’s issues instead.

“I invited Ben and his wife to stay here until the threats to them pass. I don’t expect them to accept our help, but I can see a benefit for all of us if they do.”

“If they come here,” Zara said cautiously, “I would volunteer to protect the wife. Perhaps we could become friends. Maybe we could work together on tasks.”

I grinned. “And maybe ya could learn her magick.”

“Well, you’ve already admitted it would benefit us for me to do so.”

“I do that think still, but don’t get up yer hopes up.”

Rasmus watched us both. “Did you two discuss this before this meeting?”

I laughed and turned to him. “No, but we discussed a related issue. Women quickly synthesize lots of disparate information into the simplest solution that serves the majority. Both Zara and I believe that Felicity Benson's magick holds a potential solution for transforming the demon wolves back into humans. In the short term, Felicity would get a bodyguard and Zara would learn something new. That’s a win-win scenario.”

Zara beamed at me while Rasmus frowned at her. I’d have to ask him later why the idea bothered him so much. Maybe it was because he hadn’t been the one to think of it.

I looked at him and then at everyone else. “I’m not suggesting we spend all our time hiding out here. Ben will have jobs, and we’ll do them. However, we will stay on alert for future attacks. Someone had to tell them where I lived and about the wards.”

“Who would do that?” Rasmus asked.

“The only person with a grudge against me is Ezra. If that evil fairy put a significant price on my head, more will try to gain entrance here, and some may possess the power to break wards. I’ve warned Henry to be on alert. Speaking of Henry,” I

looked around, “he and Gale have guests coming this weekend. He said he would text us with meal plans and arrangements. Ya’ll be on yer own for lunch each day. I suggest ya stock those little mini-fridges in yer bedrooms.”

Conn chuckled. “They would never make you rely on a mini-fridge to feed yourselves. Trust me. However, Mulan and I will feed ourselves until their guests leave. I’ve been asked to keep my presence to a minimum in the main house.”

“Why?” I asked, truly curious.

“Because the workers stop working when I’m around. They wait to see what I might ask them to do instead. It’s a reflex.”

“Conn is very impressive,” Mulan said with awe before rolling her eyes.

Conn’s pinch had her yelping and Zara laughing.

“Ah...” I said with a chuckle. “Henry told ya to keep yer kingly butt in the Wu Shaman’s house where it belongs.”

“It’s a request I find quite reasonable to follow since it’s the place I most want to be.”

I laughed. “Good, because it’s yer fault that I like the way they spoil me. Please don’t ruin it by playing king of the main house when they ask ya not to.”

Conn chuckled. “After all those years in Demon Hunter prison, you deserve some spoiling. I’m glad our situation has worked out for all of us.”

“So am I,” I said. “When Fiona gets home, everything will be perfect.”

Conn didn’t reply. Neither did anyone else. I glanced around the table. “What?” I

asked. “Do ya all know something I don’t?”

When no one answered me, Rasmus cleared his throat. “She belongs to the angel until he’s done with her. Did you not see his brand on her arm?”

“What brand?” I demanded.

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Zara pointed at her upper right arm. “There was a mark on her about here. I asked Rasmus what it was. He said it denoted ownership.”

“No one owns my daughter.”

Rasmus blew out a breath. I’d learned it was his way of summoning the patience to explain something to me.

“Fiona is the guardian of the second sacred ring, Aran. Her angel mentor is making sure she is protected until she finishes her training. Then he will remove his mark, and she will have to protect herself. It is their way. I verified it with Orlin. He said I’d gotten it right.”

“Tony never told me he owned her. He’s full of all kinds of shit, but I know for sure he would have told me that. He’s more arrogant than ya are, Rasmus.”

Rasmus lifted a hand. “He may have assumed you recognized his symbol and accepted it as a necessary step. I looked the symbol up to see who it belonged to, but I kept getting distracted. I finally found the answer while you were recuperating.”

“Are ya saying ya know Tony’s actual angel name? Did ya tell everyone but me?”

“You were unconscious and visiting with the beings in the Dagda stone. I had to wait until you were whole again. In the meantime, I had to tell Conn because he’s your family’s second-in-charge. He told Mulan. Zara was with me when I found out, and Dylan helped me do the research. I’ve not told Henry yet because he seems to hate all angel-kind.”

“Bloody hell,” I said. And I didn’t even believe hell existed. But if I believed, I’m sure I would classify this situation as hellish.

Sighing, Ramus pulled a small notebook from his pocket and a pen. I needed one of those myself. Then I remembered Rasmus liked to draw. He flipped forward in the notebook, wrote something on a blank page, and then ripped it out. I took it cautiously when he passed it across the table.

“Do not say the name aloud, Aran. To call an angel’s sacred name aloud is to summon him to your side. It will give him the right to ask you for something in return. We don’t want to do that. Keep calling him Tony. I’m sure he gave you that fake name so you would not call on him for real.”

I stared down at the paper clutched in my fingers. On it, Rasmus had written ‘Semyaza’ with his pen. Though my pagan roots hadn’t demanded it, learning about the existence of guardians prompted me to study the original watcher legends. That study revealed the names of the fifteen original leaders who had gotten remanded to eternal punishment for copulating with human females and creating offspring that nearly destroyed the earth.

Those leaders now served as powerful overseers with no end of their enforced penance in sight.

The rest of the original two hundred watchers were required to clean up the mess as their path to seeking forgiveness.

The task of making things right was also given to the others who came after the originals. It had taken little effort to figure out why the guardians—formerly known as watchers—had been so hard on the females of their kind. Guilt about what they had done to their human females had been a powerful motivator.

The personal story Rasmus told me about the fall had been heart-wrenching to hear. The Earth unleashed its fury upon the hybrid children, drowning them in a cataclysmic flood that brought both relief and devastation. My guardian's painful memories of that time still haunted him. I would never forget how devastated he'd been when he'd confessed it to me.

But he hadn't shared with me about his leaders—the ones people of many religions referred to as fallen angels. What I knew about them came from the Book of Enoch.

A watcher named Semyaza had been the primary leader of the watchers. He and Azazel—whom some believed were the same being—were the first of the watchers to suggest that they all take human women as wives.

Semyaza was a womanizer of the heavenly sort, and now he had marked my daughter as his property.

And to think I'd been concerned about Fiona's lusty admiration of a centuries-old fairy male. What if the watcher-turned-angel decided Fiona was too tempting a human female to pass up?

What if she returned his interest? Because how could she not?

Power like the angel had combined with his stunning looks was hard to resist. Hadn't I learned that the hard way in my own life?

Jack didn't have guardian power, but he'd inherited something that drew me to him. I still felt the occasional lustful tug in his presence. It made me extra snippy until hate washed it away.

But Rasmus was exactly the powerful kind of male Fiona was now stuck dealing with—Goddess help her. I couldn't seem to stay mad at Rasmus, nor had I ever sent

him away without eventually taking him back.

The guardian drove me mentally crazy, yet I still wanted to keep him around. And I still wanted to crawl into bed with him every night.

If Fiona succumbed to her angel, I would love any hybrid grandchildren she might end up giving me. But I hoped things never went that far. My daughter was too young to be a mother.

While that was ironic of me to think, looking back on my life, I could see that I'd been too young when I'd had her. Loving Jack had overruled every self-preservation instinct I possessed. That made a woman vulnerable in ways that it took a long time to recover from. It took eighteen years in my case.

In my heart of hearts, I wished fervently for my daughter to avoid making the same mistakes I had made. I'd done the best I could to shield her from poor decisions, but a mother shouldn't always be lying to her child's father. Or vice versa.

I rested my head in one hand and stared at the name on the paper I held in the other. "Fiona doesn't know she's been marked by her angel mentor, does she? There was no sign of attraction between them. She talked so hateful to him that Tony kept using his magick to shut her up. Maybe she'll be smart enough to do what he says, so he'll leave her alone."

"When you first explained her training, I thought perhaps your angel might be a jinn. They are angelic-like beings from King Solomon's original culture. Some consider them demonic, but their power is not related to the kind demons wield."

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I chuckled dryly at the lecture. “Yes, Professor Rasmus. I know what a jinn is. I’ve even dealt directly with a djinn before. In the beginning, I kept thinking that yer kind were fallen angels. Yer intervention on our planet seemed so much like the stories I’d heard about them. Now I see that was a pretty good guess. Not that ya ever confirmed it before today.”

“Well, there is a connection, but sharing so much of our past is both painful and not condoned. I meant to tell you what I’d discovered about Fiona’s mentor after you were healed, but focusing on Ben’s situation made me forget. It was the symbol Dylan recalled seeing on Fiona’s arm that set me on my path of discovery.”

Dylan winced at being named as a contributor. I had to work hard not to laugh at his pained expression. “I thought you saw it on her too, Aran. If I’d known you hadn’t, I would have said something.”

“Yeah, I know ya would have.” I wadded up the paper and held it back out to Rasmus. When he extended his hand, I dropped it in his palm. “Do something with this for me. The longer I hold onto it, the more likely I am to use a cease-and-desist spell and set it on fire. That would definitely make things worse for my daughter.”

Rasmus curled his fingers around the piece of paper in his palm. When he opened his hand again, the paper was completely gone. “Her angel is known as the master of enchantments. He is also the being who taught me magick. If I had been here to meet him when he brought Fiona, I would have known who he was and told you about this then.”

As so often happened, I blinked at the guardian’s effortless use of magick. Zara could

control people with her thoughts, but that was different. Rasmus could create something out of nothing, command the elements, and seemed able to perform more magick than I held in my entire witch arsenal.

And, as usual, he used nothing more than his thoughts to direct it.

Confirming the connection of the guardians to the fallen angels felt like a complicated puzzle finally getting solved. The guardians—those once known as the watchers—kept themselves detached from their former leaders. If Father Peter lived long enough, I would take him to lunch again and tell him what I’d learned. He’d share it with his church, but I doubted anyone would believe him. Humans didn’t like it when creatures of myths turned out to be real beings.

But for sure, I was never telling Ma who the angel was. Bridget O’Malley would not take kindly to losing her illusions about the beings she considered above reproach. I hoped Fiona never told her either. In her sixties, Ma had lost enough illusions. I was rapidly approaching a time in my life where I didn’t want to hear the truth if it caused me more grief.

But I said none of that to the magickal being I’d fallen in love with. “Ya always surprise me, Rasmus.”

“That sincerely is the witch pot calling the guardian kettle black. And now I finally understand that strange saying. The context is rarely present when you use it.”

He was teasing me, and I laughed at his fake irritation. I didn’t know who was more surprised by my laughter—me or Rasmus.

Then I realized we’d had an entire conversation that had excluded all the others listening to us.

“Sorry,” I said, glancing guiltily at them. “I believe I just found out why people say ignorance is bliss. Rasmus and I are both learning the truth about clichés today.”

Conn was the only one who laughed at my joke. His sense of humor was a big reason why I loved him like a brother. My demon was the best companion a daughter of The Dagda could have hoped for.

I smiled at him. “Do you have time to talk privately with me?”

“Sure,” Conn said.

“Give me a few minutes, and I’ll meet you on the porch of yer house.”

“Perfect. It’s my turn to change and wash the bed sheets. Maybe Mulan might grow impatient enough to do them herself if I’m occupied with you.”

Mulan chanted something and reached out to touch Conn’s ear. A spark leaped from her finger into his earlobe. He yelped and laughed at the same time. Those two loved to torture each other.

Conn looked ready to make use of his dirty bedsheets once more before they got washed.

I turned away from watching them and rose with a sigh as I looked around the room. “The blue house will become the guest house for Ben and his wife if they come. If that happens, we’ll meet in the stables. At least there aren’t any horses in there yet.”

“Are we getting horses?” Dylan asked.

“Not if I can help it,” I said. “But I can’t promise ya Conn won’t morph into one. He’s fond of taking that form.”

Conn neighed like a horse as he followed Mulan out. Dylan chuckled at the noise he made and smiled at the couple.

“Dylan,” Zara began. “Can I ask you something about your animal talents? I was on my way to visit the demon wolves. It’s feeding time, and I like to help with that. I’m trying to get them to like me. Would you like to come along?”

“They like you,” Dylan said bluntly. “They just don’t trust you.”

I ducked my head to hide my grin but raised it again to watch their exchange play out. A frowning Zara followed Dylan out of the room, lecturing about why she was right.

“Well, it’s not like I can change that opinion yet. I don’t remember transforming them, yet they recall it too well. They’ll have to find a way to work with me.”

“I have some suggestions on how you can win them over,” Dylan said as they walked out together.

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Soon, Rasmus and I were the only ones left in the blue house. “Do you need me to go along with you?”

I shook my head. “No. Conn and I need to spend some quality time together. I’ll tell ya about it later.”

“As you wish,” Rasmus said, bending to kiss me goodbye. He insisted on doing it every time we parted now and didn’t seem to care if we had an audience.

“I’ll work on organizing the third-floor library until you finish.”

My face wrinkled in confusion. “When did we get a third-floor library?”

“Henry asked Zara and me to secure the books we use for our studies because his people were growing too curious. We’re calling the room the ‘big library’ and keeping it locked when we’re away. Even Henry doesn’t have a key to it. Zara, me, and you will be the only three with access. We will grant Dylan access on an as-needed basis until he stops courting his lady demon.”

“Those sound like wise precautions, given Orlin’s books from the Venusians are in there,” I said.

“Indeed,” Rasmus said, smiling as he headed back to the main house.

I strode off toward Mulan’s house with a smile on my face. My life was still a mess, but it was a good mess. Having this property truly had worked out better than I ever dreamed.

While the news about Fiona's angel disturbed me, I understood my daughter was in an unchangeable situation. Worrying about how she was doing wouldn't help her. Only she could release herself from the obligation. And it was her choice to make, not mine.

In my heart, I knew guarding the ring was Fiona's destiny. And not just because it had told me when I wore it. And not because Orlin had confirmed it to Rasmus. I had known all my daughter's life that the power she'd gotten from my family would be used for important things. Now that her destiny had manifested, all I could be was her backup person.

Until my daughter needed me, I would keep doing what I felt compelled to do. My next task would be to turn Ben's beast form into a valuable asset rather than a liability.

Chapter Eight

Conn asked to move our discussion to my firepit. He spat a small fire into it—something I used to call his 'demon party trick'—and then threw some calming herbs into the flames. When satisfied with his efforts to season his smoke, Conn inhaled it in deep breaths and exhaled it with satisfaction.

"I wanted to talk to ya alone about Ben's problem."

Conn stopped his version of smoking to answer me. "Rasmus and Zara are the geneticists. They would know the most about his situation."

I waved away his suggestion. "I'm not looking to undo his changes or calculate his future evolution. I have a more basic question, and ya're the expert I need."

"Ask away then," Conn said with a grin.

“Can ya tell if one of yer kind was used to make his beast?”

Conn shrugged in answer. “I think it’s a logical assumption given the size and shape of his fangs and claws. Based on his giant size, they either used some royal demon’s blood or the largest gorilla on the planet. Lilith and I could possibly determine whose blood was used if he would give us a sample. Does that really matter to you?”

“I’m going with a negative answer about learning the demon source,” I said. “What I want to do is to see if ya can command his demon side and maybe use yer kingly powers to help Ben learn to control his beast. Ben called his talisman a crutch the other day, and he was right. Having that beast form is a liability if he fears his creators might have more control over it than he does. He’s like a werewolf who refuses to shift and they eventually go mad. It’s beyond time for Ben to accept that other side of himself.”

Conn crossed his arms as we talked. “Apart from trying to intimidate and show off his strength, what else can Ben do as his beast?”

“I have no idea. And I don’t think Ben knows either. I realize training Ben isn’t in yer job description, but it’s in mine, Conn. And worrying about him is a waste of everyone’s time, even his witch-wife’s. In between actual jobs, I see no reason we can’t do something about the situation.”

“What if Ben doesn’t want training?”

“Then we’ll get the Shadow Breakers to put trackers in him so we can rescue him after he’s kidnapped. Because, sure as we’re sitting here, that’s going to happen. Even Rasmus thinks so and he never criticizes a scientist of any kind.”

“Well, what if Ben’s wife doesn’t like the idea? She seems to have strong opinions about what he does.”

I frowned at that because he had a point. “I’m sure Felicity won’t like it. If he was my husband, I wouldn’t, either. Ben will have to talk her into it if he agrees.”

Ben snickered. “Or you will.”

My mouth quirked. I had gotten no warm and fuzzy vibes from the Caribbean witch Ben had married. I also wasn’t looking forward to having her around if she and Ben said yes to my offer to stay with us. Despite my desire to help them, my already complicated life was challenging enough.

Conn chuckled as he stared at me. “You’re wearing your most serious look. The last time I saw it, you were forcing your daughter to go to Ireland.”

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“Nearly dying changes a person.” I chuckled dryly at how morbid I sounded. “Maybe I’m not right in the head, Conn. There are plenty of unknowns in my plan to help Ben. If ya don’t want to do it or think it’s a bad idea, just tell me. Maybe I’m using him to distract myself from the danger I’m in.”

Conn shrugged. “I’m not unwilling to train him. When have I ever turned down a challenge? Look who’s sharing my bed these days.”

“How are things between the Wu Shaman and ya?”

“Blissful enough, but I think I bore her. Somehow, I thought it would be the other way around when one of us got bored.”

I blinked in surprise, and then I laughed. “After all those centuries ya spent pleasuring females, I don’t believe that for a hot minute.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Everything in bed is fine,” Conn said with a glare. “But she’s not fine outside of it. I haven’t been able to determine what’s wrong. She’s been in a strange mental space since her family visited.”

I snorted. “I hear ya. She got snarky with me the other day. When I asked what her problem was, Mulan said she was restless and told me to ignore her. Maybe she’s working through some lingering issues.”

Conn nodded. “I’m trying not to be a clueless male, but I feel like one.”

“Ya get points from me for trying. I’m sure Mulan appreciates yer worry as well. The

Wu Shaman is not what anyone would call a peaceful soul, even on her best days.”

“It seems Rasmus is more in touch with you lately. I’ve envied his easiness with you.”

I lifted a shoulder and let it fall. “I admit the guardian is putting a lot of effort into not being clueless. That’s why he spilled his guts to all of ya at the meeting. Plus, I’m sure he feels safer confronting me in front of a crowd.”

Conn chuckled low, and I grinned in appreciation. “I could tell that from the alarm in his expression. What surprises me is that you allow Rasmus to keep the illusion that you’re okay with the things he says and does.”

My right shoulder lifted and fell. “Accepting he’s well-intentioned saves me having to rant about his thoughtlessness later. Since ya all hear things when I do, ya know what I’m dealing with.”

“Tell me the truth, Aran. Are you worried about Fiona? Because I can track the angel down and see what’s going on.”

“Yes, but it’s not her physical safety that worries me. I’m worried about her lack of a love life and how vulnerable she might be to the angel’s attention. Ya didn’t interact with him, Conn. I did. He’s a very alluring male.”

“Yes, but he’s not Jack. And Fiona is not you. Your child deserves to live her life and make her own mistakes just like you did. Isn’t this what you claim to want for her?”

I sighed heavily. “Yes. Ya know me too well.”

Conn lifted a hand. “Oh, I’m worried about her too, but for different reasons. What happens if Fiona gets in a snit with him and refuses to train? You do realize that’s as

much of a possibility as her sleeping with him. Imagine the drama and what he'll have to do to convince her."

I laughed at the idea of Fiona refusing to do as she was told. Maybe the angel and I could compare stories one day.

"I'd pay good money to be there when she tells him no. Fiona was fussing at him the day he saved us. He froze her to shut her up. I admit I was a bit envious of that particular talent. And the funniest part is Fiona knew when it happened to her. She demanded I confirm it after he released her. Goddess, I don't envy him. Jack fostered that entitlement attitude of hers."

Conn's mouth twitched. "Sure. Her natural arrogance has to come from Jack. You weren't like that at all."

"No," I said with a laugh, not appreciating his insinuation. "I wasn't like her because Da would have beat it out of me with hard work. He made sure I understood that magick wasn't a ticket to a peaceful life nor a path to easy wealth."

"I think your parents are why you were such a wonderful mother. If Mulan and I have children, will you help us raise them?"

I stopped fidgeting to swallow the suddenly large lump in my throat. "I will be the best witch auntie any magical child has ever seen." I studied the longing in his eyes. "Do ya seriously want children with the Wu Shaman? They'll be tiny tyrants, Conn. She comes from a tradition that allowed emperors."

Conn sighed loudly. "I keep dreaming of her being pregnant. That's never happened to me before. I had children when I was young but I never dreamed of them. I was expected to procreate, and so I did. And then I watched them die because they were rebellious like their mothers. That's not normal parenting."

“Well, ya’re older now and more settled. Does Mulan want children too? The woman is over fifty, Conn. That’s pretty old to become a mother.”

He waved away her age. “Her fifty is like a normal human thirty. As a Wu Shaman, she’ll live to be well over a hundred and seventy. She said a very long life was a side effect of Wu Shaman magick. After what she did to her brother-in-law, she’s been vibrating with all kinds of energy. I have trouble keeping my hands off her.”

I pointed a finger at him. “That revelation, my friend, is in the TMI category. Please keep yer lusty thoughts about the Wu Shaman to yerself.”

Conn rolled his eyes. “It’s not like I’m offering to give Rasmus lessons.”

My grin was wide. “Well, see that ya don’t. And I don’t need to hear about how well ya’re treating my best friend. If Mulan is ever not happy with ya, I’m sure she’ll tell me. Outside of her occasional brooding, she’s mostly an open book.”

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He pointed a finger back at me. “Ha! So you finally admit she’s your friend.”

I gave him a withering look. “I went to a temple to look for her. Ya know how I hate those places. They make me want to run naked through them while shouting obscenities. Ya’re both lucky I could fight those urges to do what was right. And worst of all, I went there to ask her about yer love life. It was all kinds of awful to have to listen to her tell me how amazing ya were between the sheets.”

Conn’s happy male laughter rang out through the trees. A smile lit my face. Goddess, I didn’t care about keeping our contract as much as I cared about keeping Conn in my life. I was a blessed woman and a lucky, lucky witch.

“I’m really glad I didn’t die the other day, Conn. The Dagda stone did me a solid saving my life.”

“I’m glad too,” Conn said. “But I still don’t trust that artifact. Not all of The Dagda’s ideas were good ones, Aran. He made mistakes too.”

“If I’d been him, I would have spared their lives as well. One of The Three can be a bastard at times, but he’s saved me twice now.”

“Perhaps that’s a truth I’m still struggling with. Saving you was always my job. I might be a little jealous of the beings in the stone.”

“Well, as often as I face death, I need all the saviors I can get.”

“Which probably explains why you let the guardian keep hanging around.”

“Probably,” I said with a giggle. “Rasmus makes me suffer as often as he saves me. With him, it’s always a guess about whether he has my back or his brethren’s. I tell myself it’s not a big deal with him because I count more on you and the Dagda stone. I could have died from sheer shock when Rasmus chased after the bowman who shot me.”

“Yes. That surprised me as well. Usually, he opts to stay with you,” Conn said.

I snorted. “That’s not what I mean. He chased the bad guy down and smoothed things over. Not a single person was harmed in the process other than me. What would Rasmus have done if I’d died while he was gone? Would he have punished them then?”

“He’s a dangerous and powerful being, Aran. It is a good thing he’s reluctant to use his power to punish. It took me centuries to learn his level of control.”

“Yeah, I suppose ya have a point,” I said begrudgingly, not liking the reluctance in my voice.

