



Cheater Slicks

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Category: Romance, Fantasy

Description: Matty has lost his soul, and it's up to Frankie to find it before his body gives up the fight for survival. But soon his isn't the only life at risk from the soulless condition. The affliction is spreading from Thunderbolt, Georgia, into the beating heart of the French Quarter and right up to Madam Vionette Fontenot's front door. When Frankie returns to New Orleans in search of answers, she finds herself at the mercy of a god who covets her newfound powers as the guardian of the Alcheyvaha. He makes it clear he's willing to do whatever it takes to wield her for his own benefit. Even if it costs Frankie everyone she loves.

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Metal dug into my shoulder where I stood braced against the doorframe leading from my office into The Body Shop's garage. I had lost feeling in my right foot an hour ago from standing with all my weight on it since we opened the bays, but I couldn't tear myself away from Paco giving a Marimba Red 1964 Pontiac GTO a routine oil change.

Not that there was anything routine about the spirit of a long-deceased mechanic inhabiting my brother's body to perform vehicle maintenance while his soul was...

...missing.

A kinder word than lost or gone, but it amounted to the same thing.

A tether remained between Matty's spirit and his body, pumping his heart and filling his lungs with oxygen. His eyes slid open now and then, unseeing, but there was no sign of him in the vacant stare.

For our collective peace of mind, the Suarez brothers had volunteered to work overtime, monitoring his vitals around the clock. The second his status changed, if his breath so much as hitched, I would be the first to know.

Well, technically, I would be the second one, behind whichever brother was on duty, but close enough.

A wide head butted against my upper thigh, and I reached down to scratch Anunit behind her soft ears.

With the body of a panther, the head of an arctic fox, and stubby goat horns, she cut an imposing figure. Factor in the fur as black as midnight, spangled with cold stars, and her elegant tail, a sweep of feathers with mottling to match her singular wing, and it was easy to believe she had been a goddess once.

And, if she hadn't remained incorporeal, she would have given our customers free heart attacks with the purchase of every air filter.

The client door leading into my office from the parking lot swung open to reveal Josie wearing overalls, a sunhat, and clutching a pair of stained gloves in one hand. Her eyes were dark, her skin pale, and her jaw tight. Matty's affliction, for lack of a better word, was taking its toll on all of us. "He's here."

Doctors had delivered terminal diagnoses with more enthusiasm than she announced Harrow's arrival.

"Let him in." I forced myself to turn my back on Paco and shut the door between us, even though my feet dragged in shuffling zombie steps as I moved away from him. "I'll handle it from here."

A mulish expression twitched across her features, but she schooled her tone as she backed out. "Okay."

Seconds later, Samuel Harrow ambled in with a faded ballcap in his hands and a brutal case of hat hair. If I had to guess, based on the grease streak up his arm and the smudge under his left eye, I would say he had been elbows-deep in his restoration project on his inherited Chevelle before deciding to pay me a visit.

If I was a better person, in light of his recent aid, I might offer him a deal on the bodywork, since Josie had grown a tree through the car in a fit of rage over Harrow kidnapping our brother. But I wasn't there yet.

“Have a seat.” I heard the wary edge in my voice and softened it. “Please.”

As soon as he took the client chair, Anunit approached him, sniffing him with a pleased rumble.

Hoping to escape drawing attention to the invisible menace, I rounded my desk and sank into my seat.

“I drove past the shop on my way to O’Donnelly’s to pick up a parts order. I figured I would stop in on the way back and see how you’re holding up,” he mumbled, head down, “if that’s okay.”

Planting my elbows on the desktop, I stared over my linked fingers. “It’s fine.”

An awkward silence blanketed the room, neither of us certain how to act around the other.

“We’re searching for Leyna,” Harrow blurted, “but a first name isn’t much to go on.”

For such an active social life, Matty had few close friends. None I could name off the top of my head.

Friends, like meaningful relationships with his lovers, were luxuries he believed he couldn’t afford.

A friend of a friend. That was how Matty described her in a text informing me they were going to a party together. And, in an effort not to smother him, I let it go. Never had I regretted treating him like an adult more. I should have pressed him harder, asked him for the full names, phone numbers, and addresses of everyone in attendance then grounded him when he couldn’t provide them on the spot.

Because I was sure that would work on an adult who stood a foot taller than me.

“I’m not sure if she’s the SCAD grad he mentioned or not,” I commiserated, “but I doubt it.”

Matty had gone on a date with someone from the Savannah College of Arts and Design last week too.

Between Leyna and SCAD Grad, they had been among the last people to see my brother...

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Nope.

Not going there.

Not today.

Notever.

“We’re going to figure this out.” Harrow crumpled his faded hat in his hand. “I promise you that.”

Had I still trusted him, I might have found comfort in his words, but I couldn’t quite relax into old habits.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Badb scowled at me through the glass, like she agreed with Josie that I shouldn’t be alone with Harrow. Or maybe I was projecting, and she had left her bird mirror in here and wanted it back. With her, it could go either way.

“I appreciate the in-person update.” I worked on ignoring her and Anunit. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I would say that’s what friends are for, but I don’t have that right. So, I’ll just say you’re welcome.”

To avoid yet another awkward silence, I scrounged up small talk. “When do you go

back on duty?”

As if my eyeballs had minds of their own, they gravitated back to the door leading into the garage.

“I’m already riding a desk for SPD, but I’ve got a few months before the 514 assigns me any cases.”

Had Paco always had that slight limp? “Mmm.”

“Carter tells me Josie is living with her now.”

Maybe Paco should sit down, take five. “Mmm-hmm.”

“She also says you and Leer hit it off like old pals.”

Spirits carried over habits from their lives, but was he or Matty ginger on that right foot? “Ah.”

“And then I eloped with Josie, who wants to have fifty thousand babies with me.”

“Good.” I was definitely going to ask Paco to sit for a spell. “That’s good.”

“You’re not listening to a thing I’m saying, are you?”

“Wait.” I reeled my focus back to him. “What did you say about eloping?”

Last week Aretha mentioned having a crush on him, but surely she hadn’t put a ring on it that fast.

“Nothing.” His smile was small but genuine. “Call if you need me.” He cleared his

throat. “For Matty.”

“For Matty,” I agreed, counting down the seconds from the time Harrow stepped out, Anunit on his heels, tail swishing, until Josie stepped in.

Three. Two. One...

“Well?” She avoided the chair where he’d sat like it carried radioactive plague cooties. “Anything new?”

Shaking my head, I rubbed my aching eyes again. No amount of lubricating drops had cured the dryness from reading grimoires during every stolen opportunity in search of a cure. No one at Bonaventure, even the oldest spirits among them, had ever heard of a condition with symptoms like Matty’s. They were the ones curating my reading list, adding titles that might help, but no luck so far.

“You need sleep.” She yanked the end of my unraveling braid. “I’m talking REM.”

“I’m getting in eight hours,” I grumbled, omitting how I spent most of them staring at the ceiling fan like a solution might drift down alongside some of the dust bunnies I needed to wipe off the paddles.

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“I’m serious, Mary. No more grave-dirt uppers.”

That was what Josie called it when I tapped into the potent death magic present in cemeteries to heal or recharge, which, I admit, had become atinyaddiction in recent days as I turned to it for a boost whenever my body craved sleep but I had other ideas. To the point Josie had asked me nicely to quit.

Cold turkey.

Or else.

With my sister, I didn’t need theor elsepart spelled out to quake in my boots.

Without mygrave-dirt uppers, the full weight of Matty’s condition really hit me, buckling my mind into a dreamless sleep lasting for forty-eight hours. I had pushed too long and too hard to reclaim my last repo, the monster truck champion who leased Camaro for one last spin around the circuit with her daughter. Mix in the “alien” abduction case with the 514 that landed me in hot water with a whole new pantheon of gods, and it was no wonder my body collapsed beneath the weight of the last week.

“I have given this child the power of her people, so that the spirit of the Alcheyvaha will live on in her.”

Anunit spoke those words to Dis Pater with a hint of threat in them when I dropped the bombshell that I had been named the new Alcheyvaha guardian on him in his office. The shiny new title, and the responsibilities that came with it, were the reason she started hanging around the shop.

Given how little I knew of the Alcheyvaha, yes, I did need lessons on their culture and how to preserve it. I was now the custodian of multiple burial sites chockful of god bones containing untold power. It wasn't that I didn't care or that I wasn't interested. I had made a bargain and would keep my word. But, cold as it sounded, the Alcheyvaha were dead. My brother? He was still alive.

Had he not been afflicted, I wanted to believe I would have prioritized finding out exactly what she meant, but us Marys made each other a promise when we were children not to seek out our birth families, and I had been determined to honor it. Now I wasn't so sure I still had that choice if I wanted to protect Matty and Josie.

"Oh no, you don't." Josie pinched my upper arm, right above my elbow. "You're not tuning me out."

"Oww." Jolting from my cascading thoughts, I rubbed the sting. "Violence is never the answer."

"Nice try, Mary, but I saw you crack a woman open like a nut and snuff out her soul not that long ago. Violence may not always be the answer, but it's top five."

"It didn't used to be," I mumbled, regret coating my tongue in a film more bitter than pecan kernels.

"Speak for yourself." She cut her eyes toward the African violets on my desk, and they curled their plush, variegated leaves into tiny fists before shadow boxing with each other from their respective planters. "A well-aimed punch can save alotof time."

"I want to blame this bloodthirstiness on you rooming with Carter, but redcaps have nothing on dryads."

"To be fair, most dryads are very crunchy. Very granola. They're very?—"

“Please stop.” A rumble in my stomach reminded me I skipped breakfast. “You’re making me hungry.”

“Good.” She clutched my wrist, tugged me to my feet, and hauled me outside. “You need to eat more.”

As soon as my foot crunched on gravel, Badb dove over my head, clicking her beak at me.

“Pest.” Josie waved her free arm above us to shoo her away. “Go bother Mr. Mittens.”

“Josie.” I smothered a laugh. “She terrorizes that poor cat enough as it is without encouragement.”

As we hit the stairs, heading up to Josie’s former apartment to eat lunch, I identified Badb’s problem.

Kierce was doing his laundry, as part of his how to be a human homework, and he had dared to wash her cat bed. To add insult to injury, he’d spread it on a drying rack in the sun instead of giving it a quick tumble in the machine and returning it to her toasty warm.

Rookie mistake.

As I entered his apartment, ready to tell him so, a ripple in the air spun out faint purple ribbons of light.

Chills erupted down my spine at the telltale disruption of astral projection. “This can’t be good.”

News that warranted an in-person visit, without a warning text to expect company, promised to be grim.

“What?” Josie peered over my shoulder. “Did he forget to sort whites from colors?”

“No.” I stepped aside to give her room to come in. “Looks like Vi is coming for a visit.”

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Except the figure dressed in a smart pinstriped suit who materialized in the living room wasn't Vi.

But I would recognize the preening peacock with her eyes anywhere. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"That's not Vi, is it?" Josie frowned where I was staring. "You sound ready to claw out some eyeballs."

"It's Rollo." I confirmed her suspicions, twitchy to find him in our home. "What do you want?"

Hands shoved into his pockets, Rollo cocked his head at me. "I heard about your troubles."

Our voices had alerted Kierce to our presence, and I breathed easier as he emerged with a basket on his hip. Knowing he could see Rollo too made facing my nemesis easier. "And you came here...why?"

"There's no way to sugarcoat this." Rollo rocked back on his heels. "Mamaw found your brother."

Had he gotten down on one knee and held out a ring, I would have been less shocked.

Vi found Matty? And she hadn't told me herself? No. That didn't sit right with me. Rollo appearing in her stead was odd enough, but she would have called before sending him on her behalf. There was more to this than he was letting on. "Where?"

“Where you think, maringouin?” He rolled his dark eyes at me. “He’s haunting the Quarter.”

Haunting.

The word dripped ice down my spine like beads of glacier melt as I shared what he said with Josie.

“He’s not dead.” Josie tightened her fists. “He’s right downstairs.”

“His body, yeah.” Rollo sucked his teeth. “But what is a body without its soul?”

The showroom beneath the garage flashed in my mind’s eye, display cases filled with loaners for rent.

Bodies. Empty vessels. Because their souls had moved on.

No.

That was not my brother’s fate. Not yet. He had years left before his oneiros nature took him from us.

“Drop the act, Rollo.” A tremor beneath his left eye, a tic I had personally given him, began twitching. “Why are you here and not Vi?”

A flicker of grief pinched his face, so fast I would have missed it if I hadn’t been staring.

Understanding struck like a match, igniting a burn in the back of my throat. “She’s been afflicted too.”

Angling his face away, he prevented me from witnessing the answer bloom across his features.

“First Matty,” I murmured, connecting the dots, “and now Vi.”

Another victim with a link to me left my mouth dry with possibilities I couldn’t voice.

“Why not me?” Josie, obviously, didn’t have that problem. “Why didn’t I make the cut?”

“Matty is oneiros.” Kierce scratched under Badb’s chin. “The tether between his soul and body is thin.” A few quick clicks of her beak urged him to continue. Scratching, that is. “Vi is an accomplished astral projectionist. I imagine her frequent journeys left her tether more elastic than most.” He cast Josie a look. “As a dryad, you’re grounded, often literally, so I imagine it would be more difficult to uproot your soul.”

“Huh.” She rubbed her nape. “That...makes a lot of sense, actually.”

From Kierce, who had lived long enough to see a little of everything, she could take it as gospel.

“But Vi lives in New Orleans. The city is in her blood and bones. She never leaves. Physically, anyway.” Astral projection was her sole means of travel. “It makes sense that her soul would remain at home, but how did Matty end up there?” The city held sentimental value to me but not him. I had anchors there in Vi and even Jean-Claude, but Matty didn’t know them that well. “NOLA is a mecca of spiritual energy, but so is Savannah, and it’s much closer to Thunderbolt than southern Louisiana.”

“Walk us through what happened to Vi.” Kierce pinned Rollo with his stare. “Tell us everything.”

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“Mamaw called me to say she had found Matty in the Quarter. She told me to meet her at home so that I could anchor her. She planned to visit you, give you the details. I was picking up an herb order from Tiz, and I had my hands full. I didn’t ask the questions I wish now I had.” His voice turned rough. “I found her passed out in her workroom when I got home, maybe twenty minutes later, and called for Jean-Claude. He did everything in his power to revive her, but she was beyond his help.”

“Nice to know you didn’t consider me until you ran out of options.”

“This is bigger than our beef, maringouin.” He drew in a shaky breath. “Your brother and my mamaw aren’t the only ones who are...” He bit off his words rather than finish the grim thought. “There are more of them in the Quarter. All kinds. Souls who just up and left their bodies. I found out about them when I started looking for answers to help Mamaw.”

“The New Orleans angle still bothers me.” The obvious answer to why Matty and Vi had been targeted was their connection to me, but that wouldn’t extend to other New Orleanians. “This is sounding more and more like it’s a localized phenomenon. Except for Matty. He’s the piece that doesn’t fit. How did he end up there?”

“You been hanging out with gods, deathgods, and you have to ask how anything is possible?” Rollo slung a hateful glare at Kierce that made me want to poke his eyes out. “Who else could do this?”

“We don’t know that gods are involved.”

“Since you didn’t finish high school, I’ll give you the answer.” He stuck up his nose.

Nothing new there. It had been a while, but I could probably still recall the names I had given each of his nose hairs. It had only seemed polite given how much time I spent staring at them. “Two plus two equals four.”

Kierce, who had remained on the fringes of the room, allowing me to work through things, glided forward in a subtle threat that he wouldn’t tolerate much more of Rollo’s spite aimed at me. “Mind your tongue, Rollo, or I’ll remove it.”

“Violent.” Josie clapped her hands. “Ilikeit.” She squinted at him. “I shall call you Danger Kierce.”

Unlike when she dressed him in overalls, waders, and a straw hat for funksies then knighted him Kountry Kierce, this version was, if anything, Kasual Kierce. Ugh. She had me doing it now too.

“He’s in jeans and a tee,” I pointed out, not minding the look one bit. “He always looks like this.”

All that was missing was his Hawaiian shirt, but Josie’s relentless teasing shamed him from leaving home wearing it. To punish her, I had placed an order online for several more, telling myself I was encouraging his newly discovered personal style, but mostly I just wanted to annoy my sister.

Two birds, one hula girl, you know?

“Danger Kierce is more than the right accessories.” She wagged her finger. “It’s a vibe. An attitude. A?—”

“Mary.” I snapped my fingers in front of her nose. “We need to focus.” I swept my gaze over Rollo. “How long after seeing Matty’s soul was Vi afflicted?”