“Do you need him to kill your enemies to prove his love?” Conn asked.

Did I? That was an intriguing question. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer, so I shrugged.

Conn continued with his argument. “Rasmus is a pacifist. Sure, his kind will carry out a planned apocalypse to correct a planetary-wide mistake, but killing an individual is not their default setting. Their neutrality results from spending eons watching humans struggle to control themselves. Even knowing humans incarnate again and again, the guardians spare people whenever they can. That’s a positive, Aran.”

I glared at Conn. “Ya’re making me feel guilty about my bloodthirsty tendencies.”

“That’s not my intention. I simply think you need to let your eagle be an eagle. Stop trying to turn him into your parrot. The guardian will never think the same as you. Why do you think they erase their memories to spend time here? Being involved with a full guardian will always send you to me, Mulan, and others for help in taking out those you want to kill. But that doesn’t mean you can’t still enjoy Rasmus being in your life. He’s already said he wouldn’t stop you from doing what you felt was right. That is undoubtedly the highest concession he can give you.”

"When did you start being the guardian's biggest fan?"

Conn held her gaze. “When he flew after the bowman. He trusted me to take care of you and went to make sure it never happened again. That wasn’t neutral of him. And he did the best he could to protect you. I completely understand the difficulty of his decision. If I didn’t, I would have quietly murdered Jack when he left you and Fiona two weeks after she was born. You would have gotten over him, and Fiona would never have known him. I still think not killing him was one of my biggest mistakes. I could have you so much hurt.”

I blinked at Conn. “But I loved Jack back then.”

Conn smirked a little. “Yes. You did. But I always knew Jack was a proper bastard. Sometimes, in life, there is no good decision to make. There is just a decision you’re willing to live with. Rasmus has those moments as well. He doesn’t exist just to make you angry.”

Conn’s lecture about Rasmus hurt my head but also resonated as the truth. I suppose that was why all I could do was nod.

Chapter Nine

The dangerous and powerful being Conn lectured me about was currently snoring in

my bed. Rasmus sprawled among the bedcovers, temporarily sated.

Or at least I hoped that was the case. I'd given it my best effort and walked away from the snoring guardian with a smile on my face.

My mind couldn't rest. It kept going back to Ben's problem. That was why I was sneaking out of bed instead of being curled around him.

Glancing at my handsome, naked guardian one last time, I headed to the library to retrieve a book on animal shifters Dylan had borrowed. A flurry of texts between the far darrig and me had hinted that it was likely on the desk Conn and Dylan both used.

I giggled when I caught myself humming as I walked. Then I spied Dylan hovering outside the library with a female demon who looked no older than Fiona. Being a demon, she was likely hundreds of years old, if not thousands. It was the absolute attention Dylan paid her that had me grinning. He was in his tall, blond human form. I suddenly wondered if she understood it was not his real one or if she cared. I well knew ya couldn't judge other species by human tendencies, not even when they took human form.

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Not that any understanding between Dylan and his demon was any of my business.

Still grinning, I ordered myself to stop being nosy and go search for the book. I planned to take it back to bed with me and read until I fell asleep or the guardian woke up.

The search took less than a minute. The book lay exactly where Dylan said that he left it on the desk. There was another book with it that looked equally intriguing, so I took both.

Still humming, I left the library and headed back across the tiled foyer to my quarters. Dylan and his lady were no longer hovering outside, which made me smile.

“Madame? May I have a moment?”

When I turned, I saw the woman speaking to me. She was dressed entirely in black and the only noticeable thing about her was a porcelain and very youthful complexion.

Was she a new demon? I didn’t read her that way. But dressed as she was, she could have easily passed for one of Henry’s or Gale’s people.

The hair on the back of my neck rose in mild alarm. I didn’t recognize her, and yet she was here in my home.

The woman picked up her pace as she neared me. I got no demon vibe from her at all. No, she was something else. And she was radiating power.

“How can I help ya?” I asked, trying to stop her advance. “Are ya lost?”

“No,” she said. “I’m looking for Aran of The Dagda.”

She had to be one of Henry’s guests. Was she truly lost? Or trespassing on purpose? Conn’s teasing about me investigating Henry’s guests now irritated me even more.

“This level of the house is my personal space. Please return to the rooms Henry showed ya. If ya don’t know how to get there, ya can wait here until I call Henry. He’ll show ya the way.”

I looked around for Dylan and the demon he’d been wooing. Was she supposed to be guarding this level? Henry had said he’d send someone to guard the floor while the strangers—those he called guests—were staying for the weekend.

“Please, I need to speak to you for a moment. I promise it won't take long," she said.

Her ocean-green eyes stared hard at me as she neared. She was beautiful and looked vaguely familiar, but her gaze was neither friendly nor kind. It wasn’t her eye color confusing my brain, though. It was the arrogance in her gaze. I’d seen that arrogance before but my brain couldn’t place it.

I should have called an energy sword right then. But I didn’t. However, I did move one book to my empty hand as a reflex. The strange woman in black carried no weapon at all, or none I could see. Since I didn’t want to scare off the first of Henry’s guests, I restrained my urges to whack her with my reading material.

While my home wasn’t what I considered a true sanctuary, it wasn’t a paranormal battlefield, either. We’d set house boundaries for good reasons. I had expected Henry’s guests would honor them because Henry and Gale always did.

“Stop. That’s far enough,” I said, holding up a hand to stop her from coming any closer.

“I have a message to deliver. It’s essential that I share it,” she said.

My mind considered the situation and once again found it strange. My anxiety climbed a bit, and I nearly called an energy sword.

Then it was too late to act wisely.

The woman rushed me at the end of her walk, plowing her larger body into my smaller one with enough force to knock me flat.

Instead of falling, though, her grip held me upright.

I stared into her eyes and felt the cool blade of a knife sliding into my gut.

At the last minute, I finally remembered to fight, so I lifted the books in my hands and brought both against her head with all the strength I could summon.

As I fell to my knees, the books fell too. One of my hands clutched the protruding knife handle as if I might pull it out.

I heard Rasmus calling my name, but he sounded very far away.

I glanced up at her. She was holding her head and cursing me in her native language. Fairy, I thought. Henry had told me she was a fairy, but I had paid no attention to the details. In retrospect, I guess I should have.

“Is yer dagger in my gut the message ya brought me?” I asked.

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“No, the dagger is from me. The message is from my brother. He always was a polite male. Ezra wanted me to tell ya goodbye if I ended up killing ya.”

I fought the wrenching pain from the stab wound as best I could. “The two of ya are giving all Fairy Folk a bad name.”

Then suddenly, Rasmus was there. “No. This is no how you will die,” he said to me.

I tried to laugh at his stern pronouncement, but the pain in my stomach kept me grimacing instead. Whether or not Rasmus liked it, I was going to die wondering what on earth the guardian meant.

Ezra’s sister swore aloud, turned, and sprinted across the foyer. I watched her running and wished I could stop her.

“No!” Rasmus said, his guardian voice booming with command in the space.

His words made my ears hurt. Raw guardian power vibrated in them, and he hadn’t even shifted his form. Goddess, no wonder one word from Orlin had shattered my eardrums. Could Rasmus do that kind of damage as well?

Conn was right. Rasmus was dangerous.

Ezra’s alleged sister—and my fairy assassin—froze mid-stride at his command. Then she turned as if she had no choice and moved back toward us, all without her feet seeming to touch the floor. She struggled to free herself, but her efforts weren’t working. Her limbs seemed to work against her. I thought it was fairly amazing that

she was even aware of Rasmus using his magick. I don't think I would have been.

When the fairy slid within touching distance of us, Rasmus put one hand on her and the other on me. I heard a rushing sound in my ears.

Then, I was suddenly standing with the books back in my hands once more. I looked down at them in shock.

Rasmus stepped away from me and looked as well.

I put a book over where the stab wound had been moments ago and then lifted it away again to see if it reappeared.

The fairy woman rushed forward once more. Instead of plowing me down this time, Rasmus stepped in front of me, and she hit him full-on instead.

"No!" I shouted, worried about what the dagger she'd pulled from her dress might do.

What had the fool guardian done?

The fairy stabbed him near his groin instead of his stomach because of his extreme height. Is this what the bloody guardian idiot decided would fix things?

Not only had he played with time in my house, he'd taken my place in his revised version of events.

Goddess, they were a bunch of fools, and I would tell Orlin that the first chance I got.

Rasmus drew in a painful breath, gripped the dagger by the handle, and fell to his knees. The fairy woman screamed in frustration when she saw that she'd stuck her blade into the wrong target.

“Conn, I need ya right now!” I yelled, throwing the books I held at the fairy.

I circled Rasmus until I was standing between the fairy and him. I drew an energy sword with the sole purpose of dividing her into two pieces. It didn’t matter that I saw no other weapons on her. I hadn’t seen the dagger either, and she’d gutted me with it.

“Die, witch,” the fairy spat. “Yer power will be mine, and I will avenge my brother.”

Gone was the diplomat the fairy had pretended to be. Gone were all pretenses.

I advanced on her. Behind me, I felt Conn in demon form pop into place.

“Call yer father. Tell him his fairy guest is an assassin sent to kill me. And see that Rasmus gets help. This harpy stabbed him.”

Behind me, Conn growled loudly. He sounded like an angry lion. Demons poured through doorways moments afterward and ran both ways on the stairs until they surrounded us. None of them dared to intervene because my energy sword hung in the air, emitting a low, menacing hum.

“Why can’t ya die like a normal person?” the fairy demanded.

I glared back at her. “Actually, I’ve died several times lately, but I keep coming back. Want me to show ya how immortality works? First, ya have to stop running so I can kill ya.”

The fairy spat a spell into the air that put most of the demons face down on the floor.

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What in bloody hell was that? I swung to look at Conn. His fangs were showing as if he intended to eat Rasmus instead of helping him.

“Are ya okay?” I demanded.

Conn pointed instead of answering my question. “She’s getting away.”

“Not today,” I promised, before tearing after her.

I chased the fairy outside where a portal was already forming. I raised my sword and pulled back to throw it at her. Before I could release it, the fairy froze mid-stride again.

I lowered my sword and looked around for a guardian, an angel, or even a dragon. The only thing I could see was a furious Wu Shaman with her usually flawless hair now in complete disarray.

Idiot that I was, I looked away from the frozen fairy to gawk at Mulan’s appearance. The sight of her rat’s nest hair rendered me nearly speechless. It took me a moment to find my voice again.

While I was pondering Mulan’s new look and wondering what had caused it, the fairy’s escape portal collapsed and closed with a pop. I’d seen nothing and no one on the other side of it. I had no idea where she’d planned to go, and now I probably never would.

Blinking away my shock, I summoned a smile for Mulan. All that mattered was that

my fairy assassin was still here in some form, which meant at least one thing had gone right today.

“That’s a nice trick,” I said. “Is yer freezing skill a new one?”

“Must be,” Mulan said flatly, holding up her shaman staff to glare at it. “Is fairy woman the reason high demon got ripped off my body before we finished?”

Well, that certainly explained things. I covered my mouth with my hand. I didn’t want to end up frozen like the fairy, so I decided this was a good time to lie.

“Yes,” I said, pointing at her. “She said she was Ezra’s sister. She came to kill me.”

Mulan huffed and pointed. “Guess I made you new fairy statue. Tomorrow, you will be grateful.”

I winced. “I’m grateful today, Mulan. I promise. Rasmus took a knife for me. Conn is helping him. How long will the fairy stay frozen?”

Mulan shrugged. “No idea. Are we done here? I need cold shower in worst way.”

I looked at the frozen fairy woman and nodded. If I kept looking at Mulan, I was going to burst out laughing. And that would not be good.

“Thanks for stopping her, Mulan. I was planning to kill her, but yer solution was better.”

“We are partners. Stopping bad guys is what partners do,” Mulan said as if I’d forgotten.

Then she turned and trudged back toward her house. She was wearing a man’s

expensive t-shirt and sweatpants that scrunched above her ankles. Good Goddess, the woman had thrown on Conn's clothes to come help me.

Remembering Conn's comment about not being able to keep his hands off her, I could only assume that Mulan's clothes had become a pile of unwearable rags decorating the floor. I'd lost a few pieces to the guardian's enthusiasm so I could empathize.

I ran a hand through my hair and sighed. No matter how funny my sick sense of humor found this situation, the saner part of me was furious at the interruption of their lovemaking. That could easily have been Rasmus and me. We were powerful paranormals. Our home should guarantee uninterrupted rest and have few emergencies.

I dreaded going back inside. Conn was going to be angry at me... and rightly so. He was also going to make me vet every guest Henry invited from now on. I wouldn't fight him on it this time nor would I laugh. I should have taken him seriously when he first mentioned it, but I thought he'd been exaggerating.

Henry could never have known the lengths someone in Ezra's family would go to in order to kill me. I hadn't known, either.

I wasn't even sure why when Ezra's actions had been so clearly in violation of his vows not to harm any humans while he was in the human realm.

I was well within my rights to take his life, and now I wished I had. The angel initially stopped me, and later, the dragon recommended I show mercy. What about the fairy made everyone want to save him?

Also, there was the odd thing Murray said about it being important for Ezra to remain alive. Three people had talked me out of taking Ezra's life, but after this, I would not

listen to a fourth.

The fairy still lived because he'd received my mercy time after time. Would I do the same for his assassin sister? Mulan had taken the choice from me tonight, but what would happen when the female fairy came around?

No, even Conn hadn't been able to predict this situation, and he was always warning me to watch my back.

Now I just had to convince my demon that none of this was Henry's fault.

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Based on Ezra fooling me and the Shadow Breakers all these years, I'm sure Ezra's sister had covered her real agenda well.

The Fairy Folk were as skilled as demons at deception.

After all the yelling had subsided, I went to my bedroom and lay down beside a resting Rasmus while trying not to jostle him. Thanks to Conn and Zara, the knife wound Rasmus had gotten was already healing, even though he couldn't comfortably turn onto his side yet.

Zara had further eased his pain with her magick, but whatever she'd done for Rasmus had cost her greatly. She'd been very weak afterward, and I'd actually felt sorry for her. The female guardian hadn't been that vulnerable since we'd fought and she'd lost.

Despite the hour—and Goddess only knew what I was interrupting—Dylan came instantly when I texted him. He gladly helped Zara climb the stairs to her room.

Dylan looked like he'd bounded out of bed, though. His eyes were hazy and clouded with sleep-deprived confusion. Evidently, it was my night for interrupting everyone's sleep. It was nearly two in the morning and most of the household remained awake.

I retreated to the foyer to let Zara work on Rasmus in privacy. Sparing everyone else, I'd listened to the centaur bellowing in rage from the floor below. Henry had brought him up to see me and the stabbed Rasmus. He inspected the assassin's weapon, sniffed at the fairy assassin's scent on it, and snorted loudly in disgust.

His shocked perusal of the frozen statue of her lasted a few long minutes. I wasn't sure if he believed our story or was done with messing with her.

We offered to let the centaur stay to speak to the authorities tomorrow. He declined, settled his account with Henry, and walked outside. Conn mentioned the centaur opening a portal around one-thirty, but the significance of him having that kind of power had barely registered.

What I cared most about was that the person currently lying next to me still lived and breathed. My worry for him eclipsed all other concerns.

I pressed my face against my guardian savior's arm and sighed. I had given Conn, Zara, and a shocked Henry the same abbreviated story of how Rasmus had gotten stabbed.

Conn retrieved the cage we used for Jack, and we stashed Ezra's sister inside it in case Mulan's magick didn't hold.

When I asked him to bring the cage, I'd taken Conn aside and quietly told him Mulan was responsible for the statue and not me. He hadn't said a word about it but hadn't had to. I knew what his worried frown meant. We were both wondering how Mulan could suddenly do something only an angel, a guardian, and an immortal dragon mage could do.

But Mulan hadn't been the only one dropping a surprise tonight.

Even with my face pressed against his arm, what Rasmus did for me lay between us in the bed. It was this great unsaid thing. One of us needed to speak it aloud so we could deal with it.

I finally decided it was up to me. "Ya stopped time and restarted it again, Rasmus.

And I knew exactly what ya were doing the whole time ya were doing it. I know what happened before that. The fairy stabbed me. It was a mortal wound because I felt my life fading.”

Rasmus nodded against his pillow and blew out a long, soft breath. “I shouldn’t have done it, yet I would do it again.”

“I’m not intending to reveal yer power over time to anyone.”

His sigh of resignation was soft, but I heard it. “The three of us will always know. It only worked because the fairy assassin was so highly motivated to kill you that she attempted to stab you a second time when given the chance. She did not expect my intervention, but she could have if her mind had figured things out quickly enough. Luck was on our side that she did not do so.”

I rubbed my cheek against his upper arm like a cat. I wanted him to pet me and say I was worth all the trouble. I wanted to soothe him and show him how much his intervention had meant to me. And there was one other thing I wanted.

“What if there were only two of us who knew what happened? There don’t have to be three. I’m within my rights to take her life.”

“Killing the fairy will not change the fact that one day my memory of it will betray my actions. The revelation can be delayed but not stopped.”

“Are ya saying that ya can’t hide it from yer brethren forever?”

“Yes. When you are gone from this life, and the brethren restore me to my full guardian self, I will mentally merge with them once more. My team will learn it then, and I will be held accountable for my actions and my lack of regret. But I would do it again, Aran. I could not stand by and watch you die. Your loss would be the end of

me in ways I cannot explain.”

I sniffed against the tears burning my eyes. “I love ya too, Rasmus. I could never stand by and watch ya die, either. This painful conundrum is what happens when humans love someone so intensely. If ya died, I would have killed the fairy for sure.”

“Would you have killed someone for trying to kill Jack?”

I sniffed back the tears I refused to cry and laughed as much as I could manage. “Yes, but only because of Fiona. He’s her father. That’s a fact I have to live with. But ya’re the one I would give my life to protect. I would miss ya if ya left this world and never came back to me. I don’t want to live my grandmother’s sad life. Please don’t just disappear and never return. If something bad happens to ya, make sure someone tells me the whole truth so I won’t die wondering.”

Rasmus couldn’t turn to me, but he reached down and pulled my hand into his. “I have great empathy for Orlin’s suffering now. He suffered through his own death and then the death of the human female he loved. Orlin’s resurrection could not restore the most important things he lost.”

“Why couldn’t he have turned back time for her?”

Rasmus shook his head. “The lapse in time between his healing and her death was too large. What happened is sad. Missing each other so completely is even worse. Though he never mentions her, I think Orlin secretly looks for your grandmother’s return.”

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“Will he be able to tell when my grandmother’s soul reincarnates?”

“I don’t know. She definitely will not be the same person. Murieann lived the life she was meant to live as a Daughter of The Dagda. Orlin found her, loved her, and lost her. Similar events happen to many beings. Losing someone is as much a part of life as finding them. That is especially true for guardians.”

I was glad I had found Rasmus and that he was here with me. And if I was honest, without the trouble Jack had caused both of us, we might never have met. Never meeting Rasmus seemed like an impossibility, but I could still picture it as a frightening reality. I wondered if Murieann had felt finding Orlin had been worth the heartache she suffered when he disappeared and never returned.

Thinking of my grandmother, I swallowed hard and forced words out through a dry throat. Conn was right. Rasmus would never think about things the same as me, but we belonged to each other. I wanted every second with him I could have.

I cuddled him as best I could. “Jack’s destructive behavior made me lie to him and hide my truths to protect myself and Fiona. Ya draw my soul out into the light and show me who I am beneath my power. The two of us have a genuine relationship, not a fake one. And I respect ya, Rasmus. Tonight, though, all I want to do is cry because ya broke one of yer sacred guardian rules for my sake. I’d rather be mad at ya forever than worry that saving my life might cost ya yer own one day.”

Rasmus squeezed my fingers. “Is this what human love feels like?”

I smiled and nodded. “Yes. This is what genuine love is like,” I whispered, squeezing

back. “Ya do whatever ya have to in order save the people ya love. Then ya weep over yer fate afterward for things working out like they did. Yer people are lucky that humans lack yer time-altering abilities. I’m sure ya would be appalled by our choices and have to wipe us from the Earth.”

“Not all guardians can do what I can, Aran. Some can stop time in a small room. Orlin has that ability—also Zara and a few others. I can affect much more... or even less, which is trickier. In your case, I rewound only a few moments, and then I pushed time forward again to replay the same events that already occurred. Disrupting your fate was only possible because I’d already watched her stab you. I rarely use those talents, and yet I’ve stopped time for you twice.”

“It was a fatal gut wound the fairy gave me with her dagger. I knew it was fatal because the stone stayed silent and didn’t interfere. Tonight, I learned the hard way that all the power in the world can’t help if ya fail to help yerself. I should have called an energy sword the very instant I saw a stranger walking around my house. Next time, I won’t hesitate or question my instincts just because I’m in a place where I normally take my safety for granted.”

“We’ll tighten the security so you will be safer.”

I thought of the initial discussion Conn and Henry had about the fairy’s treachery. It had needed to be had, but making Henry that unhappy still bothered me. I didn’t blame him for the fairy’s treachery. I blamed myself for not doing what I should have done when instinct warned me.

I wasn’t Fiona’s age. I was forty. And I knew better than to go against my instincts. “When ya’re healed, we’ll talk about what Zara and ya might be able to contribute to shielding our home. I should have asked ya earlier but I was too proud to insist ya get involved. Any of ya could become the next pawn in the chess game they’re playing with my life. Goddess only knows what Ezra has done.”

“What kind of contract would require your death?”

“One that falsely claims the person who kills me will collect the power I’m packing inside my body. It’s not like ya can explain to would-be killers that the Dagda stone and my agreement with Conn will never be theirs. It will pass to a family member until it can pass to one of Fiona’s children.”

“So Ezra has put you in danger for no good reason.”

I shrugged. “It’s not a reason anyone will ever profit from, but there’s still my life on the line. I’d prefer to keep living. My life has been of great value to me since I met you.”

“I like being the man in your life. I would prefer you keep living as well.”

“I love you too,” I said, patting his chest. “Get some rest now. We made it through this one. Tomorrow will surely bring another threat until I can figure out how to stop the bad guys from trying to kill me.”

Chapter Ten

Ben swiped a hand over his face. “This is history repeating itself in some alternate universe way. Are you sure this is Ezra’s sister?”

“No,” I said honestly. “But that’s what she told me just before she called him by name. She said her brother wanted her to offer me a proper goodbye before I died. ”

“And you say it was the Wu Shaman who froze her like this?”

“Yes, but Mulan doesn’t know how she did it. The last time I saw her, she was glaring at her shaman staff for freezing the female fairy without telling her how to

repeat the process.”

Ben reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of gum. He held the pack out to me, offering a piece.

I smiled and shook my head. “No, thanks.”

“I’m a reformed smoker,” Ben said in explanation as he put a small stick of cinnamon gum into his mouth. “I use gum to handle my anxiety. Chewing gum keeps me from buying a pack of cigarettes and lighting up. I’ve chewed a hell of a lot of gum since I met you, Aran O’Malley.”

I grinned at Ben’s confession. It was probably wrong of me to be proud of causing him so much mental and emotional distress.

“Don’t be blaming me for yer nasty habits, Colonel Benson. I’m too busy fighting off assassins to cause ya any real anxiety problems. I only called ya here because the attack on me in my home is a professional problem as much as it is a personal one.”

“I’m afraid to ask why,” Ben said.

The sigh following his statement was as loud as his chewing noise. I blew out a breath and tried not to cringe at the sounds he was making. Then I imagined him chewing gum in his fanged gorilla form and had to cover my mouth to keep from laughing at the image in my head.

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The whole dying and almost dying thing must be messing with me more than I realized. My imagination kept running wild.

When Ben's chewing quieted, he spoke again. "What can I do to help?"

I hung my head for a moment. I knew what we should do. I just didn't want to do it. I preferred to work out problems on my own, but I had far more people in my life now. When it had just been Conn and me, I felt less concerned about the risks.

The official solution would be a problem for Ben in paperwork and a problem for me in having to cooperate. And the outcome of the effort was unpredictable outside of being able to keep walking around and breathing.

I snapped out of my thoughts and saw that Ben was studying me hard.

He pointed at my face. "That resigned look of yours is making me very nervous."

I didn't contradict him. I explained it instead. "Remember when I told ya some Shadow Breakers on the payroll worked outside the rules the rest of us follow?"

"Yes, I recall you mentioning something about them, but I didn't catch the details."

I laughed. "Because I didn't tell ya any details, Ben. No one finds out details until the enforcers get involved. Enforcers tend to burn out quickly and retire early, so new ones get recruited every few years. We only find out their identities on a need-to-know basis. If we call them to help, we might regret finding out who they are and not like what they decide to do."

“Where are you going with this warning?”

“I need to find out if there’s a contract on me for security reasons. If there is a contract on me, ya will need to keep yer distance and put everyone who knows me on alert to do the same. Hired assassins often will kill innocents to rattle their actual target. No one who knows me will be safe.”

“Do you think the bowman who shot you was a hired assassin? I thought we agreed he was one of the man-made guardians.”

“He was one of them, and Rasmus converted him back. But how did he find out where I lived? I haven’t been here very long. That was not an accident. Neither is she,” I said, pointing to the statue of Ezra’s wicked sibling.

Ben rubbed his jaw. “Would he materially gain from your death? Getting revenge doesn’t seem that worthy of a goal. Ezra wants your power, but that’s all we can be sure of at this moment.”

I shook my head. “Has Ezra been sent home yet?”

Sighing, Ben looked away. “No. He’s still in custody because his family refuses to take him. I still don’t know why.

“Since he’s still here and no longer frozen, I think we need to assume Ezra is the primary suspect for creating the contract. The fairy hates me for ruining his plans. He possesses the necessary tools and the money and has reasons to want me dead. Ezra knows where I live because he visited here while ya were gone. The fairy excels at chaos and misdirection. He also knows how to get things done, or he would never have advanced so far in the organization.”

“I know he hates you for taking away his power. He tells everyone who will listen.”

“I only took away what he stole. Sure, Ezra lost the power from Dylan’s stone and whatever else the angel took from him at the end of the fight with Hisser. But the fairy kept most of what he’d collected over the years. It’s not like he was going home completely empty-handed.”

“Didn’t you take more of his power away the last time you fought him?”

I sighed and shrugged. “I’m not sure what I did to him then. Things about that fight are still a bit fuzzy. My focus was on Mulan’s brother-in-law.”

“I have it on good authority that the fairy’s power is only about a quarter of what it takes for him to return to his homeland.”

I swore under my breath. “That might explain why he put a bounty on my head. He hopes taking the stone from me will make up for all he lost.”

“We don’t know if there is a contract or that Ezra is behind the attempts on your life. There’s no reason to borrow trouble until we know who’s creating it.”

Shaking my head, I paced away to chastise myself in peace. After I stole Tony’s angel power from the frozen Ezra statue, I had to once again stop the unfrozen fairy from killing me. Which I did on my own with no angel help. If I had taken Ezra’s power, where had it gone?

I remembered feeling giddy and strong after we put Ezra in a cage. But I did not remember his power mixing with my own outside of some initial rush. The beings in the stone should have told me because they would have felt it as well.

My chest buzzed before the thoughts left my mind. I put a hand over where the stone lay inside my chest.

We took it, a now familiar voice announced in my head.

I groaned at the news and hung my head.

“Aran? Are you okay?” Ben asked in a concerned tone.

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I half-turned and nodded to him as I held up a hand to keep him from asking more questions.

Why did ya take it?

My chest buzzed again. Power should never be wasted.

I rolled my eyes. That is not an answer to my question. Tell me, One of the Three. I want to know what ya did and why ya did it.

Taking the fairy's power was the only way you could have stopped the fairy from killing you to get to us. You made the only decision you could. There is no reason to doubt your motives.

That's still not an answer. Try again, I ordered.

It was helpful for all of us to receive it.

It was like arguing a point with Rasmus when he had nothing in his own experience that allowed him to understand the debate from my point of view. The irony was nearly too much to accept.

I lifted my chin as if the being I argued with could see me. Can the power be returned to me? Or to the original fairy thief?

No. I gave it to my helpers because they needed it. No one got harmed by its use, and two beings were made better.

The reality of what One of The Three was doing suddenly popped into my mind. My merger with the beings in the stone must work both ways because I could see his end goal as clearly as if I'd thought up the plan myself. Ya're planning to wake them up. Ya're planning to feed them enough power to join ya for real.

When One of The Three remained silent, I slapped my chest until it buzzed in reply. I yelled my response aloud. "Ya don't have to confess because I know I'm right, ya idiot. Ya can't lie to me any more than I can lie to the likes of ya. I canseewhat ya want to happen."

Ben's eyes widened at my sudden outburst. I looked at Ben and winced. "Sorry to involve ya, Ben. I'm so angry at the beings in the stone that I forgot to think the words rather than speak them aloud."

Ben chewed his gum even harder. The smell of cinnamon filled the air. "Do the voices in your head have full conversations with you? I'm happy to hear you get angry when they talk to you, but perhaps you should see a therapist about getting them to leave you alone."

I gave him the look I gave Rasmus when the guardian didn't understand my life. "I'm speaking to the beings inhabiting the stone I put inside my chest. What I most need is to talk to The Dagda, but my mentoring ancestor is choosing not to make himself available at the moment."

Ben stopped chewing and froze. "What are you arguing with the gods about this time?"

I rolled my eyes. "The voice I'm hearing isn't that of a god, Ben. The being I'm talking to is one of three ancient mages that my god ancestor trapped inside my version of yer magick charm. He's not some disembodied spirit ordering me to murder people. He's a trapped soul who remembers what being a human is like."

“Right. And it’s not like you need any encouragement to kill people. Your invisible helper probably understands that too, right?”

I glared at my boss. “Was that yer idea of a joke?”

Ben blinked in surprise and took a step back. “No. Did you think it was funny?”

Rolling my eyes again would serve no purpose, so I fought the urge. “Ya were right about me draining Ezra’s power. The mage who talks to me in my head took it and used it for something, which is why I don’t feel that extra magick inside me.”

“That explains nothing useful.”

I waved my hand, trying to wave away his confusion. “The bottom line is that yer source is likely right about Ezra’s lack of power. And that’s probably why his fairy family won’t let him return. I didn’t leave Ezra in a good place.”

“So what do we do?” Ben asked.

“I don’t know yet. Killing the fairy is getting more and more appealing. Assassins might stop coming after me if they realize they will never get paid.”

“Can we give him his power back and just send him home?”

That certainly would be the most peaceful option. It was hard for me to consider showing Ezra more mercy when he kept showing me none. I rubbed my forehead and groaned in frustration.

“Until Rasmus, every man I let into my life wanted my power. Ya’d think at some point I’d be able to forget those men and put the past truly behind me. None of this current mess would be happening if I’d just killed Ezra when I had the right to do so.

Damn Tony for stopping me. This is all his fault.”

“Did you just blaspheme your daughter’s angel?” Ben asked.

“Yes, because I’m tired of blaming myself. Do ya fear his wrath?”

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“No. I thought you said the angel saved you.”

“He did, but now I know the beings in the Dagda stone would have brought me back to life. Ezra and I were in a duel to the death. I might have died temporarily, but he would have died permanently. And she,” I said, pointing to the alleged sister, “might not be trying to kill me now because her brother brought shame to his family. Instead, my mercy has allowed him to play the victim.”

Ben shook his head in disgust. “You’re going to need a vacation to get over your vacation.”

I was, and he didn’t need to keep pointing it out. I felt wimpy enough.

“Call the Shadow Breakers, Ben. Ask them to assign an enforcer to my case so they can find out officially if there is a contract on me. If there is, I’ll work with the enforcer to end this. Once that person arrives, I suggest ya stay out of it. Ya won’t like their methods of taking care of things.”

“What are you planning to do with Ezra’s fairy sister?”

“I’m going to use her as a bargaining chip. Or kill her if she tries to kill me again.”

And if I was in a vengeful mood, I’d drain her power and give it to One of The Three so he could restore the other two mages.

Then I’d have three beings to deal with instead of one, but also three times the backup.

Conn came through the front door, frowning. I hoped he and Mulan weren't fighting. His glare turned to land on me, and I nearly sighed.

"We're doing a security meeting in the blue house in an hour," he said. Then he switched his glare to Ben. "You're welcome to stay, but there may be yelling. Are you and your witch wife moving in?"

"I haven't convinced her. She's put some serious wards around our house."

"Fine," Conn said, not sounding fine at all.

Ben blinked and stepped away. "I'd stay for the meeting, but I have some important calls to make. If there's anything I can do to help you feel more safe, Aran, just text me. Consider yourself on permanent leave until the Ezra issue is resolved. Man-made guardians are easier to fight than evil fairies with revenge motives."

I didn't disagree with that statement. Since Conn didn't correct Ben, I didn't argue either.

I knew being put on leave was necessary, but my ego stung from it anyway. It felt like I was being imprisoned in my house for both dying and not dying.

Ben left pretty quickly when I stopped commenting. I ignored a seething Conn and stood watching my boss until he exited. My fellow Shadow Breakers had equipped a windowless van once used to collect trolls with at least six gunmen and a couple of guards who doubled as drivers.

I'd seen it when Ben arrived. Henry had someone watching the van to make sure Ben's people never got out.

The massive house was being turned into a fortress. All we lacked was a moat full of

magickal alligators to scare future visitors.

I rubbed my forehead. I also must have sighed because a growling Conn pulled me into his arms. The whine slipped out during the hug. “I miss the times when all we had to do was fight demons.”

“We will find out who is after you and kill them so they can never succeed.”

I nodded against his chest and pulled back to look into his angry eyes. “Don’t let this cause problems for Mulan and ya. My guilt is big enough already. I’m sorry I had to call ya away from her last night.”

“Why did you not call a sword when you first saw her?”

I pulled out of his arms and walked away from him. “Because I thought I was overreacting. This is my home. I felt no bad vibes from her and felt mostly safe.”

“That’s not like you,” Conn said.

I blew out a breath. “Fine. I had sex brain, okay? I was humming because of my happy hormones and had gone to get a book to read.”

“You should feel safe in those circumstances,” Conn said.

I walked back and patted his cheek. He was unshaven and looked ready to explode. “Ezra fooled me for years.”

“He fooled me as well. I thought he wanted you more than he wanted to fulfill his fairy obligations. I could feel his high level of lust whenever he was near you. It never went away.”

“As egotistical as it sounds, I must have believed a little of that myself because not for one moment would I have believed he would try to kill me for my power. Ezra came at me with an energy sword before I believed.”

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“It’s the stone that draws the power hungry to you,” Conn said, tapping my chest. “Its power pulses in your aura. You can’t hide it from anyone with eyes to see. When worn like an amulet, the stone never radiated its power until one of your predecessors activated it with their magick. Residing inside you as it does now, it stays activated.”

I frowned at my idiocy. “Zenos offered to make me a charm to hide it. I was irritated with him at the time and turned him down. I may have to humble myself and ask for his help.”

“You were right to be irritated because the dragon was yet another annoying male who lusted for you. You don’t like men who chase you that hard. You like them to offer themselves and wait for you to decide if you want them or not. The fairy figured that out. So did the guardian. Jack and Zenos are the kind of males who refuse to learn the truth of any female.”

I walked back to Conn, put my arms around his waist, and hugged him tight. “It is nice to be so understood.”

Conn hugged me back. “You’re going to investigate Henry’s guests from now on.”

I sighed against him. “Yes, I am. I’m thinking of asking Dylan to do it.”

“I approve,” Conn said. “See how painless that was? That’s one less worry. What are you making Ben do to help?”

I pulled away and sighed again. “I told him to report this to the Shadow Breakers and get them to assign an enforcer to the case.”

“Because now you’re willing to kill the fairy.”

“Yes—even though Murray begged me not to.”

“Why would he do that?” Conn asked.

“Murray wouldn’t tell me. I warned him if it came down to a fight to the death, that I wouldn’t be the one dying.”

“I’ll try to find out. Murray can be closed-lipped about his people.”

“Ezra had my friendship, and it meant nothing. His actions are what made me his enemy. Now, let’s talk of something better. Answer my earlier question.”

Conn stared at me. “What question?”

“Are the Wu Shaman and ya okay? She was wearing yer clothes last time I saw her and heading to take a cold shower. It’s none of my business but I’ve been fretting about it anyway. I hope ya both know that I would never call ya for less than a life or death situation.”

Conn narrowed his gaze on me and chuckled dryly. “Rasmus got hurt but never died. Did you die another time without telling me?”

“I would have died if Rasmus hadn’t intervened. It went against his nature to interfere with the female fairy’s intentions, but he did it to save me.”

Conn snorted. “That doesn’t surprise me. He’s not as neutral as he seems, especially if it concerns you.”

“So I’ve learned. I have a new appreciation for him because of it. And ya still never

answered my question about Mulan and ya.”

Instead of telling me what I wanted to know, Conn walked to me, kissed my forehead, and then turned to leave. “Thank you for caring,” he tossed over his shoulder. “Find your guardians and bring them to the meeting when you come. Don’t be late. I have something important to do later. I want to get things worked out so I’m not distracted by a fear of you dying.”

“I love ya too, Conn. Rest easy. I don’t plan on dying any time soon.” I smiled at his back when he stopped walking.

He turned around and smiled back at me. “Mulan is still freaked out that she froze your fairy assassin. She’s enraged that the staff won’t tell her how it worked. When I last saw her, she was muttering to her staff in Chinese. Then she got so angry at it that she locked the staff in the darkest closet in the house.”

I remembered her threat of abandoning her staff and making herself a new one. A grin spread across my face because one thing I loved about the Wu Shaman was that her word was golden. If she said something aloud, she meant it.

“I’ll see ya in an hour, Conn.”

He threw me a wave before he turned and went out the door.

I turned and stared at the statue of Ezra’s sister. Even though Rasmus had changed my fate, I could still feel the fairy’s dagger sliding into my stomach. Memories of that pain haunted me still, as did the feeling of my life fading away.

Fearing yer death sharpened yer senses. Dying took yer senses from ya. Worrying that it might happen again had yet to leave my thoughts. But worry was a distraction. Just the worry alone could be the ultimate death of me before I’d lose my focus.

I couldn't let fear gain any more ground. I needed to accept Rasmus's intervention as the reality of the altercation and let go of my scary memories. I was alive, and so was the guardian who broke the rules for me.

That was all that mattered for now.

Chapter Eleven

By the time I got to Conn's meeting with both guardians and the far darrig in tow, the yelling was already underway. Conn and Henry were standing nearly nose-to-nose. We slid into the room, ignoring them as best we could, to find seats at the conference table Henry had put in here for us.

“Posting a guard at the end of the driveway is ridiculous and unnecessary. This is a home, not a fort, Henry. It also would look like we were charging a fee to get inside. Random people would be stopping to ask for a tour of the property.”

“I was responsible for what happened with the rogue fairy, and now I will take whatever steps I feel necessary to protect this home and all those in it. You asked Gale and I to be caretakers of the entire grounds and all the houses. That means I get the final say on what measures are required for our safety.”

Seated on each side of me, I heard Rasmus sigh and Zara giggle softly. The female guardian loved watching a good fight.

I did too, when the fight didn't directly concern me.

I could only imagine what Rasmus was thinking about all the anger floating around the room. It was full of emotion and contained very little logic. He considered such discussions beneath him, yet he ended up being in the middle of so many.

I grinned as I did my usual to calm things, which meant I brought up something random to bring the tension. “How about we buy a guard animal instead of assigning

a demon to guard duty? We could get a three-headed Cerberus. No one messes with those.”

Both demons looked at me like I was the one with three heads. See? It worked every time.

Zara turned to me and shook her own. “That’s not a good idea. The demon wolves would be upset by the strange animal. They feel quite possessive of this property.”

“Did they tell ya that?” I asked.

“No,” Zara admitted. “They told Dylan. They tolerate me, but they adore him.”

Across the table from us, Dylan looked uncomfortable at Zara’s statement but cleared his throat to speak when I kept looking at him. The far darrig was learning to assert himself, and I was oddly proud of that fact.

Dylan looked back at me. “I’m quite sure the demon wolves could guard the place if allowed the freedom to roam without boundaries. Zara is right that they feel this is their home now.”

I shook my head. “They’re not animals. They’re young, naïve women barely old enough to be out on their own. They’re both around Fiona’s age.”

Dylan shook his head as well. “They are actual wolves, Aran. Their genetic makeup is as much animal as human. They’re more animal than Ben. They might be taught to shift into humans again, but they will remain wolves forever. Which is okay because they’ve acclimated quite well.”

“I saw them in their human forms in a vision. They were young and vulnerable women. How can ya know for certain they’ll be animals forever?”

Dylan pulled the artifact out of his shirt to remind me of how knew. He had carefully wrapped his stone with copperwire, skillfully shaping the wire into the form of a falcon. Then he secured the stone around his neck using two strips of supple brown leather.

It appeared to be nothing more than a masculine necklace. Now the artifact was expertly concealed and hard to detect.

“I love what ya’ve done with yer stone. It’s a nice look for both of ya.”

Dylan slipped it back inside his shirt. “I never take it off. Its council flows easily into my mind when it’s this close. I trust it completely and it told me they would be wolves forever. The spell was for transfiguration, which means their offspring will inherit the changes to their DNA.”

“I’m glad ya trust yer stone, Dylan. I think ya should. Forgive me, though, because I don’t find that to be good news.”

“Would you rather I not tell you and let you learn it later?”

“No. Never hold back. Even when the news is uncomfortable.”

My hand went to where my own magickal stone rested. In hindsight, I probably should have done as Dylan had. Instead, I took additional steps because Jack once took it from me.

I made most of my important life decisions to thwart my evil ex-husband. Now I was paying the price. And I hoped I wasn’t making the same mistakes with Rasmus. I was putting a lot of effort into our relationship.

Since the guardian turned back time to save my life, at least he seemed worth it. Jack

had never been worth it. He even confessed to me that I was a job.

But I couldn't change my past with him. Neither could I change what I did with the stone.

I shook my head to clear away my unhelpful thoughts. Dwelling on things I couldn't change was a mind game I didn't let myself play often.

I looked at Dylan. "My instinct is to protect the women, not use them like ya would use dogs."

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Dylan looked at me. “That’s kind of you, but as intelligent animals, they need a purpose to feel alive. Playing with their demon caretakers a couple of times a day does not satisfy their needs.”

I spread my hands. “Are ya sure, Dylan?”

I didn’t feel great about turning them loose. I still felt they needed a keeper who was always around.

“Dylan and I can work with them and train them,” Zara said. “Perhaps you could get them a consort animal to watch over them while they are watching over us. That way, they have a constant companion that was more like them.”

I tilted my head. “I’ve heard of putting a donkey into a herd of sheep. Is that what ya’re suggesting?”

“Yes,” Zara said slowly, but she sounded unsure about agreeing to my example. “More precisely, I’m thinking that a winged horse would be an agreeable companion for the demon wolves.”

“A winged horse,” I said with a chuckle before outright laughing. “Do ya have one stashed somewhere, Zara? Last I checked, there were no pegasi herds in the states. They prefer desert climates.”

Zara smiled that evil smile I hated. “I meant that I could make you one. It would be good practice before attempting to turn the demon wolves back into humans. All you need to do is buy me a quality horse. I’ll take care of the rest.”

I stared at Zara without blinking. What kind of magickal so confidently offers to make a pegasus out of a horse? No magickal I knew had that kind of power. I wasn't even sure that The Dagda did. It had taken a dark coven, a powerful fairy, and the power of Dylan's artifact to convert Hisser into a naga.

How could Zara alone prompt such a transmutation?

Shaking my head in dismay, I scrubbed at my face. Good Goddess, why did I take the female guardian on? What arrogant madness had possessed me?

Maybe I needed to call Orlin and rescind my offer. My life would be so much saner.

"An experiment was always going to be necessary before she attempted to change the wolves back," Rasmus said oh-so-casually.

"Wouldn't such experiments make us as bad as the military scientists we keep fighting?"

The guardian stared into my eyes without answering. I stared back, and then realization hit. Rasmus had been right about not being able to stop genetic tampering from happening. Experimentation was a matter of motivation, intention, and what ya did with what ya created.

Their creation of man-made guardians to use as evil super soldiers was a terrible purpose. Our creation of a pegasus to keep the demon wolves company and watch over them might not be. It wasn't the science of genetics that was flawed. Humanity's desire to build weapons to control each other at any cost was the genuine problem. It was also one I realized humanity might never solve.

The biggest downside of Zara's request was that no one could be sure how the experiment would work out. But that was how experiments worked and why people

did them.

I glanced around the table before turning to look at Zara. “I’m not ruling any of this out but I’m going to need some time to think it through. What you’re suggesting is an extreme measure to take. However, I’ll let ya know when I get clear about the demon wolves and the winged horse possibility.”

“In the meantime, I’ll set up a rotating guard at the gate,” Henry declared.

Conn growled at everyone, but mostly Henry. “Fine,” he said. “Put someone at the gate.”

Rasmus nodded in agreement. “And Zara and I will see what magick we can add to the current wards to strengthen them. We’ll work directly with Aran and Mulan once we’ve decided what we can do to help.”

“What do ya feel we need to do, Conn? Ya called this meeting, so I know ya had some ideas of yer own when ya invited us here.”

Conn, who had never sat down, shoved his hands in his pockets and continued to pace. “I don’t want anyone to leave the property without taking another of us with them. I would prefer no one left at all until we resolve the situation, but I know that’s not practical or reasonable. I’m including myself in that seclusion. Please stay behind our wards until you simply must go out.”

“Thank ya, Conn. I have no problem with staying here. It will give me time to work in the greenhouse.”

Conn’s mouth gaped open at my statement, which made me laugh.

“Ben has officially benched me, so there will be no work for any of us until assassins

stop trying to kill me. We won't starve unless it goes on for more than a year, and I won't let that happen. My best plan is to toss the fairy's severed head back through their portal. Based on what I know so far, I truly believe Ezra's death would resolve all our problems."

Conn sighed. "Killing the fairy would solve a temporary problem and create a bigger one when the other fairies here start screaming about you being a threat to their safety in this realm. They bring magick to our realm by being here. Killing must remain our last resort."

"Fine," I said as snarkily as I could. "But don't act surprised when the wicked fairy forces me to do it. I've warned everyone that I won't be showing the bastard mercy again."

Conn's expression turned fierce. "Speaking of being forced to do something, have you considered calling in an enforcer? As much as I would rather not work with them, this seems like a case where it would be helpful to have them involved."

"I already asked Ben to call for one. That's why he's not here."

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Conn made a sound of resignation. “But we don’t know who it will be yet, do we?”

“No. The enforcer could be a previous co-worker who hated me or one of the younger ones who idolized me.”

“Or both,” Conn said. “I recall you had quite the fan club there.”