“Within the hour.” Rollo rubbed a hand over his chest. “Like I said, she wanted me to anchor her when I got home so she could tell you in person, but she was gone before she got the chance.”

A sharp jab in my ribs reminded me I had to play interpreter to keep Josie in the loop.

“So, what I’m hearing is Rollo needs you. He came here, showed his ass, but I’ve got his number now. He’s pissed because he needs you.” Glee cartwheeled across Josie’s face. “He needs your help.”

Squirming like a worm on a hook, Rollo swallowed his pride, met my gaze, and grated out, “Yes.”

Somewhere, in some hellish realm, maybe even Abaddon, blazing pits of fire froze over.

An overwhelming desire to needle Rollo into admitting—into a recording app this time—that he needed my help itched on the tip of my tongue. But Matty and Vi were more important than exacting petty vengeance for old slights. And, okay, fine, astral projections never came through clearly on recordings.

For all his faults, and they were legion where I was concerned, he had done me a good turn. To plead his case in person—well, sort of—took balls when he must have believed I would snub Vi as punishment for how he treated me. But, as usual, he overestimated his own importance. Especially to me.

Rollo wasn’t a factor in my decision. He didn’t enter into my calculations whatsoever.

Lord knew it would deflate his ego quicker than a fistful of nails stuck in a tire sidewall if I told him so.

I wasn't sure why I didn't come out and say it, relish knocking him down a peg, but I held my tongue.

There was no fun in kicking him while he was down. No. I would wait until he got back up to cream him.

"You talk to crows now, yeah?" Rollo invited himself into Matty's apartment, perching on the arm of the couch to watch me pack necessities for my brother while Kierce readied a bag one floor down and Josie caught a Swyft to Carter's place to collect her things. "I always said you were birdbrained."

Then again, maybe I should rethink the tongue-holding thing.

"Hilarious." I waited a beat to see how Badb would react, but of course she gave him a pass and not me. "What do you want?" I swept through the silent apartment, checking that I had turned off the lights and unplugged any questionable electronics. Already my thoughts had turned to my next big ask, and my gut clenched at what it would mean for this trip. "You got what you came for."

A promise from me to spend a week in the Quarter, determining the root cause of this soulless condition, locating the missing spirits, then doing my damndest to return them to their bodies.

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Obviously, if it took longer, Rollo might regret the invite to stay at Vi's after I made myself at home in my old room. Oh well. He might think he was man of the house, but I had my own set of keys.

"Don't be like that." He traced a crease in his pants over his knee. "You would have come either way."

Already, he was rewriting events to soothe his ego, telling himself he hadn't come crawling but I begged to help him, and he let me out of the kindness of his heart. As if he had one. "For Vi? Of course."

Silence fell between us, but I only waited on him, knowing he had sought me out for a reason.

"Mamaw says you died." He continued studying the pattern in the fabric as if he might be considering a second profession as a tailor. "That you were reborn a goddess."

"Demigoddess, but yeah."

"How was death?"

I almost tore into him for being an insensitive ass before picking up on the subtle earnestness burning in his brown eyes and bit my tongue. "For me, it was like being drop-kicked onto the surface of the sun."

Dis Pater had stood there while I burned in his radiance. As my flesh sizzled and

organs cooked, muscles peeled and bones charred. He watched me die. No. He killed me with his indifference. My skin had regrown taut and new and strange, and I was still learning how to live in it.

“Believe it or not, I’m sorry to hear it. Everyone deserves a peaceful death and a short walk to the pearly gates.” He ducked his head, as if in prayer, but surely not for me. “What happens if Mamaw moves on?”

The tenor of his maudlin thoughts should have clued me in to what was on his mind, but I wasn’t used to reading more than stale malice from Rollo. His question required switching mental gears and facing hard truths that cut both ways. Anything I predicted for Vi might also come true for Matty, and I wasn’t sure if I could bear speaking against a full recovery for either of them, even if I knew in my heart we both ought to temper our expectations.

“We won’t let that happen.” I slung Matty’s duffle over my shoulder. “Vi and Matty will be fine.”

“Hmm.” A spark of his usual antagonistic self glinted in his eyes. “Are you saying that as a god or...?”

“Demi,” I corrected him again, glad to see him smoothing over the hairline cracks in his façade.

The fissures of vulnerability had been freaking me out a little, reminding me he was human underneath.

Done securing the apartment, I exited onto the landing and waited for Rollo and Badb to catch up to me.

“I should go.” Rollo tipped his head to one side. “See you when I see you.”

Swirling purple energies twisted his features, smudging his outline until nothing remained of him.

With a cracker in her mouth, stolen from Matty's crow bribery stash, Badb ditched me to go snack.

I found Paco shooting the breeze with the last customer of the day, trading notes on the best local fishing holes. He spotted me, shook hands with Mr. Brawns, then ambled over as the GTO pulled out of the lot.

"Jefa." He mashed the button to close the bay door with his elbow. "Going somewhere?"

I had been so eager to set eyes on my brother, I had forgotten I still carried his duffle over my shoulder.

"New Orleans." I filled him in on our unexpected guest and the news he brought with him. "I hate to ask, with you guys already doing so much to help out with Matty, but I'm hoping a Suarez will come along for the ride. I want Matty's body nearby, so there's no delay in treatment."

Much easier to think of it in terms of a medical condition. Treatable. Curable.

From the time I had spent running the other family business, I knew how to care for a body sans soul. To request one of the Suarezes drop everything and come with us was a purely selfish ask. A big one. But I couldn't help myself.

"I'm sure you'll find a taker." He wiped a hand over his mouth, failing to hide his smile. "Pascal for sure."

"Can I trust him not to hijack Matty to go out drinking and dancing?"

“No.”

“Can he behave around that much good food?”

“No.”

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A groan tore out of me as I imagined the trouble Pascal could get into if I didn't set down rules.

"Pedro might be swayed to save you from our little brother, but you know me. I'm a homebody." His lips parted as deep grooves carved his brow, but he only shook his head, as if deciding against what he might have said. The dark expression looked foreign on Matty's usually friendly face. "I'll keep an eye on the shop until you get back, though."

"Thanks." I squeezed his arm, trying to convince myself it wasn't thinner today. "I appreciate it."

"I'll lock up and meet you in ten."

Sweat beaded in my palms as I stepped into the parking lot. We were closing The Body Shop for a week, and it made me want to hurl. Our customers were understanding, mostly, but we had been failing to hit our deadlines for months now. Divine drama had us closing early, opening late, asking for extensions.

As much as it terrified me to consider it, we might lose our core clientele if we weren't more careful. We could go back to allowing drive-up customers rather than requiring appointments, but that meant taking on busy work instead of the more lucrative classic rebuilding projects that were the Suarezes' passion.

Worry I might trash the reputation they had built over the last several years weighed on me as I opened the trunk on the wagon and tossed Matty's bag in, leaving the hatch open for the others to do the same.

Then I set out to warm up our ride to Bonaventure in case it needed convincing to crank.

Footsteps crunched on gravel, and then Kierce stood beside me. “Are you taking the god cart?”

The nickname for his wreck of a golf cart had stuck, thanks to Pascal’s enthusiasm.

“That was the plan.” I searched his face. “Is that all right with you?”

Bafflement splashed across his features. “You don’t have to ask.”

“You bought it, and you’re paying for its restoration, so I kind of do.”

“Then you have my permission.” He continued eyeing me like I was ridiculous. “Be safe.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for possums,” I teased, unable to help myself from reminding him of the time when he swerved to miss one and ended up plowing into a shrub. Vehicular shrubslaughter, Matty called it.

I swear I could almost hear him belting out a laugh as he poked gentle fun at Kierce.

God, I would give anything to hear it again. Carefree and infectious. You couldn’t not laugh with Matty.

The god cart rumbled to life without protest, and I pulled around to wait on Paco.

Drumming my fingers on the wheel, I scanned the area for Anunit, but she was nowhere in sight.

Now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen her since she stalked Harrow from the office earlier. But, given how she waltzed into the shop the morning after she named me the official guardian of the Alcheyvaha, casual as if she had done it a hundred times before, I wasn't too worried about leaving her without saying goodbye. I was sure she could find me again if she needed me.

"Everything's shut down and locked up tight." Paco slid onto the bench seat next to me. "I'll come by at dusk every day you're gone and check on things at the shop. I'll send one of the Buckley Boys if I run into any trouble."

Most spirits had a range of mobility, a certain distance they could travel from their graves or where they had died, but those boys got around in pursuit of gossip to spread from cemetery to cemetery as though they were still the newsies they had been before the yellow fever outbreak in 1876 ended their lives.

No sooner had I parked the god cart at Bonaventure than a blue, spectral puppy shot out from between the bars of the fence to yap at me before sprinting away. A teen girl with dripping wet hair cut through a promenading couple in hot pursuit. I watched them a moment longer, smiling, but I had no time to visit.

"Mr. Gray?" I called to a man decked out in English riding attire. "Would you mind fetching the Suarez brothers for me?"

At the end of a shift, I typically exorcised the Suarez on duty from Matty while he sat in the front seat of the wagon to allow Matty time to slowly rise to awareness within himself. I could have gone ahead and released Paco for the night, as usual, but fear clenched my throat in a fist when Matty sat empty for too long.

"I would be delighted, Ms. Frankie." He touched a crop to the side of his helmet. "Back in two shakes."

Thirty seconds later, which led me to believe one shake must be worth fifteen, Pascal and Pedro appeared wearing matching expressions of concern.

“Mija, has something happened?” Pedro glided forward, hovering six inches above the earth. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Better than fine.” I almost believed myself. “I’ve got a lead on Matty’s soul.”

“That is good news.” Pascal evaluated me with his head tilting. “So why are you making that face?”

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“I have a huge favor to ask you both. No hard feelings however you decide. Promise.” I linked my fingers at my navel. “Would one of you be willing to come to New Orleans with me?”

From my constant handling of their souls, they had developed a unique bond to me and were able to travel farther than they would have otherwise. They couldn’t roam more than a dozen miles from my location, but they wouldn’t have trouble if they wanted to sightsee without me when it was over and done.

“Are you serious?” Pascal let out an ear-splitting whoop. “Count me in.”

Already picturing the amount of trouble he could get himself into with that gleam in his eyes, I nearly wept tears of relief when Pedro speared his little brother with a hard stare and said, “I’ll go too.”

“I call dibs on Matty.” Pascal folded his arms across his chest. “Right, Francita?”

“We don’t know how long this will take or what we’re up against. I’ll take all the help I can get.” The gentle crinkle of Pedro’s smile betrayed his amusement over how swiftly I embraced a twofer rather than taking Pascal on solo. “Have either of you been to New Orleans?”

“Not like this.” Pascal swept a hand down his translucent form. “But I went plenty when I was alive.”

“A few times,” Pedro said, his gaze fixed on Pascal as if blaming him for those trips.

Out of the three brothers, Pascal struck me as the most likely to be found on a bench sleeping off a night spent on Bourbon Street. Either because he was too drunk to secure a room before conking out or too broke after drinking his paycheck. His stories reminded me of Matty in the way he had lived his life to the fullest, like he was on borrowed time. Probably why I had such a soft spot for the youngest Suarez.

“Then you’re in for a treat.” I winked at Pascal, really trying to sell my angle. “The dead party harder than the living in NOLA.”

With a sigh, he caught my meaning. “You’re not letting Matty out of your sight, are you?”

“Trust me.” I ignored a pang for dashing his hopes, but this wasn’t a vacation. “You won’t need a body to have the time of your afterlife. The best parties are held in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1, and the Fontenots own a mausoleum there. Vi has tons of interred family who can show you around and make intros.”

“I’ll take the nightshift with Matty.” Pedro raised his eyes to the heavens. “Pascal can work days.”

That arrangement was the best possible outcome, and I was doubly grateful for Pedro making it happen.

Pascal was now free to clock out at dark and go party while Pedro kept Matty safe during the night.

“You’re not going to round us out?” Pascal squinted at Paco. “This could be a family vacation.”

Hadn’t I just been thinking it wasn’t one? Oh, yeah. I would owe Pedro big time when this was over.

He was definitely taking one for Team Talbot by volunteering to help me wrangle his little brother.

“Too much has been happening lately.” Paco scuffed his foot. “I’d feel better about Frankie being gone if someone kept an eye on the shop.” His gaze slid past the gate. “And on Bonaventure.”

“Me too.” I hoped he read how much I meant it in my expression. “We’ll miss you, though.”

“I’ll be here when you get back.” He chuckled me on the chin. “Be safe, jefa.”

To make the transition easiest on Matty, we all returned to the god cart, and Paco reclined on the bench seat.

Palming his forehead, I murmured the soft words to release his spirit, and he rose above Matty in a blue-limned outline of the man he had been.

The alien stillness in Matty urged me to grasp the nearest Suarez and shove him into my brother before I could think too hard about why he remained static. I couldn’t tear my gaze from Matty until Pascal, who happened to be closest, sucked in a huge breath. As he settled into his borrowed skin, he pulled himself into a seated position using the front top strut.

Pedro, unbothered by the springs erupting from the backward-facing seat behind me, mimed sitting.

After a round of goodbyes to Paco, I cranked the god cart, backed out, and began the drive to the shop.

With Matty’s body beside me, cutting up and joking with Pedro and me, I could

almost convince myself this was any other trip home after a long day at the shop, but playing pretend wouldn't get my brother back, and I wasn't leaving New Orleans without him.

Vionette Fontenot lived in a two-story townhouse on Chartres Street. It was painted a rich eggplant with black trim that matched the elegant wrought iron decorating the gallery upstairs overlooking the French Quarter. Beneath a dozen stained glass art panels some folks had the gall to simply call windows, curling planters overflowed with herbs and edible flowers that were in bloom. Strange ivylike vines grew from cracks in the sidewalk to climb the walls, their leaves purple and their spikes tipped crimson.

"I always wondered who lived here." Pascal leaned over the front bench seat, right between Kierce and me, to gawk up at the house. "It's got such...vibes."

There was a tangible weight to the air in New Orleans, and I don't just mean its oppressive humidity.

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History. Tragedy. Hope.

Love. Sorrow. Hate.

Spirits walked these streets alongside the living. They laughed, sang, joked, made love, threw punches, the same as the rest of us, refusing to let a little thing like death slow down their good time. I admired that. I envied it too. Visiting New Orleans felt like coming home.

Almost.

Without Vi, her bright laugh and warm hugs, it just wasn't the same.

"We'll find answers for them." Kierce brought my hand to his lips for a kiss. "I promise."

"I'm glad you're here with me." I drew in a slow breath. "I'm not sure I could do it without you."

"You have me, so you'd be fine." Josie patted the top of my head. "But a death god sidekick is cool too."

A soft laugh from Kierce huffed across my knuckles, reminding me I hadn't asked her about Carter. "Does your roomie know you're in NOLA?"

"I'm not her girlfriend." She pushed out her bottom lip. "I don't need her permission to live my life."

Based on the cadence of that speech, I got the sense those were direct quotes from a conversation with Carter. Probably a recent one. Which explained the mocking tone.

“Ah.”

As much as it stung Josie’s pride, Carter had been upfront from the start about her stance on relationships. Josie was just too stubborn to believe she couldn’t sway her. Unable to help ease that self-inflicted wound, I turned tour guide for Pascal.

“The house has been in the Fontenot family for over a century.” I reclaimed my hand from Kierce to cut the wheel. “Wait until you see inside.”

Faux doorways and false windows lined the exterior at street level, blending in with the other residences in the area. But one set of double doors in particular always garnered dropped jaws anytime they swung open in front of passersby, and tonight was no different as I rolled the wagon over the sidewalk and drove into a massive space that was part garage and part crypt, part supply room and part chapel.

There were other areas, private areas, that only Fontenot family members were allowed to make use of. That included me, much to Rollo’s chagrin, but I was oath sworn to keep their secrets. They were as safe with me as mine were with them.

“Anyone got a napkin or a roll of paper towels?” Josie wrinkled her nose. “Pascal is drooling over Vi’s collection.”

Hearses. Each one more unique than the last. A few of them worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Most had been used for their intended purpose by the original Fontenots who settled New Orleans back in 1718. Given the myriad ways the land tried its best to kill off those attempting to tame it, they had the right idea in embracing death as the family

business when it had been so much a part of daily life.

“I know I died, but is this heaven?” Pascal sat back and pressed his face to his window, his breath fogging the glass. “Hello, babies. Daddy’s home.”