I chuckled. It was so many years ago that I doubted most remembered me at all. “The chances of it being someone I trained are good because they’d all be highly experienced now. Let’s hope for that possibility. Cross yer fingers.”

“Your trainees weren’t much younger than you, Aran. Most were barely your age.”

I thought about it and shrugged. “I didn’t have age in my favor back then, but I had the power and the experience. Plus, I had ya following me around. Those I worked with envied my demon partner, and I didn’t mind a bit. I thank the Goddess for ya every day, Conn.”

I looked around and frowned. “Where’s Mulan? How did the Wu Shaman get excused from this meeting?”

Conn blew out a breath. “She’s ill and decided to sleep it off. She’s blaming her Shaman staff for that as well. The woman broods hard.”

I laughed. “I know. She brooded hard about you. Should I go check on her? It appears I have plenty of time.”

“Yes, I wish you would. Then I’d know both of you were okay.”

“Poor demon. All the females in yer life drive ya crazy. Ya’d think we were conspiring to do it,” I said in mock sympathy, patting Conn’s unshaven cheek as I passed by.

Then I stopped. “What do ya think about Zara’s winged horse idea?”

Conn shrugged. “I don’t like it, but I can see how it might be necessary. After converting the jiangshi back into a human, I figured the idea wouldn’t bother you.”

That had me staring at him. “Do ya think that’s what Mulan and I did with her brother-in-law? Seriously?”

Conn nodded. “Yes. The method will be different, but the concept is the same. You can’t blame Zara for offering to do something for our benefit.”

“Between Rasmus and ya, I feel like I’m taking a philosophy class lately. The two of ya make me think so hard my head hurts.”

Chapter Twelve

“Mulan?” I called her name quietly as I walked through the house.

I didn’t want to surprise her. She might come out swinging her staff and cursing me.

Sounds of retching eventually led me to her location. A sniffing Mulan sat on the floor of her small master bathroom, hugging the toilet.

“Good Goddess,” I said, searching the shelves to find a washcloth. I wet it and then folded it to fit against the back of her neck. “Can I do a spell to calm the nausea for

ya?”

Mulan squeezed her dripping eyes shut as she nodded. Any other time, she would have made herself some magick tea to cure herself.

I chanted with urgency and waved my hands around the small space. I could feel the moment it helped because Mulan lay down on the floor and sighed in relief.

I dropped to the floor and sat near her head. “This is bad, Mulan. Does Conn know ya’re this ill?”

“Yes. I told him he made me sick. I made him leave.”

“Did he make ya sick?”

Tears seeped from Mulan’s eyes, ran down her cheeks, and dripped onto the floor. I stared at her in shock. First, she’d been lethargic and uncaring. Then she’d summoned enough power to stop a fleeing fairy. But this sickness stuff was the worst if it was making her weep.

“Ya’re scaring me, Mulan.”

She lifted one tired hand into the air. “Shaman staff is full of cowardly mages. They do not tell me what I most want to know.”

I turned my face up to stare at her ceiling. Did she need sympathy or tough love? I had no idea. This was why I was not that great with women friends. I could rarely guess what was going on with them.

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“Are ya sure the beings in yer staff are cowards? Maybe they’re being prudent. Mine do things without telling me. Sure, I’m figuring out their motives now, so they can’t get by with that shit anymore. I probably should have turned the Dagda stone into a beautiful amulet. Ya should see what Dylan did with his animal stone.”

“Aran, stop. You are making my headache worse. Soon, I will retch again.”

I tried a different question. “How did Conn make you sick?”

Her shoulder scooted against the tiles as she squirmed. “High demon gave me baby.”

My head rolled until I stared down at her. “A baby? Are ya sure?”

“No. I only suspect for now. I am afraid to know truth. I too am a coward,” Mulan said in a tiny voice.

“Have ya taken a test?” I asked.

Mulan turned her pale cheek and pressed it against the cold floor tiles. “Why would fifty-year-old woman have baby test lying around? No. I have no baby test.”

I chuckled. “Ya can’t blame me for asking. Ya keep all kinds of strange woman stuff in yer purse. Fiona keeps a baby test in the bathroom. My body is not in the baby business anymore, or I’d have one. Want me to see if any of the female demons have a test?”

“Demons just know about babies. They don’t need test.”

I reached out and ran a hand over her hair. “If ya told Conn, maybe he could tell ya.”

“No,” Mulan said flatly. “Not until I know. He is too worried for you. I don’t want him to worry about baby if I only ate bad sushi.”

I blinked. “When did ya eat sushi? According to Conn, we’re not allowed to go out.”

“I do not have demon chefs. I make my own sushi. I cook most food Conn and I eat.”

Well, that was good news. “Ya didn’t tell me ya could make sushi. I love sushi. Maybe ya can teach me.”

Mulan snorted, then laughed. “I say demon put baby in me, and you want to talk about food.”

“We can talk about anything ya want. I’m here because I was worried about ya.”

“How can I be mother, Aran? I am too old.”

“Not for a magickal. And Conn says ya’re the equivalent of thirty. Thirty-year-olds have babies all the time.” Mulan was quiet for so long that I thought she’d fallen asleep. “Are ya freaked out about it?”

“Yes. Do you think shaman staff knows?”

I shrugged, but she wasn’t looking at me. The stone seemed to know everything about me. Why wouldn’t her staff?

“It probably knows,” I said.

She twisted until she could look up into my face. “Will you check for me? Staff talks

to you. It ignores me.”

What were magickal besties for if not to chastise yer magickal tools when they didn’t behave? “Sure. Stay right here until I return. If ya’re up for it, I’ll help ya to bed and do another treatment. It should stave off the sickness long enough for ya to rest.”

I got to my feet to do as Mulan asked. The main house was hotel-esque, but the cottages were small and nearly identical. Each one had a tiny coat closet in the hallway. It was unquestionably the gloomiest spot in the house.

I opened the door and grinned when I found the shaman’s staff leaning in a corner. Mulan had pulled a fuzzy, bright pink sock over the top end with the turtle shells.

The moment I touched it, the staff snapped to attention. I brought it out into the hallway with me and practically felt it sigh in relief. My connection to it was stronger than it had ever been.

I held up the sock with one hand and shook the staff with the other while the tiny, turtle shells clacked. Then, I brought the two together to make sure there was no mistake about me being willing to put the sock right back on.

My head was killing me from arguing with the men in my life, so I decided to just talk out loud instead of thinking at the staff.

“This is yer one chance to redeem yerselves. The normally fierce Wu Shaman is lying on the floor of her bathroom and crying because she’s very sick. Why didn’t ya tell her that she was pregnant? Her feelings are hurt that ya stopped talking to her.”

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We could not reveal it, a woman's voice said.

I narrowed my gaze on the staff. "Why not?"

Mulan carries a child who doesn't like us.

The excuse was so ridiculous that I couldn't help but snort in disbelief. "Are ya kidding me?"

No, she said.

"She considers ya cowards for refusing to talk to her. That's what landed ya in the closet."

Will you walk us into natural light? It has been hours since we felt the sun against the staff. We crave the light.

I walked to the back porch and stepped outside. I could literally hear a woman sighing in my head, and it was the staff. Thinking how weird this conversation was, I sat down in a lawn chair and leaned the sighing staff against my knee.

It was time to do my bestie thing. "A powerful magickal can't trust very many beings. Mulan's entire family disowned her a short while ago, and aftershe did all she bloody could to make them happy. And don't even get me started about what she did to save her brother-in-law. Her life is filled with people who choose not to support her. I endured that kind of life for seven years, and every day was miserable.

I banged the staff against my knee, making the turtle shells swing and clack. “When the bowman shot me, the beings in my stone called me to them to save my life. They assured me I would heal and helped my soul return to the mortal realm where it belonged.”

I banged the staff against my knee a few more times. “The beings in the stone and I don’t agree on everything. We have our yelling moments, and yet I know they’re watching out for me. Mulan doesn’t have that with ya. And I know why because the beings in my stone told me. The three of ya can’t agree on anything. Ya like yer bickering so much that ya’re hurting Mulan rather than helping her.”

We are not the cause of her pain.

“No, but ya could be helping her body adapt to the baby and spare her the sickness. If ya’re not part of the solution, then ya’re part of the problem. Haven’t ya ever heard that old saying?”

I heard the woman—their mage representative—sighing in my head again.

“Now...” I began. “I don’t know if ya were ever a mother, but there’s no more vulnerable state for a woman. Everything in her body devotes itself to growing the baby, and the physical changes are not always pleasant.”

The Wu Shaman is angry with us. Her child is angry with us. What would you have us do?

“Ask her what she needs. The baby may be upset because ya’re being unkind to its mother. She’s spent the day throwing up when ya could have helped her. Her body is exhausted. I wove a stomach-calming spell, but it won’t last long. If ya were my magickal tool, I’d break ya into pieces, release the three of ya back into the void, and make myself a new one. Ya’re damn lucky all the Wu Shaman did to ya was stash ya

in a dark closet.”

My chest buzzed in three short bursts. My mages were laughing at what I was doing. I smacked my chest and then banged the staff harder against my knee. The turtle shells swung wildly. If anyone had been watching me slap my chest while shaking the staff, they would have thought I’d gone insane.

“I’m not yer owner, and ya weren’t drawn into this chunk of wood to help me. So I have no opinion about ya that matters. Mulan is the only one who should matter to ya.”

Take us back to her. We will make amends.

“I think that would be best for everyone.” I stood up and went back into the house. “When ya’re back on good terms again, ya should tell her how ya froze the fairy. She deserves to know.”

This time, the sighing was so loud I thought my eardrums would shatter from the air release.

“What now?” I demanded.

We did not stop the fairy. The baby helped its mother do it. We could only have restrained the fairy creature. What happened was beyond our magick. We reshape the elements.

I stopped walking. “So, whose magick froze the fairy?”

The baby she carries has more powerful blood than either of its parents. The Wu Shaman was a stolen child. Her parents lost their first baby, so they stole Mulan from the place where she was born. We do not know how they knew about her magickal

heritage. They fed her tea to make her forget her questions about her power. Even before us, she was never typical.

This was a day of high strangeness everywhere I went. Then full realization hit. “Wait... so her parents aren’t her biological parents? And that sister of hers isn’t her actual sister?”

No.

“Do ya know who her actual parents are?”

No.

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“Well, what do ya know?”

There was a long pause. We know only myths and legends. Her female ancestors died protecting her lineage. Her blood is colored with gold, and we have seen it often. We cannot enlighten you further. You already know more than we know.

I picked up the staff and glared at it the way Mulan often did. “How could I possibly know more about the Wu Shaman than the three of ya?”

You draw her people to you. Mulan has become something greater than the human females who bore the offspring so long ago. Their sires named them something different from themselves to make it easier to destroy them. But not all were evil. Not all needed to be destroyed. We are glad we were not alive then.

My throat went dry. Afraid to give voice to what they were implying, I switched to thinking rather than speaking. Are ya saying that Mulan is descended from nephilim who escaped being killed by their watcher fathers? But they were allegedly giants, and Mulan is so definitely not a giant. What ya’re saying is hard to believe.

Mulan’s weary-sounding staff cleared her throat before answering me. How could someone dead sound so tired of life? When I talked face-to-face with One of The Three, the stone’s dead mage hadn’t seemed to feel anything beyond irritation at me being there when I shouldn’t have been.

Nephilim blood has thinned over the millennia, but their descendants—the few who survived to procreate—still carry divinity and wield great power. The gift of their fathers lives on in their DNA. Her birth parents were for sure Chinese, but one or

both of them had nephilim magick in their blood. This is the logical answer. We cannot confirm our theory.

Nephilim were the product of a male watcher in his natural form pairing with a human female. According to Rasmus, none of the male watchers ever suspected their hybrid children would cause so many problems for the planet. Regret still overshadowed the memories of it for him and his brethren.

Zenos told me the watchers woke him and other dragons from hibernation to help rid the earth of the nephilim offspring. What followed was a long history of struggles between humans and dragons. He cited doing his part for the greater good before promptly returning to his hibernation.

Yet Mulan's ancestors had somehow survived all efforts to erase their existence. They had continued to live and millennia later created her. And now she had survived to create another nephilim—a partly demon one.

It thrilled me that her parents weren't her real ones, but the rest of the story was the stuff of nightmares. What kind of creature was their baby going to be? It boggled my mind to think about the possibilities.

Nephilim, the being in the staff whispered to answer my thoughts. It would make the child a demon nephilim and perhaps the first of its kind.

"Good Goddess," I said, speaking my shock.

What I was thinking was that this sounded like a prophecy coming to pass. Only it wasn't a prophecy. It was reality—Mulan's reality.

We did not share the truth with her because the Wu Shaman would have challenged her parents to confirm it. They would have killed her to hide what they did rather than

simply give her a tea of forgetfulness. Her shaman status was profitable for them. The money she made paid the bills for all their businesses. They value power above all else. The recovered jiangshi received enough power from you to replace her. This is why they gave up their parental rights to Mulan. They don't want her interfering with their plans.

"I knew there were good reasons to hate those people."

She loved them. They were all she knew as parents. It would destroy her even more to learn the whole truth now that they discarded her. There is also the additional concern that your guardians might feel obligated to kill her and her unborn child before she produces an actual child.

"Forget the guardians. They would never try to harm her because they know I would kill them without regret. While I can't destroy them, I can keep them from regenerating for a very long time. Chopping demons into pieces is my forte. Chopping up a guardian would hurt my soul, but I'd do it before I let Mulan come to harm. She didn't choose her parents. None of this is Mulan's fault. She's an innocent."

The mages were right about how tough it would be for the Wu Shaman to hear all of what they'd told me. But I whole-heartedly believed they were wrong about it destroying her. I think it would reshape her reality and erase the child guilt her parents had used to control her. More importantly, Mulan had a right to know who and what she truly was.

And I would be here to help her. Conn would be by her side. Together, we would learn the truths of her past and explore what her heritage meant for her future.

"Mulan needs to know, and ya need to tell her. If ya don't tell her, she'll feel she can never trust ya. Weigh the consequences of being put in hibernation for the rest of her

life against the cost of telling her what ya know. There is only one answer that allows ya to continue working with her. No matter what else she is, she became a Wu Shaman and still takes that role seriously.”

Your words carry wisdom. We will consider your council.

I carried the staff to the bedroom and found Mulan curled into a ball on the bed. I pulled a cozy cover from the bottom and gently draped it over her to keep her warm. Her legs stretched out beneath the cover, but she didn’t wake.

My fierce little friend was completely exhausted. I never saw Mulan look so fragile, and I hoped I never had to see her like this again.

Put us near her. Proximity is best for our magick. We will send enough healing to ease her illness. Your magick help will not be needed with this.

I nodded but didn’t answer as I laid the staff in bed beside her.

If her mages didn’t come clean with her in the next day or so, then I would tell Mulan what they said. I was fairly sure they knew that about me.

But I intended to tell Conn as soon as I could. Because if there was a baby—and I was pretty sure there was—he was most definitely its father.

Goddess only knew what security measures we would need to protect an infant demon royal. We’d at least have to hire a trustworthy nanny. A magical baby daycare had not been part of our grand plan. Since nannies cost a lot of money, we’d have to improve our ability to turn over jobs.

Those were all minor details, though.

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What worried me most was Rasmus and Zara. Did the renamed ‘guardians’ share the nephilim aversion of their watcher ancestors?

There was no way to ask without telling them Mulan’s story, and she might not want it shared. Of course, telling me was like writing it on a billboard that lots of people could eventually see if they read my mind. I don’t think the shaman staff knew that my mind shouted my thoughts to the world without my permission.

As if I didn’t already have a hundred concerns, my phone pinged with a new message. Henry said Ben was at the driveway gate with a van full of strangers. At least, they were strangers to Henry. I texted back to let him in because Henry would have kept him waiting until I did.

Looking Mulan over once more to be sure she was still doing okay, I left the sleeping Wu Shaman to go greet them.

Chapter Thirteen

A six-foot, curvy blonde climbed from Ben’s barely used apprehension van and stretched her long legs. She was curvy all over but shapely and muscled as well.

The closer I got to her, the more familiar she looked. I strained my memory, trying to place her. I’d been Fiona’s age the last time I worked in Ireland. I had returned often enough to keep in touch with work friends.

The woman’s eyes swiveled in her head as she surveyed the grounds. Then her head turned on her shoulders farther than humanly possible. There weren’t many beings

with that much neck rotation.

Luckily, Ben and the other passengers hadn't gotten out yet, so they'd missed the head-swiveling show. An owl shifter's greatest magick was the ability to scare the living shit out of normal people. Her large white wings and long claws were just extra.

A smile bloomed across my lips. "Ya could have flown in, Jessing. I wouldn't have minded. I know how hard giant owls find being cramped up in vehicles."

Jessing spread her arms. She managed a half-grin for me recognizing her, which told me she'd finally lost that edge of her seriousness that had made her keep her emotional distance when we worked together.

Her German eagle shifter family hadn't been very affectionate with the owl shifter child they'd freakishly birthed. She'd been reticent to even make friends when Aran first met her.

"Hello, Aran. I was told you had a problem you couldn't handle. Is that true?"

"No, I can handle it just fine," I said, grinning at her. "But I'm trying not to kill everyone who comes after me. I'd rather solve this dilemma differently if I can."

Chuckling, Jessing erased the distance between us and pulled me against her giant body for a hug. The woman wasn't overweight at all. She was just large... and incredibly strong. I felt like a child in her embrace.

Shock and a slight bit of fear stiffened me for a moment, but finally, I made myself relax. "It's good to see ya, Jessing. Ya look wonderful."

"You don't, Aran. You look tense. I'm here to help with that. My partner is also

coming to help soon. However, he is a big man and requires a big portal. May we open one here on your grounds? This place is enormous. You must be very rich.”

I laughed as I pulled free of her fierce clutch. It made me feel sorry for her prey. “I’m not rich at all, Jessing. Didn’t ya hear? My ex-husband put me in prison for seven years. I bought this place with friends.”

“I did hear about your unfair prison time. Why did you stay in that place? It is the question no one can answer for me.”

My voice was soft but firm. “I stayed to protect my daughter from her power-hungry father who threatened me. In hindsight, it was not a wise decision. But ya can’t change the past.”

“Ezra always said it was a waste of magick that someone like you would let someone like your former husband lock both you and your magick away.”

I grunted. “Oh, that’s right. Ezra worked his way up the Shadow Breaker ranks after I left.”

“Yes, some would say that,” Jessing said with a smile.

“What would ya say?” I asked.

Jessing drew in air through her teeth. It was a terrible sound, and I looked away so she wouldn’t see me wincing.

“I would say the irate fairy felt he had unfinished business with you,” Jessing said.

“Well, he didn’t,” I said. “I broke up with Ezra long before I married Jack.”

“Why does your daughter now cavort with supernatural beings? An angel follows her everywhere,” Jessing informed me.

“Why do wolves howl at the moon? We’re a magickal family with destinies we can’t fight.”

Jessing stopped asking questions to laugh.

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I grinned at her. “Are ya messing with me on purpose?”

“No, but I find it enjoyable. My partner would say that was wrong of me. He claims to be our moral compass. But that is only at work. At home, he likes that I am not a nice person.”

I ran a hand through my hair. Goddess, her partner was coming. I knew without asking Ben that Jessing was one of the two enforcers because she was already questioning me. She had been using our old connection as a basis to ask questions without seeming to interview me.

Why wasn’t Ben getting out of his vehicle?

“Excuse me a minute,” I said to Jessing. I walked to the van and tapped on the driver’s window. Ben dutifully rolled it down to talk. “Are ya going to sit in there all night and let the owl shifter torment me?”

“It had crossed my mind,” Ben said. “Where’s your impertinent shadow?”

“Try using a name. That flowery description applies to most of the people I call friends these days.”

Ben and I both raised our eyebrows. Then we burst out laughing. I leaned against the side of the van until I’d stopped. Ben’s low chuckling delighted me.

“When you’re done being amusing, I’ve got a troll and a leashed tiger cat in the back. He insists Mulan has to personally take delivery of it.”

“Right. Perfectly understandable,” I said, peering back through the seats. “Hello, Bo.”

“Hello, freen.”

Ben rolled his eyes at Bo’s mispronunciation. His expensive translator naga had been working diligently with Bo on his vocabulary building. The troll knew the word was ‘friend’ now... and I knew he knew. Not using it was a pleasant joke between us.

Ben had yet to adjust to Bo and might never adjust my ‘freen-ship’ with the troll, though I was hopeful.

“How’s yer wife doing, Bo?” I asked.

“Twowives now,” he answered from the depths of the vehicle. “Both good in bed.”

I dipped my head to giggle at the oversharing and looked up to find Ben glaring at me.

“Ya’re very lucky, Bo. Let me go wake the Wu Shaman. She’s been feeling sick today. Hang in there. I’ll be right back.”

“Poor cat lady,” Bo said with genuine concern.

I straightened, bit my lip, and walked away from the van so I wouldn’t start laughing again. “I’ll be back in a few minutes, Jessing. We’ll work on yer portal problem then. Make yerself at home, but ask me before ya start hunting. Ya’re not the only predator on this property.”

“I ate before I came. There was a squirrel at the office.”

I picked up speed and covered the distance to Mulan’s house in half my usual time. I

let myself back in without knocking and tiptoed down the hall. She was right where I left her.

“Mulan?” I called gently. She made a grumbling noise and rolled from her side to her back. “Bo is here with yer tiger cat. He won’t get out of the van with it until ya’re present to receive it.”

“Tiger cat is back?” Mulan muttered in her drowsy state. “Too much going on. I forgot about it.”

“Well, Bo is here with it. Yer tiger cat is done.”

Mulan blinked and struggled to sit up. I picked up one of her hands and tugged her upright. “How do ya feel?” I asked.

“Better than before,” she said. “You have healing magick.”

“A little. Yer staff helped more than I did.”

“Staff in closet,” she said.

“No,” I corrected. “It’s next to ya. It wanted to check on ya... and to make up.”

She rolled until she saw her staff on the pillow next to hers. The turtle shells clacked in hello without her touching them. Mulan, who still hadn’t woken up completely, reached out and patted it. I saw the brief affectionate exchange as a good sign.

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“If ya don’t need my help getting up, I’m going to run back and let Bo know ya’re on yer way. One of my enforcers is here. I’ve got to go deal with her before she starts interviewing everyone she sees.”

Mulan waved me away with her hand. “I feel like myself again. No sickness.”

“Good,” I said. “Bo is calling you the cat lady. Don’t be mad at him.”

“Trolls have no sense,” she said with a sad head shake.

“No, he doesn’t mean it in a negative. I think it’s because he doesn’t know yer name. Or maybe he can’t say it. Anyway, the way he says ‘cat lady’ is sweet. Ya can tell he likes you. Just go with it, okay?”

Mulan motioned me away with both hands. “He is helping me. I will not harm him.” She sighed heavily. “How can I become mother when getting tiger cat back makes me feel tired?”

I chuckled. “I’m sure ya’ll figure it out. All women do. And Bo will always take back the tiger cat if ya don’t want it.” I paused a moment before issuing another order. “Take the staff with ya so the cat will get used to it. Ya don’t want the tiger cat running off when ya call yer magick. I also suggest ya turn it into a walking stick. It needs the sunlight, and ya need the help to steady ya.”

“Yes, mother. I am fine now. You can leave,” Mulan said with all the sarcasm she could muster.

I wagged a finger at her. “I heard that tone. I’ll mother ya if I feel the need. But I’m done being bossy for now. Just please do what I suggested so I won’t worry.”

Her response was to offer me a long-suffering sigh and a nod.

“How big a portal do ya intend to create?”

Jessing held her long arms wide to show that he would need a lot of room. “My partner is a male witch. He makes a big entrance. It’s his favorite thing, so I indulge him.”

How magnanimous of her when I was doing all the work.

I tilted my head to ponder Jessing. “Wait... wasn’t yer original partner a male witch? I remember that he didn’t like being one. Did he ever make peace with his power source?”

Jessing grinned at me. “You have an excellent memory for someone your age.”

I blinked at her. “Well, it’s not like I’m a hundred, Jessing. I’m only forty. Ma is in her sixties, and she has a wonderful memory as well. How old are ya, Jessing? Ya must be in yer late thirties. I was the youngest trainer the Shadow Breakers ever used, and ya weren’t a child yerself.”

“And listen to you! You can still do math. This bodes very well for the accuracy of your story, Aran. Many people your age don’t have such solid recall.”

I rolled my eyes without hiding it this time. Jessing had mastered the arrogance of the eagle shifter family she was born into. Back when I first knew her, I’d realized instantly that she considered herself too good to need any further instruction. The woman had complied with my training exercises because she’d sworn to her parents

to do so. She was an owl shifter of her word.

She and her witch partner back then had gotten passed to another trainer after Jack dragged me away from my work... and out of Ireland.

My last memory of those long-ago days was an argument Jessing and I had over me not letting her eat a few trouble-making pixies. I emerged victorious in the argument that day, but Jessing remained unconvinced that my approach was right. She had conceded to peacefully moving the newly formed pixie group, but I was never sure she believed it was a better option than destroying them.

I briefly wondered how many pixies she'd ended up eating after I was gone. Then I told myself to let it go. Whatever she'd done or not done, I needed her. So I would not judge her by our shared past.

When I'd told Ben enforcers were always trouble, I hadn't been able to describe what kind because it varied with the magickals. She'd been here less than an hour, and I'd already developed a theory about the owl shifter. Jessing irritated people into giving her the information she needed, which was the unvarnished, unembellished truth.

Goddess only knew what kind of man the owl shifter had partnered with for life. It was not uncommon for work partners to become spouses. Ezra and I were partners who became lovers. We might have become more if he hadn't decided he needed a dozen other women to entertain him.

The Shadow Breakers had no rules against fraternization with peers. Their only rule was that ya couldn't take a target as a lover.

I easily could see how it might simplify yer life to share work and home with the same person. Wasn't that what I was doing with Rasmus? And what Mulan was doing with Conn?

Yet I still dreaded seeing what kind of man could handle the annoying owl shifter. He'd have to be twice as obnoxious to hold his own. That would probably make him twice as hard to deal with as an enforcer.

Sighing heavily, I walked the area near my fire pit and chanted to push the wards back. It surprised me that even Mulan's wards obeyed. When I'd cleared enough space to suit Jessing, she pulled a tiny foldable cell phone from her cleavage and made a call. It took remembering what it felt like to get shot with an arrow and knifed in the stomach to keep me standing there.

A spiral portal spiraled in the area I'd cleared. The energy of it bathed us in silver light. Something fast shot out of the portal like a speeding motorcycle riding up between two cars. The owner of the speeding vehicle was a muscled man with green hair riding a surfboard that was glued to a round disk.

He flew what looked to be a victory lap around us while Jessing clapped and blew kisses at him. As he hovered in the air, I looked up and saw the disk under the surfboard for what it was.

The man had mounted his board to an automatic vacuum—the set-it-and-forget-it kind that did yer sweeping while ya were away from home. I'd seen friends control theirs with an app on their phones. It was a fine example of human magick that I wanted no part of. Running a regular vacuum was good enough for me and I still knew how to use a broom for sweeping.

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My magick had always used weapons and tools that The Dagda gifted me with because I was his chosen descendant. Some witches still used brooms to direct their magick. Ma had one and had trained to use it but rarely did. She'd always had a familiar too, but her current cat had gotten lazy like a favored pet gets in old age. Ma's familiar didn't do normal witching any more than Ma did. Mostly, he kept her company.

Because of Ma's lineage, I'd seen a lot of witch strangeness in my life, but I had never known a witch—male or female—to use a vacuum cleaner. Well, not until now. I couldn't think of a single polite comment to make about it, so I pretended I saw such things all the time.

The green-haired male witch circled one last time and came to lightly land beside Jessing. He was her size in both height and girth. The girth didn't look normal for him, though. It looked like he spent many hours working out to get his muscled arms and thick thighs the way a bodybuilder would. If his muscled male perfection was a spell, he could sell it and make a fortune.

"Hi, honey," the male witch said in a low voice. He stepped off his weird broom invention and then gave her a tight hug.

"I missed you. I hope things went well," she said back, returning the embrace.

"It went as well as we expected," he said. He laughed loudly when Jessing made a face.

I forced a smile to my mouth as I closed the portal for him, reset the wards, and

turned back to the loving pair. The ShadowBreakers sent them to help me solve my fairy problem. I was glad they were a united pair and not just normal partners.

But when I turned, he wasn't where he was a minute ago. Instead, he was standing less than six inches away from me. I jumped a foot away from his hulking form.

"Goddess bless..." I exclaimed. "Give me some space, please. People are trying to kill me, and I'm jumpy. Ya're lucky I didn't zap ya."

The green-haired male witch laughed. "You don't remember me, do you, Aran."

I shook my head. He laughed again and walked to stand by Jessing. "You helped me back then, and now I've come to help you in your time of need. And if that means killing your pursuers, so be it. "

The male witch waved a hand and changed his surfboard vacuum into a normal broom, but a manly, rugged one with thick strands. Then, he magickly dressed himself until he looked like a modern pilgrim. The only recognizable thing remaining was his green hair.

Once his changes were complete, he patted Jessing on the shoulder and handed her his broom to hold. Then he walked close to me again. This time, he stayed out of arm's reach. My reaction to strangers coming close enough to stab me wouldn't be changing anytime soon.

"Who do you think is after you?" he asked.

"Since joining the Shadow Breakers again, I've made my share of enemies."

"Like the military scientists after yer boss?"

“Yes. But also Ezra of Airing Dale,” I said. “Are ya planning to tell me yer name?”

The man laughed. “You honestly don’t know?”

I shook my head.

“I used to call myself a mage. You told me to stop pretending to be what I wasn’t and to embrace my witch heritage. After you left us, I spent two years wrestling with your advice.” He held out his arms and looked down at himself. “This is what happened when I finally took it.”

I looked him up and down. Memories churned.

I remembered him, but not like this... and still not his name. Whoever he’d been before was someone easily forgotten. All I recalled of his younger days was his debilitating fear and his constant complaining.

But I couldn’t say that aloud. It would be too rude, even for me.

“I remember Jessing and ya were partners back then. I never dreamed it would last. The two of ya could barely speak civilly to each other. I remember details of that time but still not yer name. I’m sorry.”

He turned to grin at Jessing. “I thought you said her memory was fine.”

I glared at him. “It’s been nearly twenty years. Forgetting yer name doesn’t make me senile.”

The man turned back to me and smiled. “And there’s the sassy witch who inspired me.”

“Quite teasing her, Hart. I already made her angry this morning. She’s getting tense.”

“Hart?” I repeated, looking him over again. “Goddess bless, ya look nothing like ya used to look. No one would link that pale, hesitant magickal ya were with the magickal I see standing before me.”

I reeled in shock when he snatched me up and spun me in a circle, laughing the whole time. My enforcers were pushy and nosy and remembered me way more than I did them. I would hate every moment of their inquisition.

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When Hart finally let me go, I breathed out in relief.

Finally, I looked at Jessing. “Let’s go to the main house. We can talk privately there.”

“We would like to meet your ancient ones,” Jessing said.

“Ya will, but the only one ya can talk to is Rasmus. Zara is a special case. She’s here for reasons I can’t explain to ya.”

“Your daughter already explained the female guardian’s presence to us. She is being punished by her people, and you volunteered to rehabilitate her.”

I shook my head. What else had my daughter shared with the world? “Fiona’s lips are as loose as ever, I see. The only secrets that child ever kept were ones about her father that she shouldn’t have.”

Hart and Jessing both laughed at my complaining. “Your child turned out well. Your mother is very proud of both of you,” Jessing said. “What manner of being has taken it on himself to magickly train her? His energy does not reveal his nature. Is he like your ancient one?”

“I want to answer yes. Others call him an angel.”

Given what I’d recently realized about fallen angels, it was safest to let them believe Tony was like Rasmus. They followed their own rules and found creative ways to bend them when necessary.

Dylan and I had both benefitted from Tony's rule-bending efforts, but his far darrig family had disowned him. Because of that, I was still on the fence about whether Tony's angel powers were a good thing or not.

Since the angel worked with my daughter and had saved my life, I wouldn't let Jessing and Hart hassle Tony. The last thing I needed were two enforcer statues adorning my foyer, even if Henry and Gale would find it hilarious. I had already received mocking comments about the new statue of Ezra's sister. Demons streamed by it and covered their mouths to hide their giggling.

To Henry's credit, he hadn't asked who'd done the honors of freezing the female who'd deceived him.

And speaking of the deceptive fairy...

My sigh was loud as we stopped at my front door. "So ya heard about the bowman who shot me with the arrow?"

"Yes," they both said.

Jessing held up her hand. "The being was a product of a genetic human experiment which you attempted to thwart. You stopped some of them from being made, but not all. The details were in the report of the initial incident."

If the owl shifter wanted to prove that she'd done her homework on me, she had succeeded. "Right. So, did ya also hear about the fairy who recently stabbed me?"

Hart and Jessing looked at each other before shaking their heads.

Hart reached out and patted my shoulder. "We were occupied with another task. Are you injured? Is that why you called for help?"

“No, I wasn’t injured, but only because my guardian intervened. He inserted himself and took the stabbing for me. I survived, but he was injured. The fairy did not escape—or not completely.”

Jessing put a hand to her chest. “It is good she did not succeed in her murder attempt. Many stabbings are fatal. I heard that fairies are well-trained in close combat.”

“Yes, well, my fairy assassin is going to tell ya she did succeed. Her version of events was thwarted by powerful magick. I can’t even fully explain it, but the Dagda stone helped me heal. The bottom line is that she made a solid attempt but failed to kill me. As a result, we have tightened our wards and confined ourselves to the compound.”

Hart studied me. “We heard rumors of there being a kill-for-power contract on you. We have yet to confirm the rumors.”

I nodded. They knew little more than I did. “Do ya know if it was taken out by the Fairy Folk? Or by a particular fairy?”

“Are you referring to Ezra of Airing Dale?”

“Yes,” I said. “If I could repeat either of our battles over again, I would kill him when he tried to kill me. Ezra never deserved the mercy he received.”

“Why did you not take his head?” Jessing asked.

“Fiona’s angel stopped me from killing him the first time. The angel was the one who froze him. Until recently, Ezra was a statue decorating my foyer. I thawed him out, and he tried to kill me a second time. Instead of ending his life, I took most of his stored magick and weakened him. What happened was accidental, but it allowed me to stop him. Ya know the rest.”

“Then you sent him home to Ireland and hoped the fairies would take him back,” Hart said.

Jessing grunted as she turned to Hart. “I’m sure she did so to keep from killing him. His vicious tongue is as sharp as a blade.” She turned back to me. “Hart and I never liked him. Ezra was our supervisor for a time. We did not agree with his methods. He took great pleasure in cruelty and used excessive violence. We are willing to do what is necessary, but we do not get pleasure from the pain of others.”

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Coming from an owl shifter who had once preferred eating pixies to peacefully moving them, that was some harsh criticism.

“Yes, well, I told ya my story because I captured the stabbing fairy. And she may be related to Ezra. I haven’t been able to confirm her story about being his sister.”

“We can do that for you,” Hart declared.

“She lied her way into my home in order to kill me. I have her dagger. I cleaned all the blood off it to protect my and my guardian’s magick. It never occurred to me that I might be ruining evidence.”

“Things happen,” Hart said with a shrug. “Most magickals would have done the same.”

I nodded in relief. Maybe this wouldn’t be as bad as I feared. Or perhaps I needed to believe that. I’m sure I would have to draw uncrossable boundaries eventually.

Hart and Jessing followed me into the house with raised eyebrows. I held a hand out to the statue of my fairy assassin. “Here she is. She claimed to be Ezra’s sister.”

“She is in stasis. Who did this? Did you?” Jessing asked.

The owl shifter pondered the statue, leaning in to sniff the energy surrounding the female fairy. Did it have a smell?

Jessing pulled back. “I cannot identify it, but at the deepest level, it smells powerful

and ancient. It also smells Chinese. I know that sounds impossible, but that is what I smell.”

“It’s not impossible. Yer nose is very good,” I said with a grin. “I work with a magickal who calls herself a Wu Shaman. She is a Chinese witch, slash demon expeller, slash holy woman. I’ve never met anyone like her.”

Hart looked at me in surprise. “Jessing’s nose is always right. I’ve never known her to be wrong. Are you saying your Wu Shaman put the fairy into the magickal stasis we’re seeing?”

I nodded. “Yes, but she doesn’t know how, and the magickal tool she uses won’t tell her. Her staff is like the Dagda stone. It’s powered by a type of old magick only the gods understand. She and I use our magickal artifacts for our own purposes without really knowing how they work. Her freezing the fairy before she could leap through her escape portal shocked both of us.”

“Can the Chinese witch do this to anyone?” Jessing asked.

“No, but she’d like to be able to. She’s tried to repeat the process but has failed consistently. She may be carrying a baby. If true, it might have been the child helping her that allowed her to do it. Please say nothing of the potential child to anyone. It is not yet confirmed, and the father doesn’t know. I told you in confidence so you’d know I’m not holding anything back.”

Hart smiled at me. “Jessing could tell with one sniff if she was expecting. One of our daughters can do the same. It was a gift my darling owl developed when carrying our first brood.”

My gaze ran between them. “How many children do ya have?”

I blinked when Jessing's face turned pink.

"A baker's dozen," Hart said with a laugh.

I looked over at the owl shifter. "Thirteen children must have exhausted ya. I had my hands full with just Fiona."

Jessing shrugged. "My family moved to Ireland to help with them. None of my eagle siblings have conceived. Hart and I produced an equal assortment of eagle shifters and witches. They're mostly grown. His family lured our six witches to England with promises of learning secrets. My family insisted on working with the six eagles. Matilda was our only owl. We refused to send her away. She learns what she chooses to. Currently, your mother is teaching her to make potions."

"Really? Ma never told me."

This time, it was Jessing who reached out to pat my shoulder. "We understand your ex-husband wouldn't let you return to the land of your birth. And then you were in prison and couldn't return. Life in Ireland went on without you, but not like it does here."

My sigh was loud and forlorn, but I couldn't help feeling sorry for myself. "I never stopped missing it. Ireland is home."

"I did not say those things to make you sad," Jessing said.

"Oh, I know. And ya didn't. What's yer nose saying about me?" I asked her the question mostly to change the subject. I didn't want to dwell on what I'd left behind. My life was here in Salem for another four and a half years. I'd given my word and signed the same in ink.

“You smell like ancient magick, Aran, but also strongly of a virile, human male. Underneath that is the energy of the gods that I recall from when I knew you before. I have smelled similar god-magick on your child but not any virile human males yet.”

“TMI, love,” Hart said as he watched my reaction.

“No, I’m glad she didn’t smell men on my daughter. I find it reassuring.” I shook my head at my answer and chuckled as my face turned pink. “Ya’re good at discerning a person’s secrets, Jessing.”

The owl shifter beamed at my praise.

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“So, back to the fairy,” Hart said briskly, saving me from myself. “I’d like to talk with her.”

“That’s not currently possible. I can tell ya that she has an accent like mine, but she covers it up. The fairy came here pretending to be the lover of a centaur. When she stabbed me, her true self emerged. She’s full of hate, especially towards me.”

Hart tried to use his phone to take a photo of the fairy statue. His phone photos turned solid black or had only the background of the foyer visible.

“The magick must be keeping her from showing up. Perhaps it is some new fairy defense,” Jessing said.

Hart nodded. “We may have to get an artist to draw her.”

The energy causing her to be invisible might also be a kind that developed a necessary knack for hiding itself. I tucked this away as one more thing to share with Mulan when we spoke about what I’d learned.

“I know someone who draws well,” I said, snapping my fingers. “I think he’s in the library upstairs right now. Wait here, please. I’ll return shortly.”

Chapter Fourteen

It took the steps two at a time to get up them quickly. Rasmus had drawn Zara’s former human image for me before I knew her. We’d used it to search for her identity online.

I was winded by the time I reached the third floor. Panting, I knocked on the new library's door and waited.

"Enter," Rasmus said.

Still breathing hard, I went inside. Rasmus and Zara were stacking books in small piles. They looked quite entranced with their task.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but I need yer help, Rasmus."

"Of course. What kind of help?"

I drew in a deep breath so I'd have enough air to speak. I still hadn't recovered completely from the arrow incident. I tired too fast and got winded more easily. But I still breathed air daily, so I really couldn't complain. Things could have gone much worse for me than struggling with shortness of breath.

Of course, the stabbing no one knew about probably hadn't helped, either.

"I need ya to draw the female fairy Mulan froze. The enforcers are here. They're trying to confirm her identity but it fails to show her. I think Mulan's magick won't let the statue show up."

"How strange," Zara said. "May I come to see this as well?"

"Sure," I said, unable to think of a reason why that might be bad. "The enforcers are here to help me find out for sure who's trying to kill me and help put a stop to it."

Zara smiled tolerantly at my explanation. "Yes. Rasmus explained their purpose. I find it quite fascinating that they are not subject to your working restraints."

I shrugged. “Well, they have constraints too, just not like mine. Everyone working for the Shadow Breakers follows a set of rules to do their work. It is for everyone’s safety and to ensure the best possible outcomes. The Shadow Breakers are not lawless magickals.”

Zara lifted a brow. “Because the lawless ones are the paranormals you arrest.”

“Yes,” I said, wishing she’d just leave it there. I felt sure I knew where this was going and needed to cut it off before it could get out of hand. I smiled at Rasmus. “I’m sorry to interrupt yer organizing.”

“It’s no problem at all. Let me retrieve my drawing pad from my old bedroom. I kept it there for nights I couldn’t sleep.”

The guardian was sleeping in my room now but hadn’t moved all his stuff to our quarters. His old bedroom was now being used as his office. He had a desk set up in there to work. When I was otherwise occupied, Rasmus stayed close to Zara by using his Orlin-sanctioned pretend-brother status. I appreciated him for it.

I waited at the top of the stairs for them. When they appeared, I started down. With their longer strides, I needed to get a head start. At the bottom of the stairs, I walked back to a now staring Hart and Jessing.

Their gazes remained locked onto both guardians, but kept straying to Rasmus. And I knew what they were thinking. It was the same thing everyone thought when they didn’t look any farther than our appearances. They wondered what someone who looked like Rasmus saw in someone who looked like me.

They had no way of knowing that we weren’t even magickal equals because Rasmus was in a whole other category. However, compared to Jessing and Hart, I was a rock star. I was more powerful than either of them or any of the other magickals they

knew, including Ezra. If the enforcers realized it, though, they gave no indication.

Jessing's gaze turned to me when I got close. "I am impressed, Aran of The Dagda. Your guardian is a beautiful male. You traded up a skyscraper's worth," she said in a loud whisper that I felt sure everyone heard.

I made the introductions quickly. Rasmus and Zara nodded to the enforcers without saying more than a simple hello. I could see they were keeping their neutrality firmly in place with my co-worker guests.

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I turned to Jessing and grinned. I no longer even thought of Jack and Rasmus as serving the same purpose in my life. Jack had been a candle warming my bed. Rasmus had set me and my sheets on fire. And he still did. I had felt no lessening of passion from him in all the time we'd known each other. His self-control and caring during my injuries made me love him, but once I physically recovered, my clothes were always at risk of being torn off.

I didn't mind telling others how greatly my life had changed. "Things were over between Jack and me the moment I went to prison. Ya havenoidea how well I traded up," I told the owl shifter, glancing at the tall, elegant male now flipping to a blank page in his drawing pad.

We both watched with delight as the guardian's long fingers drew lines across the page with efficient ease.

Hart leaned down to my ear. "Power rolls off him but not off of her. Is that normal?"

Jessing leaned on the other side. "She is beautiful, Hart. Beauty is its own power."

They spoke about them like Rasmus's drawing prevented the discussion from being heard.

Their expressions remained stoic, but I knew both guardians heard every word being said. I appreciated their tolerance and would thank them for it later.

Hart and Jessing weren't being subtle, but enforcers never were.

I answered Hart's observation because it was in all our best interests. "Zara suffered a trauma not long ago and is still healing. Her magick is equal to his. It merely sleeps until she is well enough to use it."

"Ah..." Hart said, leaning upright again.

My gaze remained on Rasmus until he quietly pulled the sheet from the tablet. "Who gets this?"

"Me," I said, holding up my hand.

Rasmus smiled as he walked to me and handed it over. "Is that all you needed?"

"For now," I said. "Thank ya for taking the time. I don't want to keep ya from yer organizing."

"I'd be interested to see who she is. Are you planning to check now?" Zara asked.

Hart and Jessing both had been leaning over my shoulders to look at the penciled image. "Sure. Let's check now," Hart said, slipping the paper gently from my hand.

Jessing just as gently took it from his fingers and held it out for him to take a photo of it.

"Did it work?" I asked.

Hart nodded. "I'm uploading it to the Shadow Breakers database. It's running her likeness now. I had it already preset to search Ezra's relatives before extending outside his family."

It took over a full minute for Hart to get an answer from the search. We all held our

breaths during the wait. Rasmus caught my eyes, and in his gaze, I saw our shared memory of doing something similar to find Zara. Except back then, he had drawn her from my description, which had come from a vision.

I smiled and nodded to him. It was like we were a true team these days. I loved this feeling. I also liked not constantly mistrusting his intentions. Contentment urged me to sigh in relief, but I didn't want to explain my emotional reaction to Hart and Jessing, who were watching me too closely.

"She's in the database. Princess Lulutha of Airing Dale. Daughter of King Alamos and Queen Meatha of Airing Dale. Older sister of Prince Ezra, Prince Lionel, and Princess Dreama. Princess Lulutha carries the title of Arbitrator. She is the executor of her father's kingdom. There are no images of the younger two siblings."

"So she's their version of an enforcer," I said, rubbing my forehead. This was the worst thing that could have happened. "And I froze her."

"I thought you said your Wu Shaman froze her."

I waved a hand. "Her family won't care about semantics or who helped me. All they will care about is that she failed to kill me. Not destroying a threat weakens their rule and makes them susceptible to takeovers. Some fairies do not recognize The Dagda's god-state. They barely see my ancestor as their equal, and they judge me as less powerful than him because of my diluted heritage."

"Their kingdom falling will not happen in this realm. We will not know if or when it falls, and if it does, it will be because of their children. Weak offspring who cannot stand up for what is right are doomed to fail. One of my sons learned that the hard way. He nearly lost a wing," Jessing said.

"The lack of harmony will ripple across the agreement humans have with fairies

visiting our realm. They bring us fairy magick and take a conglomeration of human power home with them. Even Conn cautioned me not to mess with that status quo. Now I've taken out the one fairy who was tasked with maintaining harmony."