“Eww.” Josie inched as far away from him as she could get. “You had to go and make it weird.”

Nostalgia swirled through me as I pulled into my usual parking space, and I wished I had come sooner.

No one should wait until catastrophe struck, until their life was upended, until it was just plain too late, to spend time with the ones they love. I had called, texted, video chatted—even astrally projected—with Vi. But it wasn’t the same as driving to her home, embracing her, and proving I cared enough to show up for her. I had failed her, and I wasn’t proud of it, but I would do better if...

No.

I wasn’t giving up on Matty or Vi. They would both be fine. I wouldn’t allow them any other choice.

“Will Rollo meet us here or upstairs?” Kierce examined the space through the windshield. “He knows we arrived, if he’s home. I felt us pass over the ward on the way in.”

“I’m not really a guest, more of a nuisance, in his mind anyway. He’ll expect me to let myself in.”

“I haven’t spent much time with him, but I don’t like Rollo much.”

“Trust me when I say that more time will only make you like him even less.”

His low chuckle gave me the push I needed to get out and face what lay ahead.

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Badb, who had been quiet during the ride, launched herself into a quick tour of the garage.

“She’s stretching her wings after the trip,” Kierce explained for her.

“Tell her not to poop on the hearses.” I tracked her zooming laps. “Rollo would bake her into a pie.”

“I would pay to see him try.” Josie opened the trunk. “My money’s on Badb.”

As she and Kierce gathered our luggage, Pascal handed me the spelled box that rode over on his lap.

Once I pried up the lid, I caught a whiff of grave dirt and smiled as blue mist flowed over the sides.

Materializing on a yawn, Pedro stretched his arms over his head. “Now that’s what I call a nap.”

The box was a protective measure to ensure he was safe from the sun in the event of an emergency.

“Welcome to New Orleans.” I fastened the lid and placed it under the seat. “I’m not sure how you slept with Pascal bouncing his knee, and you with it, the whole way, but I’m glad you did. You guys have been working too hard.”

“I would say I’ll rest when I’m dead, but death is boring without an occupation.”

“Hey, Pascal.” Josie hurled Matty’s bag straight into his gut. “Make yourself useful.”

Wheezing, Pascal hooked the strap over his shoulder and followed me to the elevator.

The lift, as Vi called it, had been installed to make life easier on Vi’s mother after a certain age. Rollo modernized it about ten years ago for Vi after her determination to get all her groceries in one trip resulted in a nasty fall down a flight of stairs. I wasn’t grateful to Rollo for much, but I couldn’t fault how well he cared for his grandmother.

As soon as the doors opened onto the living room, Jean-Claude Dancosse was there. An old friend and the Fontenot family doctor, he swept me into a bear hug that brought tears stinging to my eyes. “You don’t know how good it is to see you.”

He was nearly seven feet tall, which had resulted in him developing a hunch in his back from stooping through doorways and avoiding light fixtures. His dark skin bore patterns drawn in ash, and his black hair was coiled tight against his head as though afraid of brushing the ceiling. He smelled like coffee, woodsmoke, and catmint.

“I thought you done left us for good.” He swung me around until I giggled like a little kid. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too.” I latched my arms around his neck, hugging him tight. “I should have?—”

“None of that now.” He squeezed me hard then set me down with a stern glare. “Hear me, cher?” He patted my sister on the head. “Good to see you too, Josie-bee. Is that chow chow for Momma Jean?”

“Sure is, JC.” She passed over the jars I hadn’t noticed her remove from her bag. “I have more at home the next time she gets a hankering.”

Prior to her death, Momma Jean—his grandmother—had gotten herself addicted to Josie’s peach chow chow. And while I usually stuck to my no-eating rule for loaners, I owed Jean-Claude for a favor, a month with his grandmother free of charge, and Josie’s contribution was half the payment due.

“Thanks as always.” He waited for my nod before he set his sights on Matty. “Hello, young man.”

“Pascal Suarez.” He stuck out his arm. “Nice to meet you.” They shook once. “That’s my brother, Pedro.”

“Welcome, Pedro.” He tipped his chin. “I appreciate y’all helping our girl out of a tight spot.” His appraisal of our group hit its end, landing on Kierce. “I been looking forward to meeting you, reaper.”

“He’s not a grim.” I rolled my eyes at Jean-Claude. “He’s more like Dis Pater’s personal assistant.”

“You know he write cat murder mysteries?” He barked out a laugh. “How a cat gonna solve anything?”

Badb was quick to crow her agreement with him, which softened Kierce’s expression into amusement.

“Now a crow...” Jean-Claude clucked to her, and she preened for him. “That’s a fine animal.”

“I agree.” Kierce stuck out his arm. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Jean-Claude shook hands with him, their lingering clasp veering into awkward territory, the clash of their gazes reminding me of the wordless conversations Kierce

held with Badb. “We understand one another?”

“Yes.” Kierce’s voice dropped into a lower register. “I believe we do.”

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“I want to understand too.” I wedged myself between them. “What was that all about?”

“Never you mind.” Jean-Claude booped the end of my nose. “Come on and see Vi.”

Had he rushed me to her bedside, I would have felt better about my chance of success. That he lingered to chat told me he wasn’t holding on to much hope of curing his longtime patient and friend. But his realm was healing the living, and mine was raising the dead. It seemed to me Vi and Matty were stuck between. With each of us working from the opposite end of the spectrum, I hoped we could meet in the middle faster.

Down a long hall painted in the dark greens of a nighttime forest, he led me to the master suite. The bed dominated the center of the room, an antique larger than a sedan. Head on her pillow, Vi rested under a lush velvet quilt. Her chest rose and fell, and her eyes flicked back and forth behind her lids. I crossed to her, caught her wrist in my hand, and tested her pulse. Slow but steady. She could have been sleeping.

Leaning down, I rested my palm against her forehead and shut my eyes to search for a spark within her.

“She’s not there,” I murmured, as if I hadn’t believed it until witnessing it for myself.

“I told you that much,” Rollo grumbled from the doorway without so much as a hello.

“I wouldn’t have come for you otherwise.”

Since we left at the end of the workday, it must be nearly three o’clock in the

morning. That gave us maybe three hours before dawn forced the spirits into their graves for the day. Not much time, but I was wired and so was everyone else. No one was going to sleep anytime soon, so we might as well be productive. “Who wants to get a start on canvassing the city?”

“Pascal and I will take Bourbon Street and fan out from there,” Josie volunteered. “That okay with you?”

“Sure.” I bit down on the inside of my cheek. “Just stick together, okay?”

Without the ability to see spirits, Josie was limited in what she could do to help. Matty’s soul could stand in front of her face and yell, and she would be none the wiser. She could, however, protect his body. The promise of her watching over him while Pascal scanned the sweat-drenched clubs and smoke-filled bars for errant spirits made it easier to let them out of my sight.

“I’ll go with them.” Pedro stared down his brother. “Keep them out of trouble.”

With those two, that was a big promise to make, but I was certain he was up to the task.

“Kierce and I will begin here on Chartres.” I doubted we’d get lucky enough to stumble across the missing souls right outside Vi’s door, but we had to start somewhere. “We’ll work outward as far as we can before sunrise.”

“Good luck with that,” Rollo told us then strolled down the hall, returning to his office.

“Don’t be too hard on him,” Jean-Claude confided after the door shut behind Rollo, and the antique lock snicked like Rollo didn’t trust me near his things. “Poor boy is exhausted down to his bones.”

Yeah, well, that made two of us.

“He’s already been out tonight,” Jean-Claude continued on. “He got in just before you.”

“Okay, okay.” I kissed his cheek. “I’ll cut him some slack.”

“That’s all I’m asking.”

As the remaining four of us shuffled into the hall, Jean-Claude sank into a chair beside Vi’s bed.

Badb, for her own reasons, elected to stay behind with him. Probably because he had made the mistake of complimenting her. Before he knew it, she would have him wrapped around her claw and her claws wrapped around one of the cookies on the tray next to him.

The ride down in the elevator was cramped, and our groups began to scatter after hitting the sidewalk outside. Until a breeze sent a vine tickling the side of my arm, and an idea blossomed. “Josie.”

Glancing over her shoulder, she slowed her walk. “Hmm?”

“Can you ask around, see if the plants know anything?”

“I can try, but plants are very self-involved. They’re more likely to tell me if there’s a cursed patch of soil causing root rot than anything Matty specific.” She marshaled a smile. “I’ll do my best, though.”

Armed with fresh purpose, Josie marched off in one direction, and we took the other.

Three blocks later, I decided Kierce had brooded long enough and interrupted the silence. “What’s on your mind?”

Ever since Rollo materialized in his living room, Kierce had been oddly quiet. I wasn’t sure if it boiled down to him not liking Rollo, which, okay, same. Or if there was something else weighing on his mind.

“Many things.” He attempted a smile but didn’t quite manage. “Do you think we’ll find Matty like this?”

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“I’m not sure.” Sometimes there was no substitution for boots on the ground when you had to locate someone—or someones. “Do you have any better ideas?” I smacked myself in the forehead. Maybe I was more tired than I thought. My brain-to-mouth filter was clearly malfunctioning. “I didn’t intend for that to come out snarky. I really meant it. Is there a smarter way to go about this?”

“You were right to want to sweep the streets, but you might have had more luck with Josie. Spirits aren’t forthcoming with me. They often hide in my presence. Especially those here. They know me too well.”

Until his voice washed over me, I hadn’t acknowledged the anxiety plaguing me in his silence.

After my fallout with Dis Pater over the Alcheyvaha guardianship, I kept expecting the other steel-toed boot to drop. That Dis Pater would put his foot down, forbidding Kierce to see me. Or that Kierce would decide I was too much risk with too little reward. Or that we would find ourselves at cross purposes and have no choice but to end things ourselves. I had loyalties now, to the Alcheyvaha, and I bet his god was only the first of many who would take exception with Anunit passing her mantle on to me. But, if he had been allocating resources to protecting their burial grounds all these years, shouldn’t he be happy that it fell to me and not him? I had scraped a big-ticket item off his plate. Honestly, he should be thanking me.

“That’s why you’ve been quiet.” I made a thoughtful sound. “You’re worried you shouldn’t have come.”

“Yes,” he exhaled, relief coating the word. “I want to help, but I’m not sure that I

can.”

Just being here was helping me more than he could know, but I sensed he wanted a different answer. As good as my rapport with spirits tended to be, he was right that he repelled them. I had built my business around supplying customer service for the dead, but Kierce had been too isolated to be easy around new people. Even dead ones.

“We’ll see how it goes, okay? We can always switch partners until we find the best fit.”

“All right.” He rolled his shoulders, standing taller when he was done. “I like that idea.”

Hand in hand, we cleared four streets, but we didn’t spot Matty or Vi or any spirit who had seen them, and I still couldn’t shake the dread whispering in the back of my mind that the worst was yet to come.

Arosy blush edged the sky overhead, golden sunlight piercing the clouds as I fished out my old brass key to let Kierce and me into Vi’s house through the much less conspicuous side door leading into the garage at street level. The elevator rattled and thumped, and then we were stepping into the living room.

A quick shake of Jean-Claude’s head when I asked him confirmed that no one else had made it back yet. Kierce and I were the first. And if Kierce minded that Badb was cuddled in a nest of blankets while Jean-Claude read to her and Vi from a book on mythology, he didn’t mention it.

“Let’s have a seat.” Kierce guided me down on the couch next to him. “The others will return soon.”

Aware I was being handled, I didn’t mind this time. I sank beside him, cuddled into

his side, and drew my feet onto the cushion with me. And as the sun cut through the blinds, I closed my eyes to savor the dark for a little longer.

No sooner had my eyes shut than a paper plate stacked high with beignets was thrust beneath my nose. I breathed in, and my exhale sent powdered sugar blowing onto the quilt someone had bundled me in. Coffee, rich with the scent of chicory, came next. Then Jean-Claude's face swam into focus.

"Well look at that." He flashed his white teeth. "You are alive."

A quick check of the ancient cuckoo clock on the wall told me I had slept from sunup to sundown.

The lingering withdrawals of imbibing myself with grave-dirt uppers were proving brutal.

"The jury's still out," I mumbled, accepting his offerings with gratitude.

"Your man here wasn't much interested," Jean-Claude said, sniffing, "but lovely Badb ate his portion."

Yeah. I could tell. Her head was as white as if she had dunked it into a bag of flour.

"I did apologize." Kierce wiped at her dusty feathers. "I meant no offense."

"Kierce is on a special diet." I noticed then I had fallen asleep on his shoulder and been left there all day. I didn't mind that. Not one bit. "I should have told you before you went to so much trouble."

"Bah." He waved away my words. "I was over on Decatur Street anyway."

Which meant Rollo had remained home to watch over Vi while Jean-Claude made rounds to see his other patients.

“Mmm.” I took a bite of rich, fluffy dough and moaned softly. “Why are these always so good?”

Beignets were squares of fried dough topped with powdered sugar, similar to a donut but not as dense, and I could have eaten my weight in them.

“Once on the lips,” Rollo said from his side of the hall, his room opposite Vi’s, “forever on the hips.”

“That explains it.” Josie tripped him, and when he fell, she stared at his butt for a good long while. “How many do you eat for breakfast to build a cushion like that? You must have been working on it for years.”

A flush pinkened his dark skin as he shot to his feet, and he smoothed a hand over his flat stomach as if reassuring himself the hours he must spend in the gym to be so fit hadn’t vanished with a single insult.

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“Knock it off, Rollo.” Jean-Claude pinched Josie’s cheek as if she weren’t just as guilty of slinging insults. “The Talbots are Vi’s guests, and we don’t insult guests.” He cut Rollo with a glare. “And you know damn well it took me months to fill out that girl. She was skin and bones when she got here. Now look at her.”

About to crack wise again, Rollo thought better of it when Josie raised her eyebrows in a silent dare as one of the thorn-wrapped vines growing on the house tapped on the window over her shoulder.

“I could kill him for you.” Kierce stroked his hand down my arm. “I don’t mind.”

The offer, made with such sincerity, caused my breakfast to shoot down the wrong pipe.

“The hell?” Rollo whipped his head back. “You threatening me in my own home?”

A flat stare from Kierce convinced Rollo to ease back, though he tried to play off the retreat as his intention from the start.

“No.” I coughed into my fist, swallowing past the doughy lump in my throat. “That’s not necessary.”

“Hmm.”

Over the rim of my to-go cup, I studied his profile, and any hope he was joking evaporated on the spot. I had noticed Kierce slowly shedding the brittle façade of humanity concealing his rough edges when we first met. I would have to be blind not

to see he was changing. Rapidly. But this possessive streak kept widening. And as it grew, so did that sharp edge of certainty that promised he would follow through with any threats he made.

The dorky taphophile I met at Bonaventure was morphing into the embodiment of his title.

The Viduus.

I would be lying if part of me didn't enjoy it. A big part. I would also be lying if I said it didn't worry me.

At the rate we were going, I wasn't sure how much Kierce would be left when all was said and done.

"You can't go around killing everyone who insults Frankie," Josie protested. "You can't hog all the fun."

A huff of laughter broke the tension in Kierce, allowing me to relax against him again.

Metal squeaked behind us as the elevator doors rolled open, and Pascal swaggered in wearing Matty.

I wasn't sure, but I thought maybe I remembered overhearing them decide to share a room when they walked in after their patrol. Space was at a premium with so many overnight guests in residence, so it made sense, but he had come from the garage.

"Francita." He tapped the side of his mouth. "You've got a little drool crust right there."

“With that sugar on her face,” Jean-Claude teased, “it’s going to stick like cement without a wet rag.”

“You couldn’t have told me sooner?” I aimed the question at Josie while wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, but she was too busy enjoying her stare off with Rollo to respond. “Where’s Pedro?”

“Waiting for us in the crypt.” Pascal clapped his hands. “Everybody ready?”

The reminder of what brought us here was enough to sober us again.

And byus, I mean everyone except for Pascal, who was primed to cash in on my promise of the deceased Fontenots showing him a good time on the town while Pedro was on Matty duty.

Before we went our separate ways, we each took turns sharing updates from the night before, but none of us had discovered anything promising.

The plan was to split into teams and canvass the Quarter, questioning spirits and those who saw them, to determine how widespread the affliction was across the city. And, if we were lucky, locate someone who had noticed any odd concentrations of spiritual activity. So, pretty much the same plan we had last night. But the earlier we began, the wider we could cast our nets before dawn.

“Rollo, can you show Pascal to the Fontenot mausoleum on your way to Jackson Square?”