Jessing huffed. "But she tried to stab you without a rightful challenge. She carried out an unprovoked attack by the laws of the fairies and our own. You have every right to kill her, Aran. She wanted you dead. It is a lucky thing your guardian kept it from happening. This whole situation is without doubt Ezra's fault for lying to his family. His lies grow like weeds in a field and sprout more lies that choke out the flowers of truth. The fault is not yours."

Princess Lulutha had more than just wanted to murder me. She'd given it her all and briefly succeeded. The fairy princess had mortally wounded me and nearly caused my death. The problem for the fairies was that I refused to stay dead.

They didn't realize yet that they were battling the mages in the Dagda stone, my guardian, and Conn, who were all experts at keeping me alive.

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And Goddess knew, I'd given them all lots of practice.

“My problems are in our realm because I am here. The killers and the contract will be here. I've taken out not one but two of the royal fairy family. I've created a mess in our realm that is nearly impossible to fix. I can't travel to the land of the fairies. The Dagda won't let me.”

And I couldn't leave Conn, Mulan, and the guardians behind to fight misguided fairies until they came to their senses. Murray, a fairy I counted as a friend, had done nothing significant to help. He'd shrank back from the angel magicks surrounding Ezra and left me with dire warnings not to kill the betraying male fairy.

I didn't know how I was going to fix this, but I had to come up with something. Killing the fairies would start a war. Letting other fairies dethrone the one who formally safeguarded humans was another bad idea.

But I couldn't just let both of them go.

Either Ezra or his sister—perhaps both—might come after me again. At some point, I'd drop my guard and they would succeed. That would be the price of not following this through.

And what about Fiona? The angel currently guarding her wouldn't be there forever. He said he was watching Ma because that was where Fiona currently stayed. What would happen when her training was over?

My head spun with it all. I should have recorded the scene in the cave with Hisser.

Conn was always telling me I needed to learn to use technology better. I never dreamed there would come a time when I wished I had done so.

“I need to go. I need time to think,” I said.

I’d been saying similar things a lot lately. I was always running away from what I discovered when the answer wasn’t readily available. When I was younger, I never wrestled with a decision like I tended to do these days.

Now, I had to be more careful than ever. I had so many people in my life that I would never sleep if they had to live in constant danger because of me.

Damn Ezra for causing me this anxiety. I had suspected my troubles were because of him. Learning the identity of my fairy assassin confirmed his role. And I hadn’t needed Hart and Jessing after all.

Fairies visiting this realm were required to register with the Shadow Breakers.

I knew that factoid but I’d forgotten it. If I’d thought of asking, Ben could have looked her up. But I hadn’t. Too much was going on for me to think clearly.

Dying multiple times had left more than one lasting impact that I was finding difficult to overcome.

Chapter Fifteen

I asked Henry to put Hart and Jessing in his guest suite downstairs. Instinct warned that it would best to keep them separated from the rest of us if we wanted to sleep in peace.

Staying at Fiona's house had been out of the question because it remained untouched.

The blue house we used for office space only had nothing but office furniture and cots. No, I wanted the enforcers spoiled with enough pampering that they would leave me alone for a while.

Henry and Gale knew that was my plan when I asked to put them by the pool and spa room because that was part of their private space.

Currently, I was hiding from everyone in the greenhouse.

It was growing late, but I was still trimming my unruly wolf's bane. I'd purchased the dangerous plant to make a tranquilizer in case the demon wolves got out of hand. But they hadn't done so yet.

Instead, they were like two puppies racing and playing. I had yet to see a single instance of aggression. This was what worried me about them guarding the property. What would they do to an intruder? Wag their tails and whine at them?

Maybe I could find a mean horse for Zara to convert. That shouldn't be too hard. Would the horse keep his aggression after being turned into a pegasus? That was anyone's guess, and I had no idea. I'd seen a couple of natural pegasi from a distance, and I knew they weren't social creatures. However, my experience with genetic mutations wasn't very positive, except for the demon wolves.

"There you are. I've been looking everywhere. Are you upset over the fairies?" a sexy male voice asked me from the doorway.

I set my tiny shovel aside and pulled off my gardening gloves. "Yes, I'm upset and hiding from people. No, you don't want to know why. Or what I'm regretting not doing. Ya wouldn't like knowing what I think."

Rasmus ducked his head to clear the doorway. "Perhaps not, but I like you hurting

even less. I believe this is the most obvious time when we should be sharing our true thoughts without holding back. That's what loving human couples do, is it not?"

I nodded at his summary of what should be true in a loving relationship.

If Rasmus wanted to hear the non-neutral truth of my feelings, I guess I would tell him. But he wouldn't like it.

And our disagreement could drive a wedge between us.

I'd already suffered enough over the male fairy who wanted my power. I would come to hate Ezra more than I already did if he came between me and the guardian male I'd chosen to love.

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I made Rasmus come sit beside me on my little bench. “Okay. Here it is. I regret that I did not kill the fairy when I had the best of reasons to do so. He has tried to kill me twice, and I showed him mercy twice. Now, I’ve shown his murderous sister mercy as well. Yet neither of them would ever admit that they were in the wrong. They decided I was their enemy simply because they didn’t win.”

“Are you sure the situation is as hopeless as you imagine it is?”

I stared at him and nodded. “Yes, Rasmus. From their point of view, they survived me despite all odds, which translates into them being in the right because of it. They are big believers in fate and revenge. Their passions run hot and I have disrupted their plotting. I am their enemy and they do not change their minds about such things.”

“But this is not their realm, and their rules don’t apply here. In this realm, they need to be following your rules. Here, you are the judge of what is fair and not fair.”

I shrugged. “Ya might think that would be the case. With fairies, the rules waver with the politics. There is a balance humans carefully maintain with them because our realms rely on each other. I threw it out of balance by not following the rules of this realm which justified their deaths. It doesn’t matter that something kept me from following through each time. Instead of questioning their motives, they will see me as their problem and their solution will be to kill me.”

“Being merciful is the default setting of your true nature, despite the bloodthirsty things you tend to say. You refuse to hurt people when you feel there is any other option available. Jack is walking proof of that. He’s wronged you enough times to destroy you emotionally. I could never let him hurt you that way again without

intervening. I would tell his father and insist he teach Jack the wrongness of harming you.”

I stared at the guardian and blinked in shock. Did he seriously think telling Jack’s guardian father on him would stop my power-hungry ex-husband from trying to retrieve the Dagda stone from my dead body? My death would be an illuminating event for Rasmus.

Jack and Ezra both wanted the stone and the rest of my powers for the same reason. They’d decided they deserved to use it more than I did. If I died today, they would become jackals who fought over my remains. Neither Jack nor Ezra believed me when I said my power was my inheritance and that only I could wield it.

Yet that is an undeniable truth, a male voice said in my head. We would serve no other but a child of The Dagda or the god himself.

I patted my chest. “Yes, I know. Quiet, please. This conversation doesn’t involve ya. I’m explaining it to Rasmus.”

Apologies, Aran. We will resume our own work now.

I chuckled and patted my chest again.

Then I turned to the guardian. “Killing Ezra would have been a sanctioned death, especially during the Hisser incident. But Fiona’s angel—yer old supervisor—stopped me. Killing his sister would have been legitimate as well when she stabbed either of us, but Mulan stopped her at the end before I could swing my sword across her neck. My mercy was accidental in both those cases, Rasmus. The only true mercy I showed was after I thawed Ezra out. Maybe I felt guilty for using the angel’s energy to save a condemned being who might not have deserved to be saved.”

“You were the jiangshi’s savior. Saving him was the right thing to do. You evolved his soul, and that is life-changing.”

Of course, the guardian would say something like that. Rasmus never wanted me to kill anyone. I didn’t enjoy doing it, but it got rid of my problems in a hurry.

I lifted a hand to stop him from lecturing me further. “Today, I found out Ezra has two more royal fairy siblings who might come after me. Wiping out that generation would be a waste of life. Worse than that, that fairy female is the royal who is supposed to be guarding humans from fairy shenanigans. Now that I know who she is, I can’t kill her, even though it might cost me my life and the lives of those who know me.”

The guardian just looked at me. I’d seen that look before. He was thinking of how to convince me I was wrong.

“Showing mercy has not served me well, Rasmus. Conn tried to teach me that my entire life. I think I have finally learned that lesson.”

Rasmus sighed and put an arm around me to pull me close. “There is always a way,” he said. “The question is whether or not we can find it in time.”

I thought of Mulan and the baby she carried. What if something happened to them?

I closed my eyes as I spoke. “As much as you and I have argued, ya know I am not above seeking revenge. I’m not perfect, nor even particularly good. And I don’t think I’ve ever pretended to be for anyone’s sake. I tear misbehaving demons apart for a living, Rasmus. That’s my true calling. This Shadow Breakers stuff is simply what pays the bills.”

Rasmus nodded and then smiled at me. I could feel the lecture coming, but I wasn’t

prepared for the parable, so I ended up listening.

“You lied to Jack for many years, but you did so for the best of reasons. The man you loved betrayed you, and you feared he would betray your child as well. Intentions count more than humans realize. When you follow them, they shape your reality.”

I snorted and then laughed dryly. Not because Rasmus wasn’t right—I agreed with him—but because talking to Rasmus was like talking to Orlin.

Their otherworldly guardian ability to see all nuances of every situation was the secret to their alleged wisdom. They were like walking gods—or at least computers—seeing every tiny possibility all at once. From their multi-vantage point, they felt justifiably superior to humans. That meant their choice of those many possibilities was, of course, the best one that could be made.

Human minds had natural limitations. Some had more than others. My human mind could see a lot of nuances in most situations, but never as many as Rasmus could see. Yet I was sure I saw a good ninety percent of this one. No matter what my guardian thought I should do or think, my future decisions rested on the next one I made.

I didn’t know what to do to get out of this mess without starting a fairies versus humans war. This was bigger than me not killing the fairies when I had the chance.

This was about harmony between the realms.

“Take some time to forget your problems,” Rasmus said. “I find it helpful when I am thinking too hard. You are very much like me when you are trying hard to find the best solution.”

“Really? Are ya saying we’re equals then?” I asked just to see what he would say. It was something I asked him frequently.

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“When it comes to our good intentions and having a caring heart, we are virtually twin souls in our thinking.”

I smiled and took his hand. “Okay, I’m charmed with ya. Let’s go to bed.”

“I agree. We should remove ourselves to our quarters because the demon wolves are patrolling tonight. Dylan is training them.”

“Good Goddess...” I said, hanging my head to sigh.

“Would you like me and Zara to pick out a horse for her experiment? She’s become quite the equine expert this week.”

“But I haven’t said yes to her doing it.”

“Life is going to move forward, Aran. This is the right thing to do for her and the wolves. Genetic manipulation is Zara’s life’s work. She is better at it than I am. The horse will not be harmed. It will be evolved.”

“She’s going to give it wings, Rasmus. She’s going to make a flying horse. We already have to hide the demon wolves. How are we going to hide a pegasus?”

He pulled me up and we started walking. His fingers tightened around mine. “You can fashion a talisman for the horse to wear that will hide its converted form. The point of the change is not to give a normal horse wings. It is to increase the horse’s sentience so it can communicate to any creature it chooses like other pegasi do. The temperament we choose will determine the converted creature’s behavior.”

I thought about telling him I planned to pick a mean horse, one that had a habit of kicking and biting. Maybe it would bite Zara. I think I would enjoy that.

“No, you wouldn’t,” Rasmus said.

“Are ya reading my mind again?”

“Not everything, but you’ve been broadcasting two thoughts very loudly. One is wishing you had killed Ezra. The other is about a baby. Are you wanting a baby?”

“No, and I can’t have anymore. They removed too many important parts from me after Fiona was born.”

“Nothing is impossible. You can be repaired. I could fix you.”

Of course, he could. How very non-neutral of him. I had a choice. I could either tell Rasmus I was daydreaming or admit a truth I wasn’t ready for him to know.

“It was just a thought to distract myself from how bad my luck is at the moment. Women of all ages have the occasional urge for a baby, but it passes.”

“If the urge persists for you, will you tell me?”

“Yes,” I said with total honesty. “But I don’t think I’m up for raising a guardian baby, Rasmus. Are you interested in being a father?”

“Will you think poorly of me if I say no?” he asked.

“No, I would think we were perfectly suited to each other at this time of our lives.” And I meant that with every cell of my being. “Is your lack of fatherly urges because you had to kill your nephilim children?”

Rasmus nodded. “Yes, that is partly the reason. I believe I have some long-term trauma from the event. When I think of all that is required for raising a child from scratch, I feel very tired for no logical reason. Then, I can only think about how to avoid having children. This cycle of thinking kept me celibate for centuries.”

My laughter rang out through the night. “That’s exactly how I feel about small children. Raising one child was all I could handle. We’re of like minds about this, Rasmus.”

“Just so you know, not all nephilim children died, Aran. Those that were not abnormal—that were not obviously the children of watchers—were hidden by their mothers. My brethren and I did not look hard for them. We had killed them to the point of not being able to do more. Taking a life rips away part of your soul. It was damaging for everyone involved.”

“Yes, I’m sure it was,” I said, squeezing his fingers with mine. “Didn’t you get in trouble for not getting rid of all the hybrid children?”

“No. Numbers and results were never spoken of by anyone I knew. It is like we surrendered the fate of those children we missed to their mothers. We also secretly prayed the Creators never punished us for our actions. I understand it better now because I’m feeling the same guilt over things I do for you. I need to believe intentions matter.”

It was all so sad and it made me so curious. “What kind of punishment would you have gotten for sparing their lives?”

Rasmus pondered that for a full minute before answering. “It might have been stasis for several centuries or a complete return to our light being forms, followed by banishment from the planet.”

“Because normal death isn’t an option for yer kind,” I said in understanding.

Rasmus smiled at me with that superior yet smugly tolerant smile of his. I dreaded hearing his next words, but I’d started this conversation. It was only fair for me to listen to the lecture at the end of it.

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“Death as you think of it isn’t an actual option for anyone. Every being renews. Your soul has lived many human lives and died just as often. Humans never remember this about themselves. Even paranormal humans like you don’t remember their former lives very often. My brethren and I are not sure why that is the case on Earth, but my original planet worked similarly. Those humans who do recall previous incarnations rarely handle it well.”

Knowing who I’d been in a previous life intrigued me, but I could die happy without knowing more than I did now. I accepted death would be a transition to whatever was next for me. I didn’t see it as an end. But having nearly died twice lately, all I could recall was the pain. I wanted to avoid the pain and live this life for a wee bit longer, Goddess willing.

“If I do enough damage to demons, they don’t remember their previous lives when they return. But I recall ya saying guardians always remembered, no matter what happened to them.”

“Yes, my people remember all lifetimes, all situations, and all we have done. It is how we were made. Our minds expand infinitely. It is the light being part of us. Light beings blend into the energy of the universe. The effort of staying separate from it takes far more energy. Holding a human form takes the most energy of all, but guardians enjoy its pleasurable benefits. I amno exception. I have waited centuries to spend this time with you.”

We walked in silence the rest of the way. I didn’t know what to say to his comments about light beings, so I did what I usually did when I got into conversations over my head.

I made light of it all.

“Well, come on, Mr. Light Being. I need ya to distract me from my worries. Show me how perfect yer current physical form is. I might need to inspect every detail to validate yer findings.”

A chuckling Rasmus followed me to our quarters with a smile on his face. I was not coy with him. He seemed to enjoy that about me. When aroused, the man could have me naked in under twenty seconds.

I found his desire for me very validating. I felt very lucky that it matched my desire for him.

Tomorrow, I would remember the many problems I had yet to solve. Tonight, I would let the guardian remind me of one of my greatest blessings.

Chapter Sixteen

I left Rasmus sleeping and stumbled my way to the dining room. Hart and Jessing were already there enjoying breakfast. I murmured a morning greeting and poured coffee without spilling it on my hands.

The day was off to a good start so far.

“Give me five minutes of silent coffee time and then we can talk,” I said to them, sitting as far away from the happy, perky morning diners as I could.

The enforcers chuckled at my grogginess before returning to their meal. Gale had laid out a breakfast buffet on a beautiful white oak sideboard that had mysteriously appeared overnight. This morning, someone had loaded it with food.

I never knew how Henry and Gale could put so much effort into caring for the weird strangers I regularly brought into the house. But this morning, I felt so grateful that it nearly made me cry.

Rasmus kept both of us awake until the wee hours. I'd slept well for a solid three after he got tired, but I'd need a nap later to make it through the whole day.

I couldn't afford to sleep, though. There was too much to do.

Hart and Jessing looked at each other across the table. Finally, Hart turned to me. "Do you realize that you broadcast your thoughts?"

I finished my first cup of rejuvenation and rose to get a refill. Henry had brought out the urn this morning and I could tell it was full.

When I came back to the table, I looked at Hart and nodded. "Yes. I hired a dragon mage to help me learn to not do it. He said it would be nearly impossible because I had too much energy to constrain my thoughts properly. The broadcasting seems to serve the purpose of relieving pressure buildup in my brain. Did ya hear anything that ya want me to explain to ya?"

Hart chuckled. "You seem to love your coffee."

"Yes, I truly do," I said. "Anything else?"

Jessing giggled. "Your man did not let you sleep much last night."

I lifted my coffee cup and saluted her rightness. The owl shifter chuckled and shook her head at our silliness.

Conn stumbled into the room looking worse than I did. But I didn't think it was for

the same reasons.

“How’s Mulan feeling this morning?”

“She’s acting strangely. One moment she is angry. The next she is in tears. And then she gets violently sick.”

Jessing looked at me and then at Conn. “Women get hormonal at certain times in their lives,” she told him.

Conn frowned at Jessing’s comment. “Mulan is only fifty. She’s not old enough to be hormonal in the way you are implying.”

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A smirk twisted the lines of my mouth against my coffee cup. Jessing hadn't been implying Mulan was menopausal. Conn was just being dense... and rude.

Hart turned to stare at Conn. "We did not mention the Wu Shaman's age. Why did you assume what you did?"

When Conn stared blankly at him without answering, I realized the enforcers already knew Mulan's big secret. I also realized that Conn still did not know about the baby because he couldn't hear it.

No amount of coffee I drank this morning was going to keep what I had to do from being a hot mess.

I sighed and sipped more before talking. "Conn, can ya read my thoughts today?"

"I work hard not to do that. Why do you ask?"

I stared at him while I pictured myself rocking a demon baby with tiny red horns. I tried not to make it look too similar to Lilith's toddler son.

His startled, puzzled gaze wandered around the room as he poured coffee for himself. He turned and looked at me. "Why are you acting weird? Am I missing something?"

"Yes. Ya're missing a lot," I said, but it was too early to fight about it. I'd yell at him later when I felt better.

I turned to look at her when Mulan angrily stomped into the dining room. She sniffed

the air, turned green, and put a hand over her mouth.

Surely, not even Conn could ignore that enormous sign.

Retreating from the room, I heard Mulan's small feet picking up speed as she ran back across the foyer to get outside to barf.

Conn frowned at her abrupt exit.

I rolled my eyes at him because who wouldn't be suspicious after that? Apparently... Conn wouldn't.

Jessing made a sympathetic noise. "Hart, you must make the baby sickness tea for the Wu Shaman. She is one of those unfortunate females who get so terribly sick she cannot function. You will do this as a favor for me, yes?"

Hart nodded. "Yes, darling. I have the ingredients for it in my herb bag. I'll brew the tea for the poor Wu Shaman right after I finish eating."

"Thank you, Hart. Last night, you were an unleashed animal. Today, you are a very kind man. I adore you for being both and consider myself a lucky, lucky female," Jessing said with genuine delight in her voice."

I looked at Conn who looked back at me in confusion. He slouched his shoulders as I watched. He was genuinely upset that she was so sick but I could tell he was completely clueless about the most logical reason.

He sighed as he looked at me. "Mulan said she ate some bad sushi. Does food poisoning last more than one day? I don't remember you ever being this sick with it. You could eat week-long leftovers and be fine. I guess Mulan has a weak constitution."

I sighed and shook my head at his nonsense. Conn had totally tuned out Hart and Jessing because he didn't like them. Nothing they said about baby sickness tea had reached his demon brain.

Good Goddess, it was way too early for all this drama. I sipped my coffee and took my time answering. Maybe it was a two-cups-of-coffee day for Conn.

I spoke slowly to him. "I believe I was only that sick during my first few weeks of carrying Fiona. That was the worst I ever felt in my life. Ma baked me ginger snaps and plied me with saltine crackers. That was right around the time we made our contract."

Jessing sipped her coffee and looked between Conn and me. Finally, she broke. "Are you keeping it a secret?"

She had directed her question to me, but Conn was the one who answered. "Keeping what a secret?" he asked.

Jessing shrugged as she looked at him. "The real reason for the poor Wu Shaman's illness."

Conn grunted to show his disgust over the hinting. He went back to drinking his coffee.

"He's usually much smarter than this," I told her.

"Males panic at first," Jessing said as she sipped her drink.

"I never panicked," Hart said, staring at her over his cup.

Jessing stared at Hart over her cup. "And if I said right now that I was carrying five

more?”

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“But you aren’t, are you? Come on, Jessing. We agreed thirteen was enough.”

Conn rolled his eyes. “No amount of coffee is going to make any of this conversation make sense. I’m going to check on Mulan. We might have to call in a healer to look at her. She can’t seem to hold anything down. I thought the sushi was fine.”

We watched as the clueless high demon strolled out to check on the love of his life with his refilled coffee cup casually in hand like he hadn’t a care in the world.

Jessing looked at Hart. “Congratulations, Hart. The demon king is worse at taking hints than you are.”

“But you’re not pregnant again, right?”

Jessing laughed. “No. I wouldn’t do that to either of us. Thirteen was too many.”

Hart sank into his seat. His relief made me laugh. “Thirteen was just right, but now there are just the two of us again. That is the perfect number for this new season of our life.”

Jessing nodded. “It is enough until the grandchildren come along. Who knows how many of those we’ll have?”

Hart blew out a breath. “Can we talk about something less stressful? I would like to enjoy my coffee.”

I started laughing, and then I suddenly couldn’t stop. Everything in my life was too

ridiculous to be happening.

There was a contract on my head.

Mulan was lying about sushi.

And Conn was clueless that he would soon be a father.

The enforcers were funny and liked to tease me, but they hadn't come up with any original ideas. When I stopped laughing, my sigh was loud.

Rasmus suddenly appeared in the dining room. His shirt was hanging open and his fly was barely zipped. "I woke up and missed you. Why did you get up so early?"

Behind him, Jessing grinned and fanned herself. I smiled into my coffee when Hart glared and threw a piece of toast at her.

"I'm not Yoko Ono and I can't solve my problems from bed. This is my second cup of coffee and I'm going to need one more today. It's a three-cup day."

Rasmus snorted at my excuse. "You have a caffeine addiction and are in denial. Who is Yoko Ono?"

"John Lennon was a singer. Have ya heard of him?"

"Yes. He was in a musical group called The Beatles."

"Right. John's wife was Yoko Ono. They were infamous for working from their bed."

Rasmus sighed. "Oh. Now I get the sarcasm. You need to be out of bed. Perhaps I should go dress for the day as well."

“Yes,” I said to him sweetly. “That would probably be a good idea.”

Rasmus waved to Hart and Jessing before leaving. “Good morning. I’ll be back shortly.”

At their end of the table, Hart and Jessing hid their faces in their hands while their shoulders shook with muffled laughter.

“It’s okay if ya laugh aloud. This is my crazy life. Now ya see why the contract on my head wasn’t at the top of my problem list until the third time a fairy tried to kill me.”

“Was it like this when you were married to the evil human?” Jessing asked.

I smiled at Jessing for calling Jack evil. It made me like her even more. “No. But only because I lied to Jack to keep the peace. It’s much harder to deal with what comes from the truth. How did ya know about the baby?”

Hart beamed at his wife. “It’s another of Jessing’s gifts.”

I lifted my chin and nodded. “I said nothing directly to Conn because it’s not my place to drop the big news on the clueless father. Mulan needs to do it.”

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“Why does he believe the problem is bad sushi?” Hart asked.

“Because she made it for them and was being sarcastic when she agreed with him. Mulan is quite the cook.”

“Ah... very clever. Is she afraid of having a child?” Jessing asked.

“Terrified... and unprepared,” I said. “But it will be fine. I just need to find a solution that gets the fairies to leave us all alone. Murder contracts and secret pregnancies don’t mix well.”

“Hart has come up with a potential solution. It is somewhat risky but might work to solve the kill-for-power contract.”

I held up a hand. “Hold that thought, please. Let’s talk business after I eat.”

I got up and refilled my cup a third time. I set it on the table before filling my plate with fluffy eggs and little crepes filled with fresh strawberries. I stared at my food for a long while because it looked too perfect to eat.

Then I glanced down the table at the quizzical enforcers when I stopped mooning over my unbelievable life. “Some mornings I pinch myself because I spent seven years in prison. The moment I got out and divorced Jack, all this wonderfulness happened. I tell myself forty is not too old to deal with this level of change, but then I look at Rasmus and wonder if I’m fooling myself.”

“You deserve him and what he brings you,” Jessing said firmly. “You have a good

brain to deal with the ancient one's inquiries and the passion he so obviously needs. That man would sin for you if necessary. It's in his eyes, Aran."

I chuckled softly. The caffeine was kicking in...finally. "Has Hart ever sinned for you?"

"No," Jessing said. "Hart was never a saint and I am grateful for that. I am no saint, either. If we could, we would kill both fairies for you and the other two siblings if necessary. But there are greater things to consider. We must seek another way."

I nodded at her. "I know. If we killed them, there would be a war between fairies and humans. We don't want that to happen."

While they came to terms with my admission, I ate. It might be the last calm meal I had today.

Conn was going to eventually find out about Mulan being pregnant.

And I was going to let the guardians buy a mean horse to genetically alter.

Then somehow I had to come up with a plan that forced Ezra to rethink stealing the stone from my dead body and get the enforcers to agree to help me carry it out.

"Yes," Hart said. "We figured that a war was what worried you most about your situation. Despite your time in prison, you are still the good magickal we remember. We will not leave until this is resolved."

"Killing the fairies could have been an option if I hadn't missed my chance to do it legitimately. But a fairy friend—or one I currently still call a friend—warned me not to kill Ezra. I vaguely knew Ezra was a royal but I didn't know about his sister. I thought she was masquerading as an ambassador to gain access to my home. Now I

know she's an arbitrator. Henry takes in special guests for secret liaisons. She came in with a very old centaur."

"Was the centaur handsome?" Jessing asked. "I've heard they are very handsome."

Hart turned to glare at her. "Do you always have to ask that question?"

Jessing smiled and shrugged. "I'm curious because I have never met a centaur."

I shook my head. "The centaur was large and gruff. I doubt he'll be talking about what she did to him. He's too embarrassed." I laid down my fork. "But Ezra's sister might tell the world and spin the story to make me look like the bad guy. She could say anything and no one would doubt her."

"That is true," Hart said with a nod.

My sigh was loud. "Maybe it wasn't such a good thing that Mulan froze her before I managed to take her head." I looked at both of them. "I think I will have to set Princess Lulutha free and drop the charges against Ezra to get through this without dying again. But I really, really don't want to let them get off unpunished for their crimes."

Hart studied me over his coffee cup. "You have your guardian now. Why do you care about what happens to the fairy? Are you still seeking revenge for his betrayal?"

"I only care because Ezra killed a bunch of dark witches while turning Hisser into a naga. Goddess only knows how many other beings died for his wicked purposes. He attempted to kill Dylan, who barely escaped. Then he went after Fiona until her angel intervened and stopped him. Before that, he captured Conn and Mulan, and Connnevergets captured."

“My goodness,” Jessing said, staring at me.

I went right on. “Ezra is an extremely dangerous fairy and has no reason to pretend to be nice to humans any longer. The fairy I knew all those years ago was only someone Ezra pretended to be. It will be hard for me to trust any of their kind going forward. He has misrepresented his people and they’re in denial about him.”

Hart gave me a reassuring smile. “We will find a way to convince him to nullify the contract, Aran. We always find a way to resolve things.”

“Well, I’m hoping to look for one as well. I’d like to get back to my life while I’m still young enough to enjoy it.”

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Jessing giggled. “And to sleeping in until your handsome guardian wakes you up wake properly, I imagine.”

Yes, I wanted to get back to that too.

When the guardian in question returned to the dining room completely dressed and once more composed, I sipped my coffee, looked at Jessing, and winked.

I decided a tour of the property would provide the perfect cover for a private chat with the enforcers. The two demon wolves trotted beside the three of us. I didn’t call them away from anywhere they roamed.

As Dylan suggested, I let them do as they pleased. They stayed close without me saying a word.

Hart and Jessing exclaimed over their cute little horns and asked where I’d found such creatures. I’d begged off telling that story because I wanted to focus on dealing with Ezra.

“Okay, let’s hear it, Hart. What’s your risky idea?”

“Bribery,” Hart said. “Ezra is greedy. We could probably bribe him into removing the contract seeking your death.”

“Have ya ever fought Ezra?” I asked.

The enforcers looked at each other. I took their blank stares as a no and went on to

make my point.

“I have fought by the fairy’s side as his work partner. To my eternal shame, I also took him to my bed. Now I can add fighting the fairy to the death twice. All this has painfully taught me that I never knew him at all. Ezra feels no remorse for his wicked actions. He feels entitled to kill me like I’m his primary enemy. He also feels entitled to gain back his power in any way he sees fit. But one thing he doesn’t care about is human money.”

Hart hummed low in disappointment. “How unfortunate he cannot be bribed into doing the right thing. It would be the easiest path for us,” he said.

“I understand now that Ezra of Airing Dale feels no shame because of his important sister. Princess Lulutha makes him a special snowflake even though he is not one without her.”

I stopped. “Good Goddess, that’s it. Ezra has been competing with his older sister for the throne. And I messed up his chance to prove to his parents that his power is greater than his sibling’s. No wonder he hates me. The only way he can redeem himself is to kill me and take the Dagda stone. The Dagda put the fairies where they are. Some have never forgiven him. What a boon it would be for Ezra to bring any source of The Dagda’s power back home to his parents. It all makes sense now.”

Hart nodded at my conclusions. “I think you are right, Aran. Possessing The Dagda’s power might convince his royal parents that he belongs on the throne instead of Lulutha who is first in the line of succession. He’s always been power-hungry. Perhaps taking his father’s throne has been his life’s goal all along.”

“Ezra has been on earth for nearly six hundred years and told me that he would never tie himself to anything or anyone in our realm. He said staying here was not in his plans—just as caring about me was not in them, either.”

“Yet he told others he loved you and seemed to be heartbroken when you married your ex-husband and got pregnant right away. The wicked fairy certainly seemed to be grieving for you the first few years you were gone. He was never linked intimately to other women.”

Ezra wasn't linked to them because he got better at hiding his affairs after I nagged him about his infidelity. Pretending to love and miss me would have improved his image.

“I liked Ezra, but I didn't love him. After we broke up, I didn't care whose bed he visited so long as it wasn't mine. I was faithful to Ezra while we were together, and later all I wanted was Jack. Neither of them was faithful to me. Being a realist, I accept their unfaithfulness as my lack of good judgment about men back then. I pretended to be a doormat female to hold their attention.”

Jessing's wide eyes blinked at me. “Was that the only reason you broke up with the fairy? I heard Ezra was bad in bed. I heard he was a selfish, self-absorbed lover. Many females talked about him. All would have taken him back if they thought he could have been trained. He was very handsome.”

I laughed. “He wasn't terrible in bed. He just wasn't good. His heart wasn't into it.”

“No magick sharing, eh?” Jessing asked with a sneer. “Hart was my first and my only. He has made himself into a superb lover for me. My eagle sisters wish they'd found him first. I would bite their fingers off if they touched him.”

Hart covered his now red face with both hands. “Why do you insist on telling Aran so many personal details about us?”

I chuckled and patted Hart's arm. “She's proud of ya, Hart. Let her brag. Most men never get to hear what their wives think of them.”

Hart blew out an embarrassed breath and nodded. “What if we used his competition with sister to prove to Lulutha that her brother isn’t the scion of worthiness he pretends to be?”

I smiled at the witch. “Now that is a plan I like. Can ya bring him and his cage through a portal?”

“It can be done. It would take the whole day to prepare and we’d have to bring several guards along with it. He’s under constant supervision,” Hart said.

“How did he put a contract on me then?”

Jessing looked at Hart and then at me. “We think some guards are more loyal to the fairy than to the Shadow Breakers organization. Ezra often bribed people when he controlled the organization’s purse things.”

Goddess, Ezra could have emptied the coffers of the group on both sides of the ocean. I guess that would have cut off his primary source of finding beings of power he could rob. Working his way up in the Shadow Breakers had been a brilliant strategy.

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I rubbed my chest when the stone rested inside me. It vibrated against my fingers.

“If the two of ya can work on transporting Ezra here, I’ll see if the Wu Shaman can thaw out the fairy princess. That will take me most of the day because I have to get Conn to pay attention.”

Jessing clicked her tongue in sympathy. “The poor Wu Shaman needs tea to prevent her sick stomach. I’ll work on fetching the wicked fairy and Hart can brew the tea for her. You must work on demon king who will freak when he discovers his secret baby.”

“Yes to all that, but first I must work on getting the Wu Shaman herself to own what is happening to her. Right now, she’s blaming her shaman staff for everything. That’s not fair.”

Hart and Jessing each patted one of my shoulders. They were both so large that I felt like a child standing between them. Mulan had seemed like a child to me when I found her curled around her toilet and too sick to care for herself.

My sigh of dread over what I had to do was loud and made both enforcers laugh. I would rather fight Ezra to the death again than have to mediate between Mulan and Conn.

“Will ya do me one more favor? I would normally send Conn but that won’t work today. I need ya to get a message to Murray. I understand he works with yer office.”

Hart nodded. “We like Murray but don’t know what he does.”

That made me laugh. “Tell him to call or come see me. The wards won’t stop him. It needs to be today because I want him to make sure the rest of the royal family will not pop up with more magickal daggers in their hands. I know Murray has their ear.”

“That’s an excellent idea,” Jessing said, bobbing her large owl head.

I left Hart and Jessing sitting by my firepit watching dappled sunlight stream down as it filtered through the leaves of the surrounding trees. They were already on their phones using modern human magick to arrange things.

Heading back to the house, I walked slowly and let myself enjoy a moment of peaceful solitude before the chaos started again.

I wanted Rasmus to be my backup referee, but I’d have to tell him about the baby and explain why it was important to get it all out in the open today.

It might not be easy to talk the nephilim child into releasing Lulutha from her prison. I still had the spell to drain off the power, but I had no talisman to put it in. Zenos had made the last one and the jiangshi had absorbed it during his conversation.

Where was I going to get another one by the end of the day?

I got to the doorstep of the main house and glanced up at the sky. No man-made guardians hovered there with bows aimed at me. However, that didn’t stop my panic as I stood outside in the open all by myself.

Some of my worry was that I still hadn’t confirmed Ben’s problem and mine were related. Rasmus said they were, but I wanted a second opinion.

Maybe the military and their scientists had discovered the Shadow Breakers were in town.

Maybe Ben had hired one of them without knowing who and what the person was. Stranger things had happened.

There was also a good possibility that Ezra had ratted Ben out after hearing the story of his past. Had Ben gone to one of the military scientists who worked on him for help?

Ben said Ezra arranged his trip. But he hadn't revealed where he'd gone while Ezra ran things in his absence. Dylan had found several locations where others from Ben's old unit seemed to be hidden from view.

I blew out a breath and tried to stop thinking about Ben. His problem with his creators wanting to capture him would have to wait until the Ezra issue got resolved. I couldn't go chasing down his tormentors while fighting off assassins all day long. It was too much to expect us to do daily, even for a solid team like Conn and me.

Luckily, Ben wasn't still running around in his beast form, trying to hide in trees. It was a very fortunate thing that Ben's witch wife, Felicity, had made that extra control charm for him. She'd used her magick to destroy the stolen one and power the second.

As I stood there thinking about Ben, the answer to all my problems suddenly dawned on me. I even knew what I would do if the Caribbean witch hadn't created a third talisman I could use as bait. The only big unknown was how the nephilim power currently restraining Princess Lulutha might affect the talisman Ben wore if I had to use it instead.

Well, that, and what kind of being the spell we'd used on the jiangshi might end up turning Ben into.

Chapter Seventeen

Rasmus leaned in the doorway of Conn and Mulan's master bedroom. I didn't know if he'd put the puzzle together yet, but he didn't seem to mind tagging along with me for this confrontation. He was as anxious as I was to deal with the fairy contract on me. Keeping me alive strained his guardian ethics more than either of us was comfortable with.

"Tell him. Conn needs to know," I said to Mulan. "He's missed every hint that's been dropped. He's too distracted to figure it out on his own. Ya mess with his mind, so ya need to bite the proverbial bullet and speak it aloud."

"Figure out what? I'm not missing anything," Conn said.

The demon king paced in front of us while I sat quietly next to Mulan. She had her hand wrapped in a panicked grip around her staff. I had wrapped my hand over hers for support. There would be no escape for any of us until the truth was spoken.

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The shaman staff and I both knew the baby was merely the first big reveal. But it wasn't pushing on her, which was a good thing.

Conn stopped pacing and frowned. "Is it your nerves? Are you still stressed about your parents? Mulan, you need to find some way to calm yourself down when you get so angry. Powerful emotions are terrible for your digestion."

I rolled my eyes and heard Rasmus chuckle before I even spoke. "Good Goddess, Conn, ya're being dense. Shut up and listen to her. This is not about food."

Conn stared at me. "Did you just command me to stop talking?"

I sighed. "Yes, but no. It's not a command. Just please stop lecturing her and listen."

The staff vibrated between us. It glowed with a multitude of symbols and grew more on its length as we sat there holding it. The new ones differed from the Wu Shaman ones and were easy to spot.

Mulan stared at the staff in wonder. I would ask Rasmus about the other symbols just to confirm what I was fairly sure they were.

The baby was affecting its mother. We'd simply have to deal with the results. The ability to freeze a fairy was a skill I envied.

I used my free hand to point to Conn. "We'll talk to the staff later. Right now, ya need to just tell Conn and get it over with. Then we need to find out for sure. There is a logical order to this sort of revelation. We should follow it."

Conn froze in place and stared at Mulan. “Are you dying? Because I refuse to let you die after I just found you. We haven’t even had an entire year together yet. Mulan, you are not allowed to die. I refuse to listen if that is that is what you have to say.”

Mulan turned to me. “This is what I deal with—drama, drama, drama.”

“Pot. Kettle. Black, Wu Shaman. Both of you are drama queens. Quit yer stalling and tell him,” I ordered. “I have other things to do today, and I need ya to not be distracted while ya help. Ben’s life is at stake.”

I’d already cleared the huddle of telling Ben my idea. Felicity hadn’t made a third charm, but they had both already decided that a better control method was needed. Neither of them wanted Ben to feel that a talisman was critical.

What I hadn’t told them yet was that the nephilim children had perfected the ability to hide from those seeking to kill them. Once the power was transferred into the talisman, it might hide the charm itself, or Ben, or both of them. Or maybe it would grant him invisibility.

Honestly, I had no idea. The outcome was unknown, but Ben was willing to let me use his charm anyway.

Felicity said a new one would take months to create, but Ben wasn’t worried. My boss was planning to reveal his beast side at the next organization-wide meeting. That way, no one would be surprised if they found his beast occupying his office and working for a few days. If he needed to take sick leave because he couldn’t speak in that form, someone would report that for him.

Once he’d made up his mind, Ben expected everyone to adjust. That was why he made a good boss.

Goddess, things were changing. But I guess this first big reveal was going to take some bestie bullying to shine any light on the truth.

The tiger cat yowled pitifully from one of the other bedrooms. Mulan looked worried but didn't jump to her feet to check on it. Bo had trained the dangerous feline to crave human affection and constant attention. She was trying to let it roam the house freely to get used to his new environment but didn't yet trust it not to attack visitors.

"Mulan is not dying from some horrible disease, Conn. Nor did she get sick from eating the sushi she made."

"Then what's wrong with her? Why all the mystery?"

Mulan blew out a breath. Then she drew in a big one. She repeated the exaggerated breathing twice more before finally looking him in the eye. "It is what I said before. My sickness is your fault."

"How many times do I have to defend myself, Mulan? I didn't poison your food. I would never do that to you, not even if you made me angry enough to destroy the whole house. I love you too much to ever hurt you."

Yes, we all knew that he loved her. She knew that too. But they both enjoyed yelling more than talking, especially about important things.

Now I understood that she would have brooded for years if I hadn't fussed at both Conn and her over their relationship cowardice. Hers ran even deeper than his after being raised by her shitty parents to doubt herself.

But I wasn't letting her be a coward today. I had to keep her alive—keep all of us alive.

I made a low, grumbling noise that echoed in the room. “Listen to her, Conn. She’s finding it very difficult to tell ya something important. She knows ya love her. Wait her out and try to stay in the present.”

Mulan used her free hand to cover my mouth. “Let me do this my way. Connlander of the Fir Bolg, carrying your demon child makes me sick. Visiting witch friend of Aran’s made me baby sickness tea to help me fight constant urge to vomit. Sushi was fine. Do you understand now?”

The child was technically only half-demon, but we’d get to that detail later. The staff buzzed in support under our joined hands. Mulan’s hand unwound beneath mine as she relaxed.

Surely, he got it now.

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Conn's eyes went wider than I ever saw them go. "Are you saying... ? Are you saying... ? Are you actually saying... ?"

He never quite got the whole question out of his mouth. Normally, I would have laughed, but Mulan's hand was tight over my mouth, and it kept my lips from moving.

"I carry your child, Connlander. The baby is pushy like its father. Sickness will pass soon... or so I was told."

Conn morphed into his demon form right in their bedroom. He was too tall for the space, so his massive head bent when his enormous demon body didn't fit.

He grunted once and morphed back into a naked human. Then he looked at Mulan with wide eyes again and sank to the floor with eyes closed.

A grinning Rasmus walked over to Conn's now unconscious body and stared down. "Did the high demon king just faint?"

I laughed in surprise. "Good Goddess. I'm going to have to call Henry. He has some concoction that brings Conn around. I swear, Conn has not been the same since Hisser barf-slimed him. We may need to find a healer and rent them a room in one of our houses so we can all get worked on.."

Mulan turned to me with equally wide eyes. "Was Conn upset?"

I shook my head and chuckled. "No, sweetie. He's just in shock."

Henry and Gale ran in with twenty other demons crowding into the hallway behind them.

I blinked at their startled gazes and laughed. “Did ya feel a great disturbance in the force and rush over here to help?”

I asked my question in the most serious tone I could manage. Rasmus covered his mouth and looked away to laugh. We watched science fiction shows together and talked about the universe. Entertaining him that much made me giddy.

The two ancient demon caretakers stared down at their comatose son. Mulan’s eyes leaked tears at their shock. She probably wondered if they would blame her for what happened to Conn. She constantly worried about their opinion of her.

“Connlander fainted when I told him,” Mulan finally said.

“About the baby?” Gale asked.

Mulan nodded.

“What baby?” Henry asked from the floor, where he kneeled beside Conn.

Neither Mulan nor I were surprised that his mother already knew. Gale was highly observant. I figured she and Jessing must both possess a ‘seeing’ gift.

A sniffling Mulan sighed as she looked at Conn’s mother. Leaving her prone son to his father’s care, Gale rushed to Mulan’s side and put an arm around her shoulders. “To receive a thing you have longed for so much can be a shock to a demon’s system. And remember, Wu Shaman, even a demon king is only a male.”

Henry looked up from checking his son to glare at Gale. I pressed my lips together to

keep from laughing. When Gale grinned, his gaze returned to his son.

“Conn will be fine,” Henry said. “May I take him to the main house? We have a lot going on, and I can watch over him better there.”

Mulan glanced down at Henry. “Did you faint when Gale said she was carrying him?”

Henry sighed and looked away. Beside Mulan, Gale covered her mouth. That story must be good to throw Henry so off-balance.

I glanced at Rasmus, who was leaning against the wall and listening intently.

“When Gale announced she was expecting, I ran away for a week to get a grip on my emotions,” Henry admitted. “But running from anything is not a reaction my son has ever had. He probably shifted into his demon form to try and handle it mentally but shifted back to human when he realized he needed to deal with his emotions. If he got overwhelmed, his brain likely shut down to let him recover. As a last resort, an overwhelmed demon goes into a short, intense regeneration cycle. I believe this is what Conn has done.”

“Did he do this with his first children?” Mulan asked.

“No,” Henry said flatly, looking up at her. “But that was because my son did not love their mothers. I don’t think he loved his children, either. Producing more royal demons was required, and he did his duty. To the best of my knowledge, Connlander has only loved two females. His first relationship was not compatible enough for procreation. Banshees are primarily human in DNA. We assumed the same would be true for you, so a baby never crossed our minds. This is quite a surprise but a welcome one. Demon children are rare and precious to us.”

Mulan swallowed hard, but her face didn't show if the news pleased her or not. "You can take high demon with you. Aran will stay with me until I recover."

Gale patted Mulan's shoulder. "Be strong, daughter. My son fainted for the love of you and his child. You have given him a gift like no other today. Things work out as they are meant to most of the time. Call if you need anything."

We hadn't called her or Henry, but Conn's fainting must have sent out some massive distress signal to have so many of his people come running.

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Henry motioned to several demons. They burrito-ed the naked, unconscious Conn into a cover from the bed and carted him away inside it.

Rasmus could have carried him easily but never volunteered. I was glad he stayed with us because I needed to talk with him and didn't want to track him down. I was running out of time to get all my personal issues worked out. I needed to be sure of what I was doing before Ezra showed up.

I removed my hand from Mulan's and hugged her. "I'm very proud of yer courage. Did ya know he'd faint?"

Mulan huffed as she pulled herself from my embrace. "If I could do sarcasm well, I would speak best sarcasm in the world to you."

"Sono, ya didn't know," I said with a grin.

"No, I did not expect father of my child to faint when he was told. I expected much screaming and yelling over me not telling him sooner. I expected many bossy commands not to do this, and I must do that. I expected huge declaration of undying love and many promises to love our child as much as he loves me."

"Well, I'm sure that will all be happening once Conn wakes up. How are ya doing? Can ya handle some other startling news?"

"You know I will help you with fairies. We are partners, and sickness is better with visiting witch's tea."

“And ya know I have yer back no matter what the future holds for ya personally, right? I want ya to trust in that because carrying a child makes ya vulnerable.”

Mulan nodded. “Is there actual point to your long speech?”

“Yes. Yer baby is only half demon. It’s half something less.”

Mulan shrugged. “Is this science lesson? I know about DNA.”