“Might as well.” Lips thinning, he checked his smartwatch. “I’m heading that direction anyhow.”

Once we hit the garage level, Rollo peeled away from the group and aimed for the

exit.

“Wait up, Rollo.” Josie made it plain she didn’t trust him not to ditch Pascal. “I’ll wait outside with you.”

“Hey.” I snapped my fingers to get her attention. “Any luck on the plant front?”

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Hand to Rollo's back, she shoved him ahead of her. "Nothing yet, but I'll keep trying."

As a peaceful quiet settled around us, I noticed we were missing someone. "Where's Badb?"

"Scouting the city." Kierce hung back to give Pascal and me more space to enter the narrow chamber. The walkway was maybe three feet wide with marble slabs recessed into the walls another two feet to either side and across the back. "She'll meet up with us outside."

Pedro stood from where he had been sitting when he noticed us, and Pascal took his place, climbing into the nook and lying down on the slab. As soon as he was settled, I rested my palm on his warm forehead, releasing his soul from Matty's body in a wisp of blue light.

As soon as Pedro gained his sea legs inside Matty, we exited the crypt, Pascal jittering with excitement.

We handed him off to Rollo outside, waited until Josie and Pedro ordered a Swyft to Magazine Street, then started walking.

Noting our direction, Kierce asked, "Where are we going?"

"Before we hit the cemeteries, I want to check out Bad Beats. It's a para-owned bar on Frenchman."

“Any particular reason why?”

“The bartender is known for selling information to the right person for the right price. He’s not a nice guy. I guess he can’t afford to be in his line of work, but he still gives me the creeps.”

A static crackle moved through him, but he doused his reaction. “How did you two meet?”

“Through Vi. She uses him to keep tabs on persons of interest from time to time. His intel is good. He doesn’t lie or cheat. But he’s not someone I would want to meet in a dark alley after a few hurricanes. I’ve never approached him on my own. I can’t say I’m looking forward to it.”

Part of my education included how to seek out and vet people like Pierre, and also how to survive them. I had put those skills to use establishing a few sources in the Savannah area, but no one in his league.

“I’ll be right here.” Kierce threaded his fingers through mine. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Uncertain I would have risked this trip solo, I squeezed his hand, grateful for the support. “I’m counting on it.”

The hour was early enough we had no trouble finding spots at the bar, but the bartender I had hoped to see was nowhere in sight.

While we waited, I ordered a black and bleu burger with garlic parm fries for myself. Kierce opted for the Ethel burger, rare, with a side of plain fries he intended to hand off to Badb later. We kept an ear out for any gossip about roving spirits or soulless bodies while we ate, but I didn’t hear anything promising.

A half hour later, a lanky man with sunken cheeks and greasy hair strolled out of the back room with an upbeat gait and a wild grin carving his bloodless mouth as if the world was his oyster and he had just pried a gleaming pearl from its softness.

Pierre D'Aboville. Bartender. Information broker. Man in need of a bath.

“Frankie Talbot.” He noticed me the second he reached the register. “Long time, no see.”

“Yeah, that happens when you move out of state.”

Drawing a circle in the air above his head, he grinned. “Looks like you got a promotion.”

Given his line of work, I wasn't surprised he saw the dark corona I wore.

Folks who used runners like the Buckley Boys to gather intel for their clients tended to perceive more than just the spirits in their employ. “Something like that.”

As his interest flitted away from me, his eyes gleaming as they landed on Kierce, I knew this had been a mistake. Nothing that lit up Pierre could mean anything good for us. I had let our past interactions color my perception of him, but I had failed to grasp how tight a leash Vi must have kept on him when I paid visits.

Eager for what he could tell us, what information he would sell us, I hadn't considered that any news gleaned from our conversation might go on the auction block next.

“The Viduus.” Pierre laughed out loud. “As I live and breathe.”

Angling his head in a crowlike tilt, Kierce studied Pierre. “Have we met?”

“I’m hurt you don’t remember, but I’m sure there are plenty of things you don’t recall anymore.” He rubbed a finger alongside his nose. “I could remind you, for a price.”

Oh, yeah. This had been a mistake. I shouldn’t have brought Kierce. I should have approached Pierre as an old friend with a few questions to ask the right person and not tipped my hand.

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“Not interested,” Kierce said a beat too late to sound genuine.

“I can’t say I blame you.” Pierre grinned at me. “I’d want to hold on to her for as long as I could too.”

Cold prickles skated down my spine as his tongue swiped over his lips. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Other than he was a pervert. Ick. I really wish I had Vi with me right about now.

“What will you give me to tell you?” His smile bared crumbling black teeth. “I’ll tell you all the reasons why you’re making a huge mistake. Again. History does like to repeat.”

Baiting me. He was baiting me. I knew it. I was aware of it. But I couldn’t stop myself from pushing him.

The taunt struck too close to home. It was too similar to the insidious whispers from Ankou claiming Kierce was lying to me, that I was a fool to trust him, but Kierce hadn’t given me any reason to doubt him. Unlike Ankou, who had fabricated an entire persona to infiltrate my life.

“What history?” I gripped the edge of the counter. “What do you mean repeat?”

“How much is the truth worth to you?” He glanced between us. “Either of you can pick up the tab.”

A warm hand landed on my arm, a reminder from Kierce of why we had come.

“Noticed any unusual spiritual activity?” I kept my tone civil. “That’s what we’ll purchase. Nothing else.”

“This is New Orleans.” He planted his forearms on the bar top and stared at me like a wolf about to snap its jaws shut over a juicy rabbit. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“This is New Orleans,” I agreed with him, “but Vi told me once that you’ve lived here since the first brick was laid. That’s why you and your spirits, more than anyone else, would know if there was a new threat in town and where I can find it.”

“Threat isn’t the right word.” He switched his focus back to me. “But there is a new peculiarity.”

Curling my fingers in my lap until they went numb, I held myself back. “What do you want in exchange?”

“I owe Vi a good turn.” He lowered his voice to a bare rumble. “Tell her to square up with me after she is in better spirits—” he placed a hard emphasis on the last word, “—and I’ll give you what you need to get started.” He eyed me up and down. “Can you still bargain on her behalf?”

For him to offer, she must have something he wanted, and I had presented him with a way to get it.

“You know I can.” I chewed my bottom lip, debating if I should write a blank check in her name, aware it was a risk. But without his help, there would be no Vi to pay the debt. “You have my word she will honor the bargain we make tonight.”

The knife he pulled from his pants was rusted and coated in gunk I didn’t want to

think too hard about, but I didn't stop him when he slid it across his palm and then mine, clasp hands with me to seal the deal. Though I might have thrown up a little in my mouth.

"Go to Ursulines Avenue," he said, licking the blade, "and give it a minute."

"That's it?" I didn't fuss when Kierce poured his glass of water over my cut then blotted it with a stack of thin paper napkins left over from our meal. "That's all I bought us?"

Kierce's lips brushed my temple, a reassurance I needed, badly, and I managed not to snarl at Pierre.

Pretty sure that was Anunit's influence. Or Josie's. My sister was downright feral for a dryad.

Smiling to himself, Pierre went about slicing enough limes to get through his shift. With the same crusty blade. And...yeah. That was the last meal I was eating here. I just hoped I could keep it down. At least long enough to get outside.

Without missing a beat, Kierce flung cash on the counter for our meal, helped me off my stool, and guided me out the door before I could circle back and increase my debt out of desperation.

As soon as we hit the sidewalk, I texted Josie with an update and instructions on where to meet us.

Without knowing what we were walking into, I couldn't decide if it was a waste of time bringing her and Pedro in, but she would want to be there if we had even a slim hope of putting eyes on Matty tonight.

We strolled to the end of Frenchmen before I opened the Swyft app on my phone and booked us a ride.

“I don’t like that he knows me.” Kierce answered the question I hadn’t drummed up the courage to ask. “I don’t like that I can’t remember why our paths crossed or when.”

I couldn’t imagine any history between them would be the good variety. To add insult to injury, Pierre just had to throw the gaps in his memory in his face. Our faces, really.

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“You must have been on an assignment from Dis Pater when you met him.” I set my palm on his chest. “That’s also probably why you don’t remember. His handling of the Alcheyvaha showed me he has no problem suppressing any pesky memories that might get in the way of you doing as you’re told.”

Did Kierce and I share some unknown history? Could Dis Pater have erased his and my memories of it? There was no doubt in my mind it was possible, but I decided it was unlikely.

Erasure on that scale would create a massive ripple effect. To get away with revising my recollections, he would have had to tamper with Matty and Josie too. And even then, the Suarezes, who were immune to such things, would have told us if we lost a chunk of time.

No.

Pierre was baiting us, hoping Kierce or I were desperate enough to bite.

“I wouldn’t know they existed now if not for you. He would have taken that knowledge from me. Again.” His hands clenched at his sides as rare anger washed over him. “What else have I done? Who else have I harmed? How can you ever trust me when I can’t trust myself?”

“Don’t let him get in your head.” I curled my fingers into his shirt. “Do that, and he wins.”

“How can you just accept it?” His haunted gaze lingered on my lips. “Accept me?”

“I don’t need to know who you were to know who you are.” I willed him to believe me. “I didn’t expect a Viduus to be some paragon of virtue. How could you be? I may not have all the information, but that’s okay. Until you do something that proves otherwise, I’m going to trust my gut, and you can’t stop me.”

“Frankie...”

“Nope.” I yanked him a step forward. “You’re not talking me into giving you up on the say-so of a guy who hasn’t used a bar of soap since Prohibition. And you’re not going to bargain with him to find out whatever he claims to know about you either. There are other ways to unravel your past, and I’ll help if that’s what you want, but not like this.”

“Thank you.” He slid his arms around me and held on like he was afraid of letting go. “Just...thank you.”

How could I give up on him when it was clear everyone else already had? His withdrawal from our world had been motivated by exhaustion from his role, but how much of that was linked to his inability to form lasting bonds because of his duties? Because he knew Dis Pater could command him to end any relationship that detracted from fulfilling his god’s will with a snap of his fingers?

How long would I have lasted without the Marys? Not long. For some reason, most people tended to find necromancers creepy or strange. That was why those who dwelled among the dead tended to bury their social lives. Poor Kierce’s had been DOA when we met, and mine had been on life support. Outside of my family, I wasn’t Little Miss Popular either.

Headlights glided over us, and we piled into a mud-splattered sedan for the trip over to Ursulines.

And if Kierce's fears gave mine fodder, I did my best to hide those corkscrew thoughts from him.

Ursulines Avenue was known for its antique shops, art galleries, hotels, and restaurants. The vibe was calmer and the crowds thinner here than on Frenchman Street, and the smells of boudin and crawfish boil spiced the air.

Our driver, clutching a muffaletta the size of his head in one hand and gripping the wheel in the other, put us out on a corner where Josie and Pedro waited for us. We milled around, searching for signs of Matty but finding no indication where his soul had gone.

"That Pierre guy said to wait, right?" Josie posted up under a flickering streetlamp. "For how long?"

Impatience and frustration warred in her voice, barely covering her fear for our brother, but we didn't have a lot of options. This was the only lead we had to follow. "As long as it takes."

Anticipation flavored the first thirty minutes, but it faded to an aftertaste past the first hour.

The four of us stood our ground, scanning for any sign of Matty, but we began to lose our collective faith after the second hour passed with no sign of him. Or Vi. Or any spirits. Not one. Which was odd in and of itself. The city was usually bustling with souls going about their business this time of night.

Yet another reason our canvassing hadn't turned up any useful information—a lack of informants.

Bargaining with Pierre hadn't been ideal, but we hadn't had many better options, and

at least I knew his information was good.

Ten minutes before midnight, I heard the rat-a-tat-tat of a snare drum and straightened from my lean.

“What is it?” Josie peered around, her hand clutching mine. “Do you see him?”

“No.” I checked with Kierce and Pedro, who both nodded. “Can you hear that?”

“You’ll have to be more specific.” Her nails dug into my skin. “That guy playing sax a street over?”

Trombone slides slowed down the drums, and trumpets struck up a lazy march.

But Josie heard none of it.

And that was proof enough.

“A parade is coming.” I stepped up to the curb. “I can’t see them yet, but I can hear them.”

“Damn it.” She noticed her crushing grip on me and let go with a grimace. “I wish I could help.”

With the rest of us craning our necks and straining our ears, it was little wonder she got caught up in the moment. “I’m sorry, Mary.” I jostled her arm. “When I see him, you’ll be the first to know.”

Stepping out into the street, Kierce called back, “I’ll go search for Vi.”

Funerals in New Orleans weren’t somber graveside affairs. Not entirely, anyway. Some families opted for jazz funerals, processions accompanied by a brass band, to celebrate the lives of those who had been lost. Music played, mourners danced, and some even sang hymns.

I had been swept into one or two, the participants’ joy infectious. Tears of sadness and happiness mingled until you couldn’t tell one from the other. It was beautiful. It was soulful. And it was damn strange when the spectral musicians came into view because I had never seen spirits reenact funerary rites. Most souls wanted to cling to the echoes of life, not the trappings of death.

For a moment, I thought I must be wrong. That this was a residual haunting left over from some Mardi Gras parade. I kept scanning for floats or spirits tossing beads,

coins, or candy. But as they drew nearer, and I got an eyeful of their somber attire, I knew I had been right all along.

We kept to the curb, allowing the soft-blue glowing mourners to march past us. Dressed in their Sunday best, they were a sight.

“This must be it.” I willed myself to believe it. “This must be what Pierre wanted us to see.”

The music swelled as the outliers drew even with us, and I scanned every face for Matty.

Midway through the revelers, I was rewarded with a glimpse of a face I would recognize anywhere.

“I see him.” I broke away from Josie. “I’m going after him.”

“Me too.” She growled her frustration. “I can’t stand here and watch, even if I can’t see a damn thing.”

“You’re not going in there.” I slowed, fear coasting down my spine, and she smacked into my back. “We don’t know how people become afflicted, and we’re not going to risk you to figure it out.”

“Frankie—”

“No.” I shut her down fast. “I’m not losing my sister too.”

“Take Pedro at least.” Tears threatened in her voice. “Just in case you can swap them out.”

Instinct screamed at me not to risk Pedro for the reasons I didn't want Josie anywhere near a dangerous source of magic we didn't understand, but from the look on his face, they were united in overruling me.

"This is why I'm here, mija." Pedro gentled his tone. "I want to help."

"There's no time to argue with either of you." I lifted my hands in defeat. "Let's do this, Pedro." I broke into a sprint, Pedro on my heels, waving a hand overhead and yelling, "Matty."

He noticed me, and his face lit up as he stuck out his elbow for me to slide my arm in. I focused to grant his soul enough substance I could hook him, but my arm passed right through his. Again and again, I tried with the same result. Finally, he shrugged and walked on, shuffling his feet to the beat and eyeing the woman ahead of him with the flare of interest he had shown me.

"Matty." I ran to catch up, each swipe of my hand failing to connect with him. "What's wrong with you?"

"Hey, pretty girl." His stare was glazed where it fell on me. "Want to dance?"

"I'm not a pretty girl." I struggled against the pinch in my chest. "I'm your sister."

Humming along, he sidestepped me in pursuit of the woman again.

A growl in my throat, I circled in front of him, my hands clawing through him without purchase.

"Pedro?" I tamped down the frantic thread about to snap in my tone. "You're up next."

Two souls could occupy the same body, and Matty was an old pro at cohabitation. But this wasn't how it was done back home. I couldn't exorcise Pedro without Matty's body dropping like a ton of bricks.

Pedro could only grasp at him, his fingers slicing through air. "Mija?"

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“Get in front of him.” I yanked him front and center. “Let him pass through you.”

Wrong choice of words because that was exactly what Matty did—danced through him without a hitch in his stride. As if his own body hadn’t been standing there. As if he hadn’t recognized himself.

“Matty.” I swallowed past the lump in my throat, refusing to give up yet. “You need to listen to me?—”

“Hey, pretty girl.” His attention landed on me, his eyes duller than before. “Want to dance?”

Understanding really and truly dawned then, that the light in his eyes hadn’t been recognition. He would have given the same greeting to any girl who walked up to him. I had seen what I wanted to see the first time and not the reality.

“You just said that,” I whispered, chin wobbling, my arms falling limp at my sides.

“I couldn’t feel him.” Pedro turned sorrowful eyes on me. “It was like he wasn’t even there.”

“It’s not your fault.” I gripped his forearm, contenting myself with this one small piece of my brother. “We’ll figure it out. We’re not out of time or options yet. We’re going to fix this.”