I grinned at her snarky tone. “It’s mostly a magick lesson. What would ya say if I told ya that yer parents were not yer biological ones? What if I told ya that ya were sort of adopted?”

Mulan’s frown deepened. “I would be even more heartbroken by them choosing me as their child and then casting me aside. Was I not good enough for the family? I would also say that it would explain many things that I never understood.”

“Have ya ever heard of a tea that causes forgetfulness?”

“Yes. My parents sell tea of forgetfulness to families of traumatized children. It treats those who have been abused by erasing their worst memories. It takes years to work its magick completely.”

“How long would it take for it to make one small, curious child forget all the questions she has about her powers that her parents refuse to answer?”

I stood and watched her while she pondered my words. I could see her mind churning.

“I have something to tell Rasmus. Talk to yer shaman staff while I’m gone. We’ll talk about what they tell ya when I return. I never persuaded yer mages to come clean

with ya—not that they have the details—but they read their intentions during the years ya subsidized their business with yer Wu Shaman earnings. The mages discovered things they were afraid to share because they thought ya had suffered enough.”

“I was always unwanted child. That is not news to me. Adoption makes more sense. It also must be why they favored my whiny sister,” Mulan said.

“Yer mages think ya’re a stolen child, Mulan. We’ll look into that when ya’re feeling better... if ya want to do so. I chose to tell ya about this now because it wasn’t yer magick that froze the female fairy. The staff says it is not that strong. They said it was the baby’s magick melding with yers. And there’s a reason it worked as well as it did.”

I looked at Rasmus and then back at her.

“Anyway... talk to the staff. I may need both the baby and ya for what I plan to do today.”

Mulan’s mouth twisted into some odd shape, but I wouldn’t call it a smile. On her lips, it looked like resignation. But now and again, when she felt in control, the Wu Shaman beamed with awareness of her greatness.

“You are not idiot—just annoying, Aran. No worries. I still think you are good friend.”

I grinned at her attempt to reassure me. “Well, I’m not smart. If I was smart, I wouldn’t be planning to manipulate a couple of fairies into learning the truth about themselves.”

“Why is that not smart? You manipulated Conn and me for the baby.”

This time I laughed. “Yes, but that’s different. I did that out of love.”

“I will do as you ask because you speak of love. Your friendship makes me weak.”

“Never—not even on yer worse day,” I said.

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Showing me she meant to keep her word, Mulan lifted the staff in her hand and gazed intently at it. But she wasn't glaring this time.

I hoped that meant she and her mages were finally talking.

I took Rasmus to the greenhouse. We did our best talking there, and getting back to Mulan would take less than five minutes.

"The mages powering Mulan's shaman staff said the Wu Shaman's baby wields nephilim magick. They said it was the baby who helped Mulan stop the fairy from escaping."

Rasmus rocked back on his heels and crossed his arms. I knew he was remembering our discussion about the watchers and their long-ago mistake.

"That's a bit shocking but possible. What will your primary concern be if it turns out to be true?"

I lifted both hands palms up. "Mostly, I need to know if Zara or ya have any desire to destroy Mulan's child because of what it is."

"Ah..." Rasmus said as if my interest was suddenly crystal clear. "I can't speak for Zara, but I have none. The nephilim who survived defeated our efforts. They own their fate as much as the rest of us, though I'm sure they hate us still. What we did to their kind exists in myths about us and them. You knew the story before I told you."

"Yes, that's true. Should I ask Zara the same question?"

Rasmus nearly laughed. I saw him start to, but then he caught himself. “No, just give Zara a horse. That will keep her too busy to care about anything or anyone else. She is single-minded.”

What Rasmus left unsaid for me to finally figure out was that Zara had known the story all those centuries she’d spent among humans and hadn’t taken it upon herself to track down nephilim descendants.

I sighed and let my body relax. “I would never let ya hurt the baby, Rasmus. I would chop ya into pieces and give them to Orlin to put back together.”

“The child is safe from me and my kind, but Mulan might not be.”

“Why not?”

“The nephilim were never supposed to reproduce. She has worked a modern miracle in her body to have done so.”

I crossed my arms. “Well, yer kind can make yer grand rules all day, every day, but that doesn’t mean humans are going to faithfully follow them. Also, the baby is half demon—and royal demon, at that. What kind of blood would rule in such a person?”

Rasmus lifted a hand in surrender. “I don’t know. What I’m trying to communicate is that the original nephilim were given something to consume that made them sterile. That was the first wave of us trying to rid the earth of them.”

“I guess some of them didn’t drink their sterilization juice like ya thought.”

Rasmus shrugged. “So it would seem. Mothers of following generations must have stayed in seclusion while gestating. Nephilim magick is riotous until the child learns to control it.”

“Do ya think the Mulan can direct his magick?”

“I have no idea. Mulan is good at controlling things. The child is barely a divine spark at this point. He is staying out of sight. If Mulan truly has nephilim blood, her very existence proves our sterilization efforts failed. Geneticists would be fascinated to know how.”

“I can’t talk about geneticists today. It makes me want to kill all of them.” I looked at Rasmus. “I’m calling the baby a ‘he’ as well. Do ya know for sure if it’s a male?”

“No, the spark is still deciding. Perhaps next month, we will see his choice.”

Sometimes Rasmus could be as dense as Conn. Referring to it as ‘his’ choice seemed a done deal to me that the baby was a boy, but I let it go.

“The shaman staff couldn’t tell the gender but said the child was very powerful. They also said Mulan had been stolen from her biological parents when she was a baby. Their opinion was that her pretend parents disowned her because they no longer needed to capitalize on her magickal talents after she and I regenerated the jiangshi. He became their money-making magickal replacement.”

Rasmus looked at me. “Throughout human history, children have been created and used as commodities. In some parts of the current world, they are still treated that way. It is one of the hardest things to stand by and let humans do. I’ve seen too much.”

I nodded. “So the bottom line is that I will never have to worry about ya hurting Mulan or the baby.”

“No more than I would ever hurt you.”

“Good,” I said. “I need to get back to her. Learning she’s got nephilim blood and has passed it to her child may be the thing that breaks her. I thought she was a goner when Conn fainted.”

“I don’t understand that. Why would the knowledge disturb him if a child with her was what he most wanted?”

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I shrugged and then laughed. “I’ve learned more about Conn since he hooked up with Mulan than I ever knew about him before that happened. In twenty years, I never saw him faint once. But I’ve also never seen him as happy as he is with her. We’re both having lives we never expected.”

“I was just curious. Perhaps I will ask him about it one day.”

But that day would not be today because Conn was now stuck in regeneration. I smiled at the disappointment in the guardian’s voice as we headed back.

Chapter Eighteen

Things got busy in the main house in the late afternoon.

An assortment of demons rolled the cage containing the frozen statue of the female fairy to the middle of the foyer.

I’d supervised Hart building a portal just outside the front door. When Ezra arrived, I asked that his cage be set up facing my assassin’s cage.

While I waited for all of it to be done, I went to talk to Ben and Felicity. “How long can ya hold back his beast with only yer magick?”

“A couple of hours,” she said.

I nodded. “Hopefully, that will be all we need.”

I turned to Ben and held out my hand. He slipped off the charm Felicity made to control his shifting and passed it over.

“Will it be okay if I wear it?” I asked.

“It will feel like nothing but a stone on you,” Felicity said.

I put it on and slipped it under the sweater I wore over a camisole. “He should be here shortly. I want to be ready to glare at him.”

Both Ben and his wife smirked at me. I’d included both of them in my meeting with Murray. The secretive fairy had been more secretive than I even imagined. Given how much he liked to drink, maybe I could pour drinks down him until his tongue loosened enough to speak freely.

I turned and reluctantly made my way to the door.

The male voice in my head cleared his throat. What are you wearing? It’s very powerful. Is it yours?

No. It’s something I borrowed so I could pretend it was ya. Keep yer sticky power-grabbing fingers off of it. It belongs to Ben, and he needs it. I borrowed it to trick the fairies into thinking it’s the stone ya’re in.

I also intended to put the energy holding the female fairy inside it, which I hoped it could hold.

I could drain all that nephilim power into me, but Goddess only knew what would happen. After nearly dying twice, I didn’t want to risk a third time. Better to put it in something made to hold power.

I got to the doorway just in time to see ten guards carrying Ezra's cage on their shoulders like it was the Ark of the Covenant. They even used wooden poles and rings, which I felt sure were warded.

The sullen fairy sat inside the cage, smirking at what was happening. I don't know what was running through Ezra's mind, but I knew I wouldn't like it.

But that was all right. He wouldn't like what I had to say, either.

"Hello. Welcome back to my home," I said, sounding as polite as possible.

"What are ya planning for me, Aran?"

I raised one eyebrow. "I might be planning to set ya free, providing ya swear a blood oath to stop trying to harm me or my people. What did ya think I was doing?"

"No idea. I never understood the workings of yer strange mind. I doubt any illumination will be happening today, either."

"When ya're ready, bring him inside and set him facing the other cage," I said to the guards. I noticed the portal was still open and pointed it out to Hart. "Is someone else coming through?"

"Your friend, Murray... and he insisted on bringing a guest," Hart said. "Jessing says we should have sold tickets."

I chuckled at their teasing. Murray's attendance surprised me. He hadn't been very forthcoming when we spoke. Arguing with Ezra in front of Murray didn't hold any appeal for me. Everything I was doing was for the greater good. And if I got lucky, it would prove a point.

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I couldn't change Murray coming, nor stop him from bringing a stranger. Murray was some kind of secret fairy operative with the ability to do what other fairies were not. While I didn't know exactly what he did, I knew everyone respected him.

And I still owed him for guarding Fiona when I fought the man-made guardians. If it hadn't been for him, Jack and his monsters might have tried to give the guardian serum to her.

So no, I wouldn't worry about why Murray came. I had a plan and would see it through. It was too late to worry how Ezra would react to the show I was going to give him.

Conn wouldn't be here. He was still doing his emergency regeneration thing, but having him so close allowed me access to his mantle and my swords. I'd only lose that if Conn sank into deep unconsciousness.

All that remained then would be the magick of the stone in my chest. This couldn't be put off. It needed to end. Relying on the stone alone was a risk I had to take.

They carried Ezra in and set his cage down in front of the one containing a covered statue.

"Does it remind ya of the time when Fiona's angel turned ya into a statue just like that?"

"I don't like the games ya're playing, Aran."

“And I don’t like the assassins ya keep sending after me. Neither do the Shadow Breakers. Today is either about clearing the air between us, or it will be our last fight to the death. It will be yer call, Ezra. I won’t be showing ya mercy again or letting anyone else do it.”

“Where’s yer demon sidekick?”

“He’s having a nap to recover, but he’s not far away. See?”

I wrapped myself in Conn’s mantle until it covered me in a radiant coat of golden energy.

“Can ya still call yer energy sword? Or did I drain ya too much?”

I called a green energy sword from nothing and swung it back and forth.

“Ya’re not scaring me, Aran. But I am curious about who else ya managed to cage.”

“As well ya should be,” I told him. “Because this yer fault as well.”

I reached through the bars and tugged the sheet off the statue.

Ezra stiffened, which told me he hadn’t known who this sibling was that had attempted to murder me and failed. Maybe all he was guilty of lately was wishing really hard.

“She is fairy royalty, witch. Ya wouldn’t dare harm my sister,” Ezra hissed between his perfect teeth.

“I was well within my rights to kill her. First, she stabbed me. Then, when she got a second chance, she stabbed Rasmus while she was trying to stab me again. I nearly

took her head off with my sword after I chased her down. The Wu Shaman stopped her before I swung my blade. I was unlucky all around.”

Ezra grunted. “My parents will avenge us both. They will bring the wrath of all fairies down on your head.”

“On what grounds? It’s well documented that both of ya came after me. What is this really about Ezra?”

Mulan dragged herself through the front door, looking tired and sick. She carried her staff but didn’t look capable of fighting anyone.

“I am here. Once I release your fairy assassin, I will need to nap like Conn.”

“And ya’ll get one. I managed to find us a place to put the energy ya used, so it won’t get wasted.”

Mulan frowned and waved her staff at me, just as we planned. “Did it hurt to remove necklace from your chest? Do you have giant boob scar now? Does guardian boy-toy care you are deformed?”

“It certainly didn’t feel good to remove it,” I said, pulling Ben’s talisman out of my shirt.

Mulan touched it with reverence. “Let’s do this. I need more sleep.”

“Ya really do,” I said, running a hand over her hair.

Murray entered the foyer and came straight to me. “We talked about this, Aran. Ya have every right to kill them, but please don’t do it. I’m begging ya.”

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“Killing them isn’t my first choice, Murray, but I can’t let Ezra’s kill-for-power contract continue to send assassins my way. I’m tired of fighting without getting paid for doing so. The bills don’t pay themselves. And Goddess knows, it’s no fun dying all the time just because some entitled fairy is a sore loser. I don’t even know what Ezra told his sister to send her after me.”

Murray stared at me and still managed to glare at Ezra. “My royal cousin is an arse all around, but Princess Lulutha is a good fairy. She’s just.”

I looked around. “Hart, will ya bring me the dagger she used?”

Hart brought it to me, and I passed it to Murray. “The female fairy stabbed me with it, and then she stabbed Rasmus. Like a cat, I used one of my nine lives to come back and chase her down.”

“That dagger is mine, Aran. It’s a royal relic. Give it to me,” Ezra demanded.

“What was yer assassin sister doing with a dagger of yers?”

Murray turned and glared at Ezra. “The Colwich Dagger is not yers. It belongs to yer father, and I know he’d never give it to ya. The only person worthy to wield it is the next in line to rule, and Lulutha is that fairy.”

I looked at Ezra and blinked. “That was brilliant of ya. Did ya send yer sister after me so I’d kill her for ya? Ya’d be next in line for the throne for sure then, wouldn’t ya?”

“That has nothing to do with any of this,” Ezra said. “Unfreeze my sibling and give

the dagger to her. Let's see how well ya handle being stabbed with it this time. There are too many witnesses for the ancient one to use his tricks to save ya."

"What did ya tell yer royal sister, Ezra? She's the executor of the contract between fairies and humans. Ya had to tell her something awful to make her willing to sneak into my home and kill me in cold blood."

Ezra's smile was awful. "Lulutha and I compete for the throne because that's what royal siblings do. But my sister is loyal to me—not my father, but me. And we've both been stuck in this realm for six hundred years, witch. We want to go home."

"But ya can't," I said to him. "Yer family won't take ya back. Why do ya think no one's tossed ya through the portal yet?"

I turned to Murray. "I understood yer people volunteered to come here. I thought fairy visits were to be mutual exchanges with us lowly humans. Was Ezra forced to spend time in this realm? Was he forced to be kind to me? To sleep with me? Because he talks like that was the case."

"No," Murray said, glaring at his cousin. "He was courting ya for yer magick. He was yer partner because they assigned the most powerful magickals to you to track down. And my wicked cousin knew The Dagda had incarnated again specifically to train ya. He planned to steal yer power all along. Ya just kept outmaneuvering him."

Ezra yelled through the bars. "Do ya think I enjoyed the fact that I couldn't go home? When I was nearly done and ready to return, ya robbed me of six hundred years of saving every scrap of power I could collect. Ya owe me for that, Aran O'Malley. Ya know ya owe me."

"We were partners, Ezra. We guarded each other's backs. I nearly died from shock when ya tried to get a criminal we captured to kill me so ya could carve the Dagda

stone from my chest. I had every right to defend myself from a killer. I owe ya nothing.”

“Ya stole the power I collected. I want it back,” Ezra said.

“No. Ya didn’t deserve the mercy Fiona’s angel showed ya. And just so ya know, he was the one who took back the energy ya stole from the artifact the far darrigs had guarded for centuries. Ya could have gone home after that with plenty of power to spare. And, foolish me, I would have let ya because of our past. But ya didn’t leave. Ya came after me again because ya just can’t accept that ya’re not entitled to any of The Dagda’s power. It was gifted to me, and ya’ll never have one bit of it.”

“Ya’re as big a fool as my cousin, Aran. No one is entitled to power. Ya earn it by taking it from those who can’t protect what they create. That’s how life works. Humans are weak. All of ya should be the servants of the fairies, and yer kind knows it.”

I lifted my energy sword. “Ya’re not making me any less inclined to settle this peacefully.”

“Thaw out my sister, and let’s see what she says about ya. Give her back her dagger, and I promise ya, she’ll succeed in killing ya next time. Die with honor and rest knowing yer power will sustain my people for a millennia or two.”

I lowered my sword and let it fade away. “I’ll take that woman’s head before she has a chance to hurt me.”

I looked over at Murray’s friend, who shifted from male to female in a blink. Ezra’s shock told me Murray’s story about siblings battling for the fairy throne had been truer than I knew.

Princess Lulutha—the real one—held her head high as she approached her brother's cage. She turned to the statue of herself and glared at it. "Do I really look like that?"

"Yes, but ya don't look as mean," I said. "Did ya hear enough? I told ya yer brother was behind the contract on me."

"Yes, but who took on my likeness and tried to kill you? Who slept with a centaur to carry the ruse? If I had stabbed you, Aran of The Dagda, you would be dead instead of talking to me."

"I might die in a fight between us, Princess, but then I'd come right back. Beings in high places keep saving me."

Ezra looked at his older sister. "Are ya going to take her word over mine?"

"Yes," Lulutha said and then turned to look at me. "Can we thaw the fairy statue and see who the impostor is?"

Now that I saw the real Arbitrator, I didn't need magick to figure out who my assassin was. It was sort of obvious now.

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“We can thaw her, Arbitrator, but ya’re not going to like what ya discover.”

The female fairy arched one eyebrow. I motioned to Mulan. She came over and stood next to me. We both put our hands on the staff. I held out Ben’s talisman in my hand.

Mulan drew in a breath and chanted. The wind rose from nowhere until it whipped our hair. I kept a firm grip on Conn’s mantle to keep it from responding to Mulan. We needed the boost of me wearing it because the nagging nausea had weakened her.

The magick covering the fairy in the cage drained away one grain at a time and floated to my hand, where it got absorbed by the talisman. When it was done, I had to catch Mulan before she fell.

“Easy now,” I said to her.

“I am good partner,” she tiredly declared.

“Ya’re the best,” I said.

Rasmus rushed to us and lifted her into his arms.

“Put her in our bed to rest,” I told him.

Princess Lulutha studied the woman in the cage. She was nearly a mirror image of herself. What set her apart was the look in her eyes but not much else. “Dreama? Why would you do this? Murder is a crime.”

“Because Ezra is right, sister. Humans should be our servants. Instead, you serve them like a sheep. They are not our equals.”

Lulutha stepped back and stared in shock at her two caged siblings. “This has been a very illuminating and thoroughly dreadful day. Our parents warned me many times that punishing family was one of the hardest things a ruler ever had to do.”

She removed a weapon from her back and shot her two siblings. Both fell inside their cages.

I looked at them and sighed. “Did ya kill them?”

“No,” Lulutha said. “But when they wake, both will wish they were dead.”

She bowed to me and then looked at Murray. “Will you assist me in taking them home, cousin? I have to return and make sure my brother’s kill-for-power contract is no longer active.”

“I gave ya my word I would help ya no matter how mad yer parents get over yer siblings. But ya’re going to owe me some fairy mead when it’s done.”

“Deal,” Lulutha said. “I’m going to need some as well. My baby sister grew up to look just like me. I guess I should have gone home more often.”

“Let’s get this over with. There’s mead waiting. Lead the way, Princess. Lead the way.”

Each fairy grabbed a cage and disappeared with it.

Resealing the wards against all the beings who’d come and gone was going to take over a week to accomplish. And this time, I would have no help.

Mulan was going to need to rest for the next eight and half months—give or take a few weeks. Her child seemed determined to make her miserable.

I sighed and let Conn's mantle fade away. Rasmus walked to me and took me into his arms.

Hart and Jessing walked to us. "Princess Lulutha—the real one—will see that the contract is removed."

"Will ya stay a bit longer?" I asked. "Having ya here makes me feel safer, especially with Conn and Mulan both feeling under the weather."

"Staying will be like having a vacation in a fancy hotel," Jessing said. "We will stay until they call us."

"They won't call us until we report that we're done," Hart said.

"Perfect," Jessing said with a smile. "I want to see the ancient one turn a horse into a pegasus."

It was over—or mostly over. Lulutha would let the Shadow Breakers know when it was completely done, and they would contact Ben.

Somehow, it had all worked out. I had killed no one, and I hadn't died, either.

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We'd all have to stay secluded a bit longer, but it would be worth it. Some of us needed the rest.

I hid my face in Rasmus's shirt and let myself laugh with relief.

"Can I have my talisman back?" Ben asked from behind my back.

I realized then that I still held it in my hand. Breaking free from Rasmus's grasp, I proudly lifted it up to reveal its new golden coating.

"I can't promise yer results won't be as equally hard to deal with as the jiangshi's."

Ben sighed and looked at his wife. "Nephilim magick is like guardian magick, isn't it?"

"They share the same origin. Nephilim is partly human and has evolved to serve their needs. Your results will be from whatever type Mulan's ancestors practiced. We have no way to predict what will happen."

He looked at his wife. "I love you, Felicity."

"I know, Benjamin. Put the necklace on. Nothing terrible is going to happen. I read my stones before we came."

Ben pulled the necklace over his head and let it fall beneath his shirt. "Ow... it stings," he said, pulling the material away from it. He started to adjust the straps, but they came away in his hands. The pieces looked like someone had burned the

talisman off them.

He clawed at his shirt until he ripped it off. I couldn't believe Mulan was missing Ben's sexy man chest showagain.

On his chest was the imprint of the talisman his wife made for him. It looked like a tattoo. I tilted my head, trying to make out what it was.

It looked different.

"It looks like a turtle," Felicity said, putting her face as close to it as she could.

"Oh. Turtle power," I said, raising my fist in the air. "That's from Mulan. She can do some wicked things with turtle shells."

Ben ran his thumb over it. "It stung when I put it on, but it doesn't hurt now."

"And it can't be snatched off ya again," I said. "They'll have to cut it out of ya now if they want to get rid of it."

"What do you think it means?" Ben asked.

I shrugged. "Get yer wife to take a picture. When Mulan wakes up, I'll ask her and let ya know. Be careful going home, Ben. I'm going to find someplace to crash in this monster house of mine and sleep for the next two days."

Felicity was trying to wrestle her husband back into his shirt to get him out the door. Everyone had disappeared, even Hart and Jessing.

Ben was still studying his new tattoo as they headed out of the front door. One of Henry's people locked it behind them and waved to us.

“Conn is in Henry’s suite on the second floor. If ya carry Mulan there, she can sleep on the sofa, and we can sleep in our bed. She might be sick when she wakes up. Henry’s people can watch over her.”

“That’s a great idea. Will you carry her staff?”

“Because ya can’t manage both?” I asked.

“Physically, I can manage, but I try not to touch it.”

Rasmus was afraid of the shaman staff. Well, that was fascinating news.

“Why not?” I asked.

Rasmus blew out a breath. Goddess, we were still struggling to tell each other the truth.

“Spit it out,” I ordered.

“It doesn’t like me, but it seems to really like you.”

“Good goddess, it’s a sentient stick with turtle shells on it.” I nodded at his pained look. “Fine. Carry the Wu Shaman, and I’ll carry her scary tool.”

I laughed and danced with the staff all the way up the stairs and all the way back down.

When we got to our room, Rasmus picked me up and tossed me on our bed to make me stop laughing.

Goddess, I loved my crazy life.

— THE END —