This time, I let Matty go. Let him dance his way to the woman and ask her his question. She turned to him, smiled, and they began a slow waltz that spanned the

width of Ursulines Avenue.

He never looked back.

Not even when I called his name.

A ruckus drew my attention from Matty toward the rear of the procession.

Though I couldn't stomach giving up on him altogether, I couldn't ignore the shouting either.

"Kierce," I cried out, racing for the scuffle. "Try to break Matty out."

"I'll go with him," Pedro told me. "See if I can help."

Maybe they would have better luck together than he had with me.

The voice spouting profanities caused my throat to tighten, and I ran toward it. I found Vi with two strapping young spirits walking arm in arm with her. They were walking, anyway. Vi was swinging in their grip, hissing and spitting vile curses that made my ears burn.

"Vi?" A whisper wasn't going to get the job done, so I tried again. "Vi?"

"Frankie?" She quit struggling and hung between them. "Thank God you're here."

"You know who I am?" I couldn't stop my head from turning toward Matty. "You remember yourself?"

"For now, I do." She snarled her lip at the men to either side of her. "For how much longer, I can't say." Her eyes softened on me. "You saw Matty?"

“He didn’t know me.” Hot tears poured down my cheeks, sadness and joy mingling. “I was worried you wouldn’t recognize me either.”

“The magic nibbles on me. On all of us. Feels like tiny ants biting.”

Sure enough, as I scanned the parade, I spotted a few of the more subdued revelers scratching their arms, but they didn’t miss a step. “This spell, or whatever it is, is feeding on you?”

“The headaches...” she hissed through her teeth, “...they come on when I think about it too hard.”

That could explain the revelers’ laissez-faire attitude when it came to going through the motions on autopilot. “Do you think that’s what’s causing the memory loss?”

“That would be my guess, but it’s like pouring water through a sieve to hold on to my thoughts.”

“How did you end up here?” I pressed my luck, hoping she could recall any details, no matter how small. “Rollo couldn’t tell us much.”

“A patron had me searching Ursulines Avenue for a missing soul.” She frowned. “His wife?” Her pause sent a chill racing down my arms. “Yes. His wife. She’s in a coma.” Her relief to share that much was short-lived as a wave of pain rocked her in place. “He’s an oungan and sensed there was more to her condition than simple illness. He called me in to consult, as a favor, and sure enough. He was right to worry.” I held my breath as hers steadied. “Her symptoms matched...your brother. Mathew?”

“Yeah,” I said, voice thick. “Matty.”

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“That’s when I lucked up on the Midnight Parade.” Her pupils expanded and then retracted, her focus shifting beyond me. “I hope I’m not late for supper.”

This whole conversation contracted my heart like a closed fist within my chest.

No, no, no.

This wasn’t happening. She was going to be fine. I wouldn’t let her be anything else.

Walking backward, I tried latching on to her arm without any luck. “How do I get you out of here?”

Impact sent me stumbling to one side, and I realized I had bumped into a parked car.

The parade marched on, and before I could pivot after Vi, they evaporated into whirls of blue mist.

“Well, we found them.” I gritted my teeth as Kierce ran to me. “Fat lot of good it did us.”

Gently, he helped me test my hip where I had smacked it on a non-folding car mirror. It might bruise, but I would be fine. I couldn’t say the same for Vi if we didn’t prioritize freeing her. Matty might be too far gone to realize he needed saving, since he couldn’t recognize me. Breaking through to him, and breaking him out, were looking more and more like two separate but equal tasks.

“We knew this wouldn’t be easy,” he soothed me. “This is only the first step.”

“It would have been nice if Pierre mentioned whether this is a nightly occurrence. And if it is, does it always happen here? On this street? At this time? Or do they pop up all over the city?”

“We can go back, see if he’ll tell us more.”

Worry that Kierce might end up the one in debt, for his own reasons, left a sour taste in my mouth.

“If I had anything he wanted, he would have bargained with me instead of bargaining through me to get to Vi.” I massaged my hip. “I’ve already run up her tab. I can’t keep adding to it without knowing the cost.”

“Then we wait,” he decided. “See if they circle back.”

Searching behind him for Pedro, I was relieved to find he had left to comfort Josie. “And if they don’t?”

“Then we come back tomorrow, same time, same place, and we wait.”

“I don’t understand.” I stared in the direction my brother had gone. “I couldn’t put hands on him.”

“Neither could I.” Kierce rubbed his fingers together as if the attempt had left behind a residue. “There’s magic chaining him to the others. They’re all connected.” He grew pensive. “There’s one more oddity. As far as I could tell, none of them are dead.”

“That makes sense.” In my mind’s eye, I saw Vi’s still form beneath her velvet bedspread. “Their bodies are still alive.”

“The spell must be weaving a collective bond between the spirits.”

Had Matty tuned out what was happening to avoid the magic nipping at his mind? Pain could trigger a Pavlovian response if he fought against the spell. Maybe he had given up when no help came. Or maybe blissful dissociation was how the magic worked, almost a reward for its victims going with the flow.

“Vi stumbled across the parade while she was investigating a patron’s wife’s illness.”

“Do you think the magic somehow trapped her?”

“Neither of us got stuck, but we’re both god adjacent. Our divinity might have protected us.”

“Perhaps,” he allowed, his expression going distant, “but we can’t be certain without a broader sampling of the afflicted factions.”

Thoughts veering back to Kierce’s interaction with Matty, I asked, “Did he say anything to you?”

“He introduced me to a woman in front of him who told me I was handsome and asked me to dance.”

“It’s like he’s reading from a script. He didn’t recognize me. There was just this...generic happiness...I guess? He didn’t understand what I was saying enough to engage with me. He repeated the same words on a loop, but that was it.”

“They must have a set number of phrases, though I don’t see why they would require the presets only to interact with one another.” Kierce mulled over his impressions. “Unless the victims are programmed to sweep others into the procession with them. That could be how the affliction was spread.”

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“Not a bad theory, but it doesn’t account for how Matty was exposed when he was all the way in Thunderbolt.” I sounded like a broken record, but it kept needling me. “We’re no closer to knowing who—or what—is causing the affliction either. Let alone why they conjured it or what they stand to gain from it spreading.”

Still.

Matty aside, I had to consider it might explain how Vi was ensnared while out searching for her friend.

Had she struck out with Matty too? Had she tried to find someone more responsive to question? Had she given up on the stock answers and accepted the offer of a dance to check and see if that helped?

Clearly, once they got their hands on her, they didn’t intend to let Vi go until she had integrated into the collective, which made extracting her our top priority. Any detail she could share with us could make the difference between saving Matty and reuniting his soul with his body or...

Nope.

Not going there.

A text chime drew my attention to my phone and a message from Harrow.

>>Leyna Reynolds.

>As in friend of a friend Leyna? You found her? What about SCAD Grad?

>>No luck on SCAD Grad, but Leyna Reynolds was admitted at Candler Hospital on the same night Matty was afflicted. I saw her not five minutes ago, but she won't be answering any questions for us. She's comatose.

>You vetted her in person?

>>Yeah.

>>I figured I owed you.

Warmth ignited in my chest, warning me that my anger at Harrow was close to reaching a melting point.

First loves really screwed with your head. And your heart. I thought I could cut him out of my life, but he was making it hard to paint him as my enemy when he kept brushing aside my animosity to help Matty.

>Send me her picture. I'll keep an eye out for her too.

>>Will do. Thanks.

After giving me a moment to gather my thoughts, Kierce raised his eyebrows and waited for me to share.

"Harrow identified Leyna." I shut my eyes, accepting I had lost yet another lead. "She's comatose too." I pocketed my phone then sought out Josie. "Let's go update my sister before she comes unglued."

The only thing holding her in place was Pedro's grip on her wrist, anchoring her to

the spot to give Kierce space to check me over before she swarmed me with questions. I was grateful for the moment to gather my thoughts before facing her.

Seeing for himself I was fine, he released her with an apology she brushed aside. As soon as I reached Josie, I saw what standing idly by had cost her in the smear of blood where she had bitten her bottom lip.

“Pedro hit the high notes,” she rushed out. “What else can you tell me?”

“I spoke to him. It was Matty. Not an illusion.” I started her off easy. “But he doesn’t know who he is and can’t help us figure out what’s going on.” Her chin trembled, and I brought her in for a hug. “I found Vi in the crowd.” I blinked back frustrated tears. “Whatever swept them up, a spell or an enchantment, it’s eroding her memories too.” I made myself believe the words as I spoke them. “But she’s not gone yet.”

“We need to free her before it’s too late.” Josie sniffled against my shoulder. “In case Matty can’t...”

“Come on, Mary.” I rubbed her back in soothing circles. “None of that.”

“We’re going to get Matty back,” Kierce swore. “No matter what it costs.”

I was onboard until that last bit. Not that I wouldn’t give anything to help my family. I just worried what he had in mind. More specifically, that he was considering a bargain with Pierre. Plenty of people had hinted at Kierce’s forgotten memories, claiming to know his secrets, but he must have known better than to trust them to deliver. With Pierre a temptation so close at hand, I feared Kierce might fall victim easier.

For some reason, the one thing I wanted no part of—my past—made those around me desperate to find their own answers. Which made me question if they saw something

lacking in me that compelled them to fill the answering gaps within themselves.

I didn't want to watch Kierce go down the same road of self-discovery Harrow had once walked with no way to pull him back from the brink of whatever he might learn there on the edge of his known world. I didn't want to lose him.

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“We have a few hours until dawn.” Josie pulled back with damp cheeks. “What do we do now?”

“You and Pedro head back to where you left off,” I decided, hating to send her out in this condition.

With a firm nod, Pedro promised me, “I’ll take good care of her, mija.”

Tears staining her cheeks, Josie blotted her face on her shirt. “What about you and Kierce?”

“I’m going to sit right here.” I sank onto the curb. “And wait to see if this Midnight Parade is literal.”

“You think they might circle back?” Pedro’s brow pinched. “Like a residual haunting?”

Until we grasped how cyclical this event truly was, we couldn’t begin to plot our next move. Pierre found them for us once, yes, but it didn’t guarantee they would come this way again. To move forward, we had to be sure that Ursulines Avenue at midnight was always there and then in order to prepare.

“Residual,” Josie repeated after him. “That’s a ghost that keeps reenacting its death, right?”

“Residuals repeat a set of actions at the same time, in the same place. Death, or other events with strong emotion, are most common, but there are no hard-and-fast rules.” I

made room for her to sink next to me. “None of the revelers are dead, so it’s not quite the same.”

“What’s the point then?” She rested her forehead on her knees. “Why trap them in a loop?”

“I don’t know.” I wrapped an arm around her slumped shoulders. “But we’re going to find out.”

The Midnight Parade lived up to its name.

Revelers caught in its snare made one pass down Ursulines Avenue at midnight, and that was that.

To put her mind at ease, I texted Josie.

>You didn’t miss anything. He didn’t come back.

>>At least we have a time and place for tomorrow night.

>We need to visit St. Louis No. 1 before the sun comes up.

Bones creaking, I rose and stretched after sitting for so long on the concrete curb.

>Call a Swyft for Pedro. Send him on to the cemetery. We’ll meet him there and make the swap with Pascal.

Now that Pascal had had his fun, it was time for him to go on Matty duty and let Pedro rest.

>>Jean-Claude asked me to pick up a few things for him. Mind if I go do that?

>Not at all. Thanks for helping out. See you soon.

Hoping to steal a smile from Kierce, I put the Swyft app on his phone and let him do the honors. He got a kick out of performing simple human tasks. Usually. Tonight proved an exception.

“That’s our ride,” he announced, frowning after checking the car against his details twice.

With the driver blasting EDM at a volume I felt in my teeth, I had trouble scrouging up enthusiasm too. Conversation was off the table, so I settled for resting my head on Kierce’s shoulder, threading my fingers through his clenched ones.

Ten minutes later, we got out at the cemetery, my ears ringing. Pedro was already there, waiting on us. I lifted a hand in greeting, and he strolled over to join us in front of the gate.

The lock was bolted for the night, but we had never let that stop us. Old pros at climbing fences, we didn’t hesitate to swing over and join in the chaotic bustle of spirits getting up to all sorts of shenanigans.

“The Fontenot mausoleum is this way.” I cut around the raucous crowd rather than through them out of politeness, not because I would jostle them. “Have you been here before, Kierce?”

“Many times.” He soaked in our surroundings. “The spirits aren’t usually this active when I visit.”

“You got Frankie, and Frankie is good people.”

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The scratchy voice stopped me in my tracks, and I spun to find Jean-Claude's grandmother and namesake, Momma Jean, wearing her favorite floral dressing gown with a pipe curling smoke in her hand.

"Momma Jean." I bent down so the small woman could embrace me, giving me a hit of relief that I had been able to solidify her enough to make it happen after failing so spectacularly with Matty and Vi. "How are you?"

"Dead." She rasped out a laugh. "How about you?"

Aware she could see my corona just fine, I pointed to it anyway. "I died too, but it didn't take."

"Bah." She clamped her teeth over the pipe's stem. "Some folks have all the luck."

"I'm not sure I would call it luck."

"Hmph." She slid her gaze over my shoulder. "Lucky woman to have that man on your arm."

"I'm sorry, Momma Jean, I forgot my manners." I tugged him forward to meet her. "This is Kierce."

"You're Jean-Claude's grandmother." He inclined his head. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine." She fluffed her short, dark curls. "What brings you all out

tonight?”

“I need to pick up a friend.” I kept it vague to avoid the threat of eavesdroppers. Gossip burned through cemeteries and graveyards like wildfire. “We’ll have to catch up before I go back to Thunderbolt.”

“It’s a date.” She fluttered her fingers at Kierce. “See you later, handsome.”

An adorable flush warmed Kierce’s cheeks as we set out for the Fontenot mausoleum.

Hard to miss the towering marble structure leaning a tad to the right after the last big hurricane flooded the cemetery. That, and the Fontenots had a thing for angels. Muscly ones. Lots of abs. Thick thighs. And a clothing allergy. Most wore a scrap of fabric suggestive of a loincloth and their wings. That was it. The anatomically correct figures stood guard to either side of the door, were carved into the stone walls, and one stood watch on the roof with his legs spread wide enough to flash anyone who attempted to enter.

“The attention to detail is...” Pedro winced up at Mr. Dangly, “...impressive.”

“Wait until you see the inside. All the angels are impressive. Especially the ones painted on the ceiling.”

Swallowing once, Pedro made the sign of the cross before following me in, not that it would save him.

Pretty sure God wouldn’t step foot within a five-mile radius of this particular plot if you paid him.

Unlike the frenetic energy outside, the inside of the mausoleum had wardings etched in stone to protect its inhabitants. Easily the most peaceful spot in the cemetery, I

wasn't surprised to find it empty with the precious few minutes of moonlight left for spirits to finish their earthly business for the night.

"What now?" Kierce studied an altar at the rear of the building. "Do we wait for Pascal?"

"We don't have much choice." I swept a hand toward the door. "We'll never find him out there."

Had I been allowed to question the spirits in residence, I might have been more motivated to try.

Sadly, St. Louis No. 1 had ironclad rules I had no choice but to follow unless I wanted my access revoked. I could visit all I wanted, I could talk to anyone I pleased, but the spirits who watched over the cemetery enforced a ban on necromancers. The restriction stemmed from an incident that happened long before I was born, but spirits excelled at holding grudges. Spite was the anchor tethering plenty of souls to this world. The only reason I was allowed onto the property was Vi—and the Fontenot spirits—vouching for me. Unless I wanted the boot, I had to behave, which meant I would reserve questioning the souls here as a last resort.

Kierce and I stood around another five minutes before the first spirit slid through the door and me.

"Pardon." He tipped his hat, its long feather tickling the ceiling. "Didn't see you there."

"No problem." I stepped aside to give the next several spirits room to enter. "Pascal is pushing his luck."

Careful to avoid making eye contact with the murals, Pedro stared at his feet. "Have

you met my brother?”

Laughing under my breath, I checked the time then joined Kierce at the altar dappled with candles in various states of melting. “What do you think?”

“I’ve never seen a Virgin Mary depicted in the nude,” he mused, “or with breasts quite so large.”

Rumor had it the model was none other than Momma Jean, whose family had long ties with the Fontenots. But I figured I would keep that tidbit to myself, since Kierce was the blushing type.

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“She’s not nude.” I pointed to the moldering gauze at her feet. “She just needs new robes.”

“That doesn’t explain why she’s anatomically correct.” Pedro shielded his eyes. “Where is Pascal?”

Poor Pedro looked ready to go stand in a darkened corner to hide from the heart within the mausoleum, but he must have realized there was nowhere to rest his forehead except on angel junk, most of it in bas-relief.

Even Kierce couldn’t resist a smile at Pedro’s horror, and I nudged him with my elbow. “Hi.”

“Hello.” He rested his hand on my shoulder then slid it until he cupped my nape. “I’m sorry I?—”

“Booya,” Pascal crowed as he raced another spirit to tag the wall above our heads. “I win.”

The woman, because of course it was a woman around his age, chortled at his glee.

“You made it by the skin of your teeth.” I quirked my lips. “Made a new friend too, I see.”

“Oh. Frankie. Hey.” The woman scooped her wild curls away from her face. “I didn’t notice you there.”

“Anita.” I smiled up at her drifting form. “Good to see you.”

As best as I could recall, she died back in the thirties from lead poisoning in her home, but it wasn’t like I was going to ask to check if I was recalling the grisly details correctly.

“What brings you to the cemetery?” She leaned cozily into Pascal. “Anything I can help with?”

“I’m here to pick him up, I’m afraid.” I lifted my brows, waiting on him to chime in. “Right, Pascal?”

“Francita,” he pleaded, staring down at Anita. “Can I get a pass? Just for today? Please?”

“I’m afraid not,manito.” Pedro shook his head. “I’m too tired to pull double duty again so soon.”

Guilt tumbled through me when the exhaustion in his voice, his expression, registered with me.

The effect was instantaneous on Pascal, who cut out the whiny-little-brother act fast. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Anita folded her arms across her chest, boosting her cleavage. “Are you serious?”

“I’ll be back tonight,” he promised, eyes full of desperation. And boobs. “Wait for me?”

“All I got is time, right?” She flounced into a vault. “Later, Pascal.”

“Later,” Pedro reassured his little brother.

No further prompting was required to get Pascal to fall in line as Pedro lay on the floor.

Hand to Matty’s forehead, I released Pedro, who vanished through the marble wall seconds later.

Twining my fingers through Pascal’s chilly blue ones, I murmured a soft hymn as I guided him down into Matty’s body, his brief solidity confirming it had only been the lost souls in the parade I couldn’t touch.

“That’s a neat trick,” a man said from behind me. “You need volunteers, you ask for Bosco.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I grinned at him over my shoulder then pulled Pascal onto his feet. “You good?”

“Momma always said no man has yet to die from blue balls,” he lamented. “God rest her soul.”

“Blue...?” A furrow gathering across his brow, Kierce struggled to read between the lines. “Balls?”

“She had three sons, threeteenagesons at one point, and she wanted to make sure we grew up knowing how to treat girls right. No means no. Even if it felt like we would die if we got ourselves all worked up, and then our date changed her mind later, Momma assured us we wouldn’t die from it.” He rolled a shoulder. “Then she followed it up by saying she was too young to be a grandmother and made us go to the store and buy our own condoms while she watched from the counter with Ms. Nelly, who was our former bible school teacher.”

“That’s positively evil,” I spluttered, unable to hold in my laugh.

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“But effective.” He held up a finger. “I died with zero offspring and the same box of condoms.”

“That’s not something to brag about,” Bosco said from the depths of the marble vault.

Smothering a laugh as Pascal flushed, I added, “And emotional scars that lasted a lifetime and beyond.”

“That too.” His lips twitched at the memory. “Damn, I miss her.”

Unfortunately for the Suarez brothers, she had elected to move on rather than linger. They wouldn’t see her, or their father again, until they crossed over.

“Can you take this reunion outside?” a grumpy voice mumbled. “We’re trying to sleep here.”

Wincing at the commiserating grumbles from the other vaults, I shuffled the guys out then closed up behind us.

The cemetery wouldn’t be open for a while, so we climbed the fence and started down Basin Street. The walk to get breakfast would cost us twenty minutes, but after spending so much time sitting on concrete and waiting for the parade to come again, I was happy for the excuse to stretch my legs.

Halfway to Café du Monde, I spied Badb circling overhead, her beak cracked open in a cackle.

A thud on the crown of my head pushed a hiss from between my teeth as I rubbed the sore spot.

“Really?” I reached up to untangle the beads from my hair. “Where did you find these?”

Please don’t say somewhere gross.

“They were looped over a power line,” Kierce told me. “She thought you might like the mirror charm.”

Yeah. Uh-huh. Because, between the two of us, I was the one obsessed with my own reflection.

Mardi Gras beads came in all sizes, shapes, and colors. Most necklaces tossed from the floats were plain beads in green, purple, and gold. But every now and again, the krewe flung deluxe beads. The battle for those often resulted in scuffles in the street. This particular strand—with its chunky golden beads and the ornate gold brocade trimming out a hazy mirror—fell squarely into that category.

Oh, how the paradegoers must have cried out when it got stuck on the power line. I bet folks had thrown their shoes at the necklace for days, probably losing them too, but it had taken a vain crow to liberate the prize.

As Kierce and Badb conferred ahead of us, I fell in step with Pascal, whose expression pinched my heart.

“Don’t tell me you fell in love with Anita that fast.” I bumped shoulders with him. “If you’re worried she’ll write you off for ditching her once, don’t be. As long as you make it up to her, she’ll forgive you.”

“It’s not that.” He cracked a smile, but it faded as he admitted, “I’m worried about Pedro. He takes more shifts with Matty than Paco or I do, and it’s wearing on him. And you know Pedro. He’s like you. He would do anything for his family, and you Marys are the next best thing to Suarezes.”

Fear trickled in over Pedro hiding his strain from me, but I would have to take that up with him.

“What he said before was the first I’ve heard about it. I wish he had told me sooner.” I leaned my head against his shoulder, already thinking out my talk with his brother. “I’ll talk to him, okay?”

“Fingers crossed Matty is back with us soon.” He rested his cheek against mine. “Then it won’t matter.”

The comforting warmth of my brother’s skin on mine threatened to bring tears to my eyes. And I felt like a bad friend for cashing in on Pascal’s pain to get closer to Matty, to take the comfort I ought to be giving.

“Looks like there’s already a line,” he murmured, pulling away from me. “That’s dedication.”

There was always a line at Café du Monde, which led to many locals, Vi included, labeling it a tourist trap instead of regarding it as a local institution. But Jean-Claude was obsessed with their beignets and considered anything less than a five-star review of them to be blasphemous.

While Pascal went to join the other early birds waiting for the café to open, I sought out Kierce and Badb where they stood watching artists arranging their canvases, easels, and crafts in nearby Jackson Square. I smiled when I noticed the reason for his interest and watched as a young man hung a stained glass suncatcher shaped like a

crow in flight next to what was clearly part of a series.

“Are you sure I can’t tempt you into trying a beignet?” I made a mental note of the artist’s name for later. Christmas would be here before we knew it. “They’re mighty tasty.”

“There’s an oyster bar down the street. I’m going to pick up a dozen for later.” He stroked Badb’s head. “She swears they’re the best in the Quarter.”

“Be careful going through the trash,” I cautioned her. “Oysters turn quick in the heat.”

A mocking laugh moved through her feathered breast, and I waited for the punch line.

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“She helped herself to the plates of diners who couldn’t finish their meals.”

“So, she stole from them.” I should have known Badb wouldn’t dumpster dive.
“Gotcha.”

“I’ve been thinking.”

“Good thoughts, I hope.”

“What Rollo said about gods being responsible.” He rolled a thumb over one of the beads on the necklace Badb salvaged. “There are gods of revelry.”

The peculiar manifestation of the Midnight Parade wasn’t exactly a party, but gods were multifaceted beings. Most of them, anyway. At least on paper. Gods in the flesh, I was learning, were a whole different kettle of fish.

“Dionysus, Bast, Shiva, Bacchus.” I ticked them off on my fingers. “That’s all I’ve got. I’m not up on party gods.” Pretty sure that Dionysus and Bacchus were the same guy, so that cut me down to three total. “What are you thinking?”

“Bacchus is celebrated widely in New Orleans, but he’s more than a symbol of excess.”

The Krewe of Bacchus was a big deal in The Big Easy, and plenty of celebs had portrayed the goodtime god over the years, but I had trouble imagining him cavorting with the dead. “Oh?”

“Bacchus can be called a dying-and-rising god.” Kierce squinted against the glare as the sun rose higher. “His female followers are called maenads, and they feed the dead with their blood. Maenads can also be called the thiasus, his revelers.”

“The party boy image threw me.” I tugged on my left ear in thought. “I never paid much attention to him in my studies.” I could see now that had been an oversight. “What makes him a dying-and-rising god?”

“Hera was jealous of Bacchus. Of his relationship with Zeus. To punish him, she had Bacchus torn apart by Titans. They devoured everything but his heart. Zeus took the heart and placed it in a mortal’s womb. Semele was her name. She gave birth to Bacchus. Some consider his rebirth as him rising from the dead.”

“That actually makes a tiny bit of sense, so there’s probably a wackier version that’s the real story.”

Kierce cracked a smile, and I soaked it up greedily, happy to have banished his grim mood.

For now at least.

Beneath the striped awning overhanging the sidewalk at Café Du Monde, I stuffed my face with hot, pillowy dough while waiting on Kierce to return with his oysters. I had already sent Pascal back to Vi’s with takeout for Jean-Claude, Josie, and yes, even Rollo. As much as I didn’t want to part from Pascal, he convinced me to let him book a Swyft on Matty’s phone then showed the text conversation promising Josie would meet him at the curb to help him bring up the food while it was hot and fresh.

About to dust the resulting white powder off my shirt, I jumped when my phone rang. I had forgotten how much coffee I tended to drink when I was visiting, and how jittery it made me, but everything tasted better in New Orleans.

“Hey. Carter.” I wiped sugar off my hands onto my thighs, but I still left behind fingerprints. “How’s it going?”

“Your sister isn’t returning my texts.”

“So not great.”

“She also won’t answer my calls.”

“She mentioned something about not being your girlfriend or needing your permission to live her life.”

“I didn’t mean she should run off half-cocked without telling me. I meant she was free to enjoy herself. That she doesn’t have to run every damn thing she does past me.”

“Well...”

“She sent me a picture of her sticking out her tongue like she was about to lick the Bourbon Street sign. Until that exact moment, I had no idea she was even in New Orleans. She didn’t mention it, or the tip on Matty’s possible location.” A low growl vibrated my ear. I couldn’t tell if it was for Josie, for not updating her, or for me. Also for not updating her. “She was wearing a string bikini, heels, and foam. Fucking foam, Frankie.”

Soap, actually. I knew a guy who mixed batches for clubs. Though I don’t think this was one of those times where sharing a fun factoid would de-escalate the situation.

“I was not aware she had done a photoshoot, but that’s very Josie.” I should have been more suspicious when Josie and Pascal hit Bourbon Street on our first night, but even without an agenda, she would have called dibs. “I don’t know what you want.”

“I don’t know what I want either.”

“That’s definitely a problem.” I was glad she couldn’t see the face I was making.

“Are you sure you’re not dating Josie?”

“I made it plain from the start I had no interest in a relationship.”

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“And she’s made it plain she wants to get naked with you.”

“Are you telling me I should have sex with your sister to get me out of her system?”

“I try not to think about my sister having sex, so no. All I’m saying is, if you don’t want her, then you need to do yourself a favor and pack her up while she’s gone. Leave her things at the shop. I’ll give you a code to get into my office.” I lamented only having crumbs left in the bottom of my bag. I could have used a distraction to get through this conversation. “Make a clean break.”

“She can’t go back to her apartment.”

“She can room with me, or we’ll rent her an apartment until she’s ready to move home.”

“I have the space, and I don’t need the money. It makes more sense for her to stay with me.”

“Financially, yes. Emotionally? No. Keep going like this, and one of you is going to get hurt.”

And, as much as I liked Carter, as much as Carter had tried to do right by Josie, Josie was still my sister.

“Yeah.” Her voice grew rough with emotions I wasn’t about to attempt labeling.

“You’re right.”

“However, if you do give my sister the boot, please don’t tell her I gave you the idea.”

With a snort, the redcap ended the call, leaving me torn on the advice I had given.

Had Kierce not chosen that moment to appear, I might have called her back, but he did, and I didn’t.

Because he wasn’t alone, and I don’t just mean Badb sitting on his shoulder with a purloined oyster.

Harrow was with him.

Here.

In New Orleans.

Mouth falling open, I walked into the street to meet them, stunned at the man who had invited himself along.

“Frankie Talbot,” he purred, his eyes golden and glimmering.

Pretty sure my heart skipped a beat before it got back with the program.

“You—” I checked with Kierce, whose wary expression didn’t comfort, “—arenotHarrow.”

“I required a body to travel the distance to you,” the Not-Harrow said without batting an eye, but I could tell there were other reasons too. “You did not seem to like this one much, so I borrowed him.”

No, no, no.

This was not happening. Not now. I didn't have time for more divine shenanigans.

"You stole Harrow's body." I wadded up the bag, wishing it was Anunit's throat I was crushing in my fist. "That's not..." I groaned a miserable noise. "He's a cop. You can't steal a cop. Other cops will notice and come looking for him."

No wonder she had been so taken with him that day in my office. She wanted to try him on and see if he suited her. And I had given her the perfect excuse to give him a test-drive by leaving her in Thunderbolt.

"Ah." She tipped her head to one side. "A law enforcer."

"Yes." I pinched my eyes shut but was afraid to lose sight of her. "Can we do this later?"

"Do you have food?" She scratched her stomach. "This body is hungry."

A hungry predator was threat enough to send Badb sailing off with her oyster clutched in her claws.

"Good Lord." I did not need this complication. "How did you get him to New Orleans anyway?"

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“I told him where to go.” She said it matter-of-factly, as if that explained anything.

For all I knew, she kidnapped him from work, pointed him in the right direction, and told him to start walking.

“I must remain close to you, Frankie Talbot,” she continued, “until you are ready to assume your duties.”

“Perhaps Anunit could instruct you for an hour before dusk,” Kierce suggested, trying to keep the peace until we could contain the problem, aka, Anunit. “We can only hunt Matty at night.”

“A hunt?” Her smile gleamed bright in the early-morning sun. “I like this idea.”

“Not a hunt-hunt,” I rushed to explain. “We came here to find my brother’s soul. We located it last night, but we had no luck convincing him to leave with us. We’ll have to return to Ursulines Avenue tonight, see if he comes around again, then try to contain him until we figure out how to fix him.”

“This body knows about your Matty,” she hummed. “Have you determined the cause of his affliction?”

“No.” I booked us a ride, paying an extra fee for a larger vehicle because it was closer. I wanted Anunit inside the wards so she couldn’t escape with Harrow in tow while we figured out what to do about her situation. “We came for my brother, but my mentor is in a similar condition. We’re staying at her home, with her family. You’re welcome to room there too, but we’ll need to find another host for you.”

Anunit made an unhappy noise but submitted to the car ride. She behaved herself until we reached the house on Chartres, and I escorted her past the wards with a sigh of relief and a quick prayer she couldn't use her bond with me to slip through every time I left the premises.

"Oh good." Jean-Claude waited outside the elevator. "I was wondering when y'all would get here."

Which meant the goodwill I had purchased with breakfast had run out, and now he was getting antsy for an update on our progress.

"Got any more of those beignets?" I noticed him noticing Anunit. "My friend here is hungry."

"You look like that boy that done broke Frankie's heart." Jean-Claude studied him. "Why're you here?"

"I needed a body," Anunit told him baldly. "I chose this one, but Frankie Talbot says I must give it back."

Head tilting to one side, Jean-Claude examined her, his eyes going out of focus. "Good God."

"I was a good god to my people," she said, mimicking his head tilt. "Does that count?"

"Jean-Claude, this is Anunit, Eater of Moons, Mother of Darkness." I saw when the name hit him upside the head, striking him mute. "Anunit, this is Jean-Claude Dancosse."

With introductions out of the way, I crammed everyone in the elevator then hustled

them into the living room. There were additional protections on the upper level stemming from how often Vi entertained loa in her home, and I wanted Anunit as contained as I could get her.

From what I could tell, we had beat Rollo in. I had hoped to use his absence as an excuse to avoid going over the chilling details of learning Vi's soul was trapped in that damn parade, but Jean-Claude wasn't the patient type except with, well, patients.

The story came tumbling out, along with the bargain with Pierre, and Jean-Claude simply nodded along.

Only after I was done sharing all we knew did he seem to blink free of his silent contemplation.

"So, Anunit." Pascal gawked at Anunit from the far corner of the living room. "You eat people."

"People eat animals." She cocked an eyebrow at him. "What is the difference?"

"I don't see much of one myself," Jean-Claude said abstractly, "but you know how humans are."

The room fell silent as everyone absorbed that the doctor among us was cool with eating people.

From deep inside Harrow's body, undeterred, Anunit gave a thoughtful hum of agreement.

"You're not human?" Pascal plastered himself to my side, like he wasn't an oddity himself. A spirit stuck in a body that didn't belong to him. "What are you?"

“Something older than you,” Jean-Claude answered dryly, “and meaner than you.”

Even after the time I spent living next door to him, laughing and cutting up with him, I had never pinpointed his faction.

“Can you fix something for Anunit to eat?” I aimed the question at him. “I need to go make a call.”

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The only way to avoid a total disaster when we arrived home in Thunderbolt was to get ahead of this mess now.

“Sure thing.” Jean-Claude gestured her into the kitchen. “You like raw or waved over the flames?”

Hoping they meant steak and not people, I left him to handle that problem while I dialed Carter.

“You must be psychic.” She picked up on the first ring. “I was about to text you.”

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with your missing partner, would it?”

“Fucking hell, Frankie.” Carter growled a string of choice words. “What do you know about it?”

“Uh, well, you see...” I twirled my wrist, searching for the right combination of words to make Harrow’s situation sound better, but I came up empty. “He’s here. Anunit showed up, um, wearing him. But he’s fine. Totally fine. As soon as I figure out where to put her, I’ll get her out of him.”

“Is this a Matty-type situation?” She strove for calm. “Explain it to me.”

“A dead goddess took over his body, so that makes it a possession? I think? I’m not really sure.”

“Of course she did.” Her sigh whistled in my ear. “Update me when you get it

sorted.”

Optimistic of her to assume I could sort it, but that was a problem for tomorrow’s Frankie.

“That went about as well as could be expected,” I reported to Kierce, who had probably overheard the highlights. “I don’t think she realized exactly how missing Harrow was until I told her he was here.”

“Poor guy.” Pascal snickered as he glanced toward the kitchen. “Karma is kicking his ass.”

“Josiedidpromise to make him regret ever meeting me, but that was years ago.” I drew a check mark in the air. “Still. Mission accomplished, I guess?”

Glee bright in his eyes, Pascal sneaked away to update Josie on the latest catastrophe to befall Harrow.

“Any idea who or what we can stick Anunit in for the time being?” I pivoted toward Kierce. “Do you think I can put her in an animal? That’s much less invasive than the alternative.” I dropped my arm. “But then it sounds like I’m okay with the loss of free will for nonhuman hosts, which I’m not, but?—”

Before I could get even more tongue-tied, Kierce pulled me against him. “I understand.”

“I’m glad one of us does.” I mashed my face into his shirt. “Nothing makes sense anymore.”

“I’m sorry.” He stroked down my spine, his gentle touch surer than it once was. “Gods thrive in chaos.”

“I’m starting to see that.” I let him hold me for a minute longer. “Even if they can’t feed on it like Ankou, I...” I let the thought drift, unfinished, wheels in my head turning. “Do you think he could be involved?”

Everywhere I turned lately, there was Ankou. Even banished from this realm, he crept into my dreams.

“The fear and grief from you and Josie alone would make a tempting meal for him.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“Bacchus, if that’s who we’re dealing with, has a long history of animosity with Ankou’s god. Ankou had a hand in killing one of Bacchus’s favorite lovers a few decades ago. As far as I know, Ankou hasn’t been to New Orleans since. He’s too afraid the god will kill him or that someone will cash in on the bounty on his head. He’s worth his weight in gold bars.”

If a god was responsible for the parade, hope for a quick resolution fizzled. “I’ll add that to my mental list of reasons why moving to New Orleans isn’t a terrible idea.”

To be free of Ankou? That would be worth starting over from scratch.

But I had a funny feeling he would find workarounds to get to me.

Kierce withdrew to stare down at me, his eyes the soft gray of rolling fog. “Is that a possibility?”

Drawn from my thoughts, I admitted, “It’s always been my contingency plan.”

That didn’t mean I wanted to leave Thunderbolt. I would miss Bonaventure like a phantom limb. Plus, the loss of the business, particularly the other family business, and

our home. No. I didn't want to leave Georgia. But I had to keep my options open in order to protect my family. Not that I was doing a great job of it lately.

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Pretty sure the adamantine wall of my guilt was the only reason Ankou hadn't invited himself into my dreams lately. He probably slammed into it face-first every time he tried to pester me.

"You should rest." Kierce brushed his lips over mine, his cheeks flushing when I grinned up at him like an idiot. I was doing my best not to project sex-starved-maniac vibes at him, but it was hard keeping a PG relationship after I'd had a taste of him. The only thing keeping me from taking a whole bite was guilt. As much as I enjoyed watching Kierce unravel, I was tied up in knots over the state of my brother's soul. "I'll see what I can do about a host for Anunit."

The urge to protest balanced on the tip of my tongue, and I realized I was afraid of letting him out of my sight. I think I had been since we met Pierre. But Kierce was a grown man. And god-adjacent. He could take care of himself.

So why did my stomach drop into my toes when he walked out the door?

An earthquake snapped me out of a dead sleep, and I clutched the headboard like that might protect me from the rattling thumps jostling my bones. As my vision cleared and I spotted the cause of my shakes, I asked myself for the umpteenth time if it was too late to become an only child.

Then the reality of my situation, what had brought me to New Orleans, sank in, leaving me tasting ash.

"Rise and shine." Josie bounced up and down at the foot of my bed. "You've got to see this."

“See what?” I released my death grip on the headboard. “What time is it?”

“Come on.” She tossed me a pair of wrinkled jeans. “Move it.”

I missed the leg hole on my first try, and it was a near thing on the second, but I got it in three. As much as I wanted to know what had put a bounce in her step this morning, in light of everything, I couldn’t shake a sense of unease that whatever had her in such high spirits couldn’t be good.

Before I could pull on a bra, brush my teeth, or comb my hair, she yanked me stumbling into the hall.

“Is that safe?” Rollo’s voice rang out from the living room. “Are we sure that’s safe?”

“It’s a baby.” Pascal, still in Matty’s body, sounded delighted. “What harm could it do?”

“You ain’t got much sense, do you?” Jean-Claude clucked his tongue. “You see them teeth?”

“Oh, God.” I lengthened my strides until I rushed past Josie. “None of that sounds good.”

We stumbled into the living room to find everyone already there.

“What’s going on?” I checked the time. “It’s four in the afternoon.”

“I have a new host,” Anunit announced from nearby. “Perhaps this one will be more to your liking.”

There was no sign of Harrow, which I took to mean he was in a bedroom recovering

from his possession. I wasn't looking forward to that conversation. Maybe I could let Josie do the honors? She would love the horror sure to splash across his face when he woke in New Orleans with no memory of how he got here.

"I'm afraid to look." I sought out Kierce, who was the center of attention. "You found a host that fast?"

"A willing one." His expression turned thoughtful. "More or less."

That was the type of logic that led Anunit to believe she could borrow Harrow.

"Your man is as crazy as you, maringouin." Rollo recoiled from Kierce's general vicinity. "Who in their right mind sticks a dead god in the body of a...whatever the hell that is?"

One of the big touristy items on sale most anywhere in Louisiana were alligators. Parts of them, anyway. Taxidermized, I guess you would call them. Most with the dark, bumpy skin left intact. Feet glued on the end of a stick as a backscratcher or claws strung on a keychain. Leathery heads were popular. Bare skulls too. But this...

I understood why Rollo couldn't put a name to it despite knowing it had started out life as a gator.

This was my first time seeing a preserved hatchling. The miniature cowgirl hat was an interesting choice to complement the baby pink feather boa wrapping its neck. The bedazzled bikini top was eye-catching and drew attention to the small tiara glued to the front of the hat. Its matching chaps were held in place by a rhinestone belt. A scaled-down cigarette stuck between its teeth finished the look.

"I was searching for options when a man approached me with several of these." Kierce held his selection out to me, clearly proud. "Since it was alive at one point, I

hazarded a guess Anunit could reanimate it.”

“And since it was already dead, there was no pesky soul to shuffle aside to give her an avatar.” As soon as I held out my hand, Anunit leapt onto my palm, ran up my arm, and sat on my shoulder, the feathers of her boa tickling the side of my neck. “Well? What do you think? Will this work for you?”

“I like this body’s teeth.” She snapped her jaws, and the cigarette tumbled out. “I can manage.”

“I’m glad that’s settled.” I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye and spotted Badb hiding in the jackets hung on a vintage coatrack in the corner and asked Kierce, “Can Badb handle this arrangement?”

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“Anunit chased her around the living room for a solid five minutes.” Josie flapped her hands. “That gator can move.”

“Poor Badb.” I flicked the brim of Anunit’s hat, but it didn’t budge. “Don’t torment the crow.”

“She is plump and slow.” Her reptilian skin brushed against my throat. “I could not help myself.”

Fear forgotten, Badb burst out with an ear-splitting caw and flew at my face—no, at Anunit.

Apparently, even though the others couldn’t comprehend her speech in this form, the crow understood Anunit just fine.

“She says she’s the ideal weight for a crow of her height,” Kierce translated for the rest of us, “and she is faster than the pathetic excuse for—” He shut his mouth. “The rest is difficult to translate.”

“You’re a terrible liar.” I swatted at Badb, whose claws passed dangerously close to my eye. “Please, call off your attack crow.”

“Come with me, cher.” Jean-Claude held out his arm to Badb. “Let’s get you some of that bread pudding you like.”

Certain Anunit was about to zing Badb about Jean-Claude fattening her for the kill, I set her on the floor before she got me flogged. Call me a chicken, but I didn’t want to

lose an eye from their petty squabble.

Quick as a blink, Anunit scurried out of the room and down the hall. I was too glad for the ensuing quiet to call out and ask for her plans. I would probably sleep better not knowing them.

“We’re all awake,” Rollo grumbled, “we might as well seize the day, yeah?”

From the rumpled state of him, which I was just noticing, I was convinced he hadn’t been to bed yet.

And, recalling that I hadn’t seen him before I fell asleep, meant I had an unenviable task ahead of me.

Josie, stretching her arms over her head, nodded. “I’m game.”

“Might as well,” I agreed, and the four of us sat across from one another on the crushed velvet couches.

For the next half hour, Kierce and I updated Rollo on what we had seen and learned so far.

Minus one key discovery I couldn’t quite figure out how to word without sending him into a tizzy.

Buying myself time to woman up with the bad news, I fielded questions about why Harrow was sleeping in a guest room down the hall. Josie almost wet her pants recounting how Pascal told her Anunit had worn Harrow like a Halloween costume. That segued into Kierce filling in more details about how he aided Anunit in the transference of her essence into the hatchling, and its reanimation, leaving off with a quick update on Harrow’s current condition.

Jean-Claude returned for that part, reassuring us that Harrow was fine. Tired, but fine. He ought to be awake in a few hours, and then we could send him home. Hopefully without him pressing charges.

“Folks rise from the grave for parades all the time.” Rollo scratched his jaw. “That’s nothing new.”

“These souls are tethered to living bodies.” Kierce stared off in the direction of the kitchen. “We couldn’t touch them. We couldn’t affect them.” He angled his head like he did sometimes when Badb was communicating with him. “They have no idea who they are, as far as we could tell, except for Vi.”

“What do you mean except Vi?” Rollo’s expression twisted. “What does he mean, maringouin?”

So much for breaking the news gently. “You weren’t here?—”

“All of a sudden, you don’t know my number?” He shot to his feet. “What did you find?”

“We located Vi’s soul.” I stood too, uncomfortable with him looming over me. “She’s trapped in the Midnight Parade, the same as Matty. She’s still got some sense of self. Either because she hasn’t been there as long or because of her power. She’s used to astral projection. She’s spent a lot of time outside of her body. That might be the difference.” I held up my hands in a placating gesture. “She’s our top priority. She’s the only one lucid enough to help us figure out how to break the enchantment.”

“I don’t know how, but this is your fault.” He stabbed the air in my direction. “Yours and your man’s.”

Ah, yes. This was more like it. This felt normal. This I could handle.

For as long as I had known him, Rollo could only last for so long without blaming his woes on me before I worried his head would explode.

“Rollo, are you half parrot?” Josie squawked. “It’s Frankie’s fault. It’s Frankie’s fault. It’s Frankie’s fault.”

The impression ripped a snort out of me, but Rollo looked ready to spit nails.

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A faint static sensation lifted the hairs down my arms, and I knew without checking that lightning arced in the palms of Kierce's hands. I didn't want this to get ugly, so I backed up and invited myself to sit in his lap. He was so shocked by the move, he lost his focus on Rollo—and his lightning—and fixated on me.

"I'll take my share of the blame," I said, accepting it was probably all my fault, "but Kierce has nothing to do with this."

"The crazy didn't start until he got here," Rollo protested. "He brought these damn gods into our lives."

"I have a divine parent, so, no. I brought these damn gods into your life. We just didn't know it at the time."

"Gods are everywhere." Jean-Claude stood in the entryway to the kitchen. "All the time." He cocked one bushy eyebrow at Rollo. "You've met Papa Legba how many times? He and other loa are in and out, and I never once heard you raise your voice to them, to disrespect them, the way you're doing now."

"That's different," Rollo gritted out. "Mamaw?—"

"—loves Frankie like a daughter." Jean-Claude kept pressing on that sore spot. "I hate to tell you this, but it's a damn fool thing you do tempting the wrath of a demigoddess. She might walk, talk, and look like the girl you grew up with, but she is a force of nature, and she has to be as tired of your shit as I am."

Without another word, Rollo turned and left, but I knew better than to think I had

heard the end of this.

A sharp jab in my thigh brought my attention to my chair of choice, and I cleared my throat. “I’ll just...”

But I didn’t get the chance to finish the thought as Kierce lifted me, readjusting his bony knee, then set me higher on his thighs. He looped his arms around my waist, securing me in place, and a flush crept up my throat into my cheeks for no good reason. Unless you counted how he was looking at me. Really looking at me. With the edge of hunger he had concealed from me since Matty...

And just like that, my lustful thoughts evaporated into thin air.

“We have eight hours until midnight.” Josie broke the awkward silence. “What do we do until then?”

Most of our contacts wouldn’t be awake until dusk, which didn’t leave us with many useful pursuits.

“We track down every person in the city whose symptoms match Matty and Vi’s, and we figure out what they have in common.” I puffed out my cheeks. “We need to pin down what, exactly, is happening to the victims, why it’s affecting a specific demographic, and who is responsible. What they stand to gain from it. Then we can work on reversing it.”

“Rollo has a list of folks we know from the Quarter who’ve been afflicted by this soul sickness. He’s been working on it since Vi took ill.” Jean-Claude ducked into Vi’s room and returned with a notebook Rollo must have left in there earlier. “These ones would rather die than go to a hospital.”

“This will help.” I read his notes on their condition. “He even marked their faction.”

Odds were good victims hadn't been chosen based on their paranormal heritage, judging by the small sampling we had already, but more information was always better than less.

"He's got a good head on his shoulders." Jean-Claude clucked his tongue. "Most of the time."

"I'll start calling the hospitals, see if there are more cases outside the Quarter." Josie climbed to her feet. "New Orleans has a large private hospital network for paras, so I'll begin there then check to see if any got lost in the human medical system. We can cross-reference for matches after we get names and birthdates."

From her tone, I could tell she wasn't expecting much to come of it, but she was eager to contribute.

"I have patients to see." Jean-Claude grinned when Badb sailed in from the kitchen, breadcrumbs stuck to her beak with sticky sweet bourbon sauce. She lit on his shoulder, and he scratched her head with a gnarled finger. "I'll keep my eyes and ears open while I make my rounds."

Folks were more likely to confide in him than the rest of us, given his profession and his deep ties to the community, making him the ideal candidate for canvassing the neighbors for any details the locals might have seen or heard. "That would be amazing."

"Pascal can help me run through my calls," Josie decided after the scope of her task sank in. "He's good with people."

With the work split between the two of them, we would have our answers that much faster. "Okay."

That left Anunit, who hadn't returned since sprinting from the room earlier, unaccounted for.

As much as I wished I could skip her and lower my stress threshold, I had to locate her for my own peace of mind. I was about to wriggle off Kierce's lap, which could have been all kinds of interesting under different circumstances, when a distant yelp shot us all to our feet.

"Harrow?" I scrambled toward the noise. "Harrow?"

"Frankie?" He appeared in the open doorway of a guest room, his eyes wide and red-rimmed. "What the hell?"

"It's a long story." I cringed at the explanation about to tumble out. "Maybe sit first?"

"Fuck no." He shuddered from head to toe. "There was something in bed with me."

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Striding past us, Kierce entered the bedroom, gripped the edge of the comforter, and yanked it off.

There, next to the pillow, sprawled Anunit with her little hat knocked askew.

“That...” Harrow scooted closer to me and away from her, “...is an alligator.”

“Yes and no.” I stomped over to the mattress and spoke out loud. “What are you doing in here?”

“I miss that body. It was warm.”

Translating for her was a mistake. I realized that the second the words passed my lips.

“What does she mean she misses that body? Me? She misses me? Why? I’ve never seen that thing in my life.” As if his situation had just registered, he froze on the threshold. “Where am I?” He swung his head toward me. “What the hell is going on?”

For Harrow’s sake, I hoped Jean-Claude had some bourbon left.

The truth of what happened to him wasn’t the kind of story anyone believed sober.

Much to my relief, Harrow was cool about the whole kidnapping/possession thing. He was so quick to be the bigger person and forgive me that I had no choice but to break my own rules and forgive him. I had a problem giving people who hurt my family second chances. I knew holding on to grudges wasn’t healthy, but aside from

running, I didn't have many healthy hobbies, so what was one more?

Alone with Harrow on the gallery overlooking the Quarter, I sipped sweet tea while he chomped through a shrimp po'boy fresh from the corner shop. Had we found ourselves here for any other reason, I would have called the evening peaceful. I might have even let myself enjoy the company. With his mouth full, it was too hard for us to argue.

"I want to call a truce." I watched him for his reaction. "We've both made mistakes, and I doubt we're at the end of them. Our paths keep crossing, so... Yeah. This would be easier if we were friends."

"Okay." He chewed thoughtfully. "Friends."

"Just like that?" I stirred my drink with my straw. "You forgive me?"

"Frankie, I'm tired of blaming you for things outside of your control. I'm tired of getting blamed for them too." His eyes smiled at me when he stole my cup and sucked down half of it. "We live in the same town and have people in common. Like Carter. And Aretha. Friendship would make bumping into one another a lot easier on everyone involved." He stared into the glass, clinking the ice cubes. "I'm more worried about if you can forgive me."

Tempted to ask if Aretha had bumped into him recently, I decided it wasn't my place to pry.

"I'm not the same person I was, and I don't mean to play the death card to death, but I'm literally a different person." A smile twitched in my cheek. "This is the part where I should say that means I don't want to waste my second chance on old grievances or petty blah, blah, blah, but I'm just tired of losing people I care about." I shoved his shoulder. "That apparently includes you."

“As much as I would love to hang around and help out, I didn’t exactly get the time off approved. Carter is covering for me, but I have to head home.” He finished off my drink. “I’ll have 514 resources at my disposal, so if you need anything, text me.”

“I’ll do that.” I watched him as he left to return his dishes, and a sense of contentment blanketed me. He was going to be a part of my life, peripherally, and wiping the slate clean felt good. It felt even better not to be brought up on charges because a goddess used his body like a Swyft. “Kierce.”

I wasn’t sure how long he had been standing there, watching me, or maybe watching over me. I couldn’t say how much of my interaction with Harrow he witnessed, but I didn’t think it had been much. As I sank into my new skin, opening my senses wider, I could feel him on the edge of my consciousness.

“Harrow is leaving?”

“He woke up in a strange city with an alligator in his bed and no memory of how he—or it—got there.”

A chuckle slid past his lips, and that was all the encouragement I required to invite myself to taste them. I rested my palms on his shoulders, lifted onto my toes, and pressed my mouth to his with a happy little hum. As he relaxed into the kiss, gripping my hips and holding me flush against him, I let my thoughts spin out and take my worries with them.

“Frankie.”

The voice at my back wasn’t one I could ignore, not with that somber quality, so I broke away from the stolen moment with Kierce to face Jean-Claude and the reason for his interruption. “What’s wrong?”

“Rollo is...” He dragged a heavy hand down his face. “I found him in his office.” His fingers trembled over his mouth. “Passed out on the floor.”

“What?” I rushed out into the hall. “He was fine a minute ago.”

More like thirty minutes ago. Maybe forty-five. Had it already been an hour?

How long had he lain there before Jean-Claude went to comfort him and discovered him instead?

A shiver tickled my spine as I entered his room, which had been forbidden to me all these years. But he was in no shape to scold me. His head rested on his pillow, and he lay on the mattress like a sleeping prince. With all the gilded accents on his duvet and the gold leaf on the corners of his four-poster bed, the theme was less Sleeping Prince than King Midas.

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“No wonder you didn’t want me to see your room.” I retrieved a lancet from my pocket and pricked my finger. I daubed his forehead with blood then pressed my palm to his skin. “It’s the gaudiest thing I’ve seen in my life. Who has gold slippers? And is that...? No. That’s not a gold chalice.” I thrust my awareness into him, searching every corner. “Do you stir gold flakes in your bedside water pitcher too to make your poop sparkle?”

A heavy hand landed on my shoulder, a silent comfort, as Jean-Claude waited for me to accept what he already knew.

“His soul is gone,” I announced to the rest of the room. “Just like the others.”

* * *

More than anything, Rollo acted as a secretary for Vi. A savage one. For him to have been struck down in his office, when he had been fine earlier, there must be a clue within those four walls. But an hour later, I hadn’t found a single one.

Aside from his water pitcher, there was no food or drink in the room. The glass that matched the set was turned upside down on the same ostentatious serving platter as the pitcher, indicating he hadn’t drunk from it.

None of the tidy papers, calendars, or notes hinted at what happened to him while he no doubt paced and cursed my name. That was how I remembered him spending most of his time while I lived here anyway.

“Whether he registered it or not, he figured out how the others were afflicted.”

“Yeah.” I turned to find Harrow standing in the doorway wearing a severe expression. “Looks that way.”

Too bad we had no clue if what truly caused the affliction was in this office or, by process of elimination, if he encountered it elsewhere while he was out bartering for information from his network of magically inclined neighbors. Other than the tidbits he shared earlier, I couldn’t find a thing about those conversations or who he had them with.

“I can stay if you need help.” He soaked in the potential crime scene. “If I told Chief Leer?—”

“No.” I screwed my eyes shut. “Sorry about biting your head off, but I don’t want him in my business.”

“That’s probably for the best.” He wiped a hand over his mouth. “Okay. Well. I better head out.”

“Tell Carter I said hi.” I hadn’t texted her out of fear she had elected to give Josie the boot on my advice. If that happened, the next boot I saw coming would be the one Josie used to stomp my face in. “I’ll walk you out.”

“That’s fine.” He waved off my offer. “I know my way.”

Still, for the sake of manners, I trailed him out into the hall.

Just in time to spot a shadow wriggle toward his jacket where it hung over the arm of the couch.

“Nope.” I lunged for it, closing my hands over leathery hide. “You’re not sneaking off with him.”

“I would not abandon you, Frankie Talbot.” Anunit nosed his pocket. “I simply wished to give him a token of my regard.”

“I’m not ashamed to admit,” he said, leaning down to my ear, “I would have screamed like a clown jump scare at a horror house if I stuck my hand in my pocket and pulled out that...thing.”

“I like that body very much.” Her beady eyes bored into him. “I may wish to use it again.”

Harrow’s swallow was audible when I passed along her warning, and I chuckled when he took a healthy step back.

“I think she heard you.” I leaned in too. “I would get while the getting’s good if I were you.”

For his sake, I scooped up his jacket and handed it to him. I sat with Anunit, frowning at the glue ring around the crown of her head, while he called for the elevator. I waited until the doors closed behind him to eye her with curiosity. “You gave him your hat?”

“For him to remember me by,” she said slyly, her tail swishing with feline amusement.

“Oh, I don’t think that will be a problem. He’s never going to forget you.” I rubbed her tiny scalp, but the super glue didn’t budge. “Not that I haven’t enjoyed the company, but I have my hands full. Can we start guardian lessons after I figure out how to march the parade of souls back into their bodies?”

“Life will always be complicated for you. It is the way of things.” She climbed onto my thigh. “I will stay. I will help, if I can, but you must open your mind. You cannot

view the world as you have, or you will be as a rabbit fleeing a hawk. To protect your family, Frankie Talbot, you must become the hawk.”

“The best defense is a good offense,” I murmured, turning over her advice.

Footsteps thumped behind me, and Josie leaned over the back of the couch, putting us cheek to cheek. “You and Rollo get along as well as oil and water, but this still has to hurt. Are you doing okay?”

“Okay is relative these days.” I was functioning, and I felt good about that. “How about you?”

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“You’ll figure it out. You always do. I believe in you.”

“I don’t know where you get your faith in me, but I would like to buy some. Preferably in bulk.”

“Mine’s homemade, but I can spot you a jar.” She curled a lock of my hair around her finger. “Pascal and I have a ways to go, but there are no cases of the affliction outside of the Quarter aside from Matty’s and Leyna’s so far.”

“Excellent work.” I pinched her cheek. “I knew I kept you around for a reason.”

“Yeah. To feed you. Not for my secretarial skills.”

“Kierce and I need to head out.” I stood with a grunt, careful to set Anunit on a cushion first. “We have a couple of stops before we stake out Ursulines Avenue at midnight.” I had thought of a few more spirits worth quizzing, if I could find them. “Do you want to come, Anunit?”

With Harrow gone, she had no reason to skulk around the house but no reason to help us either.

“Yes,” she decided and shed her alligator skin, stepping into the room in her breathtaking spirit form.

Hard to believe such a majestic creature could be crammed into that cowgirl catastrophe, but such was the power of the divine.

“Nice.” I had used my last lancet, so I needed to restock. “Let me grab my bag, and then we can go.”

“I’ll start on Rollo’s notes,” Josie said, setting off down the hall. “Pascal can finish up our call list.”

“That would be a huge help.” I followed, turning right two doors before hers. “Thanks.”

Standing in my bedroom, I drew in a long breath, filling my lungs until they ached, reminding myself that even slow progress was progress. We knew more tonight than we had last night, and maybe among Rollo’s notes was a fresh lead we could follow.

A girl could dream.

Thirty minutes until midnight, I was pacing Ursulines Avenue, raking through my brain for anyone else to question since half the spirits I had been searching for were no-shows at their usual haunts, even with Kierce hanging back, and the rest were as baffled by the Midnight Parade’s sudden appearance as me.

And terrified if they ventured too close, it would suck them in and drain them dry too.

About the time I started eyeing the lamppost, tempted to kick out my frustration and probably break a toe, my phone rang. “Hey, Mary.”

“I found a link—maybethelink—between the names on Rollo’s list.”

Slowing to a stop, I held my breath. “I’m listening.”

“He had already verified the victims’ names and their emergency contacts while he was identifying them in case he needed to reach out with future questions or updates.

So, I called down the list of emergency contacts, a few times, which didn't win me any friends, and pushed for new angles." She kept rambling. "Every single one of the victims attended the funeral of Ms. Sugar Brown, which, no offense to the dead, but that has to be a stripper name, right? Anyway, it was held at Lafayette Cemetery No. 2."

Lafayette Cemetery No. 2 had seen better days the last time I visited it, but it was beautiful nonetheless.

As far as I knew, it remained closed to the public for repairs, meaning only those who owned plots could enter. That was good news, if the name was legit and not an alias, because the cemetery records could hold answers for us.

"The name isn't familiar to me, but Vi knows everyone in the Quarter, and she never says no to anyone."

Her deep ties to the community meant she was always going to so-and-so's house or to a party or to a funeral or to a wedding or to a baby shower. She spent a fortune on gifts, but she considered so many of her neighbors as the next best thing to an extended family, she never resented the expense.

"It still doesn't explain how Matty was afflicted," Josie said, "but it's got to mean something."

He was the outlier for sure, him and Leyna, but establishing a link with the other victims was a start.

"Hey, you did good. Don't be so hard on yourself." I clutched the railing until the twisted metal bit into my palms. "We need to find out Sugar Brown's connection to the others." I forced myself to relax my grip. "I can ask Carter or Harrow to run the name, see what they find. They'll have easier access to the cemetery's records too."

“I already asked Carter to do police stuff on Sugar Brown. We should hear back soon.”

That was news to me, but I was glad to hear they were communicating in some form.

“So, you two are talking.” I strained my ears to catch her reaction. “Everything’s okay?”

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Had Carter told her to pack her bags? Or that her bags had been packed?

“Everything is great.” She injected cheer into her voice. “Just peachy.”

The call ended with me convinced everything was not great, and I was staring down the barrel of an ugly breakup that I never should have taken part in. “Sistering is hard.”

“I can only imagine.” Kierce hesitated, proceeding with caution. “Their relationship, or however they want to label it, is theirs to fix or end. You can’t do either for them.”

“You’re right.” I smushed my face into his chest, breathing him in. “I just wish I could help.”

“Just being there helps.” He kissed the top of my head. “Don’t underestimate the small things.”

With those words of wisdom ringing in my ears, and time to kill until midnight, I tipped my head back and savored the not-so-small thing of being able to kiss a man who supported me—goddess-possessed alligators and all.

* * *

“Maringouin.”

Never had I been so grateful to hear the hated nickname as I cut through strutting spirits to reach Rollo. Two women twirled around him, reminding me of the men who

had restrained Vi, but they didn't touch him. Whether the women were other souls chosen for this role or only a manifestation of the enchantment, they had no reason to get handsy with him.

The magic glazing his eyes, forcing him to blink free of its hold, told me he was struggling. But I had anticipated this. Which was why Kierce and I had split up, him seeking out Vi while I tackled Rollo.

That Matty had sunk from our first priority to third made me want to vomit, but I had to be smart. Even if it made me sick. I had to park my heart on the bench and let my brain take the wheel.

A glimpse of him to reassure myself he was still here would have to suffice for now.

"Mamaw is here," he shouted over the heads of everyone between us. "I saw her."

"Kierce is helping Vi," I promised him, "but first you need to tell me what happened to you."

"I was in my office." He didn't put up a fight, which further proved his will was degrading. "I had the..." I waited for him to continue, but he frowned. "I had it in my hand. Something. A glass." A slur smudged his words, and a silly grin wreathed his mouth. "You're beautiful, Frankie-boo. Ever told you that?"

With him losing his faculties, I had no time to waste. I had to attempt an extraction. Now. To do that, I needed him alert. "Vi always said you were mean to me because you have a crush on me."

"Mean to you 'cause I don't like you." His voice turned syrupy. "Doesn't mean I don't got eyes."

“Okay, Romeo, hold that thought.” I walked backward, shifting my palms to his chest, funneling my powers into him the same as I would any spirit I wanted to solidify. “These are starting to sound like deathbed confessions, and now’s not the time for that. Or for finishing your thought.”

A faint resistance when I pressed against him proved I was making headway, but I couldn’t quite get him to a point where I could grip him. Like me, Kierce hadn’t been able to put hands on Matty that first time. I was willing to bet that meant he wouldn’t have much luck with Rollo either.

That left me with one last option, and I prayed she would hear my call for help.

Diving into my consciousness, to the place where her voice rang in my head, I shouted with everything in me. “Anunit.”

For a few seconds, I feared she couldn’t show, that I would have to wait another night for action.

We had so little time before the parade was over, and I hadn’t put eyes on Vi or Matty yet.

Aside from instructing me in my duties, Anunit had shown zero interest in other aspects of my life. Honestly? I had a hunch that she had been chained to her role for so long, she was enjoying an excuse to stretch her legs in the real world. I don’t think she minded putting off my education one bit.

A warm presence brushed against my side, the swish of her feathered tail tickling my calves.

“Help me pull him free.” I slumped with relief to see her. “He’s stuck, and I can’t get a grip on him.”

“This enchantment is divine.”She hummed to herself.“I am not sure we can succeed alone.”

Risking a glance over my shoulder, I spotted the head of the parade dissolving into the night air.

“Just try, okay? Hurry. Please.” I was already losing my tenuous hold. “He won’t last much longer.”

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Heat suffused me, soothing me down to the bone, and a lick of wildness flavored my tongue.

“A soul is an echo of the body it once occupied, a familiar shape. That is all.” Anunit said from within me, her spirit mingling with mine. “You focus too much on what you see. Feel his soul. Feel what you remember of the man he is. Feel what is there.”

Learning from the bruise on my hip, I glanced over my shoulder to check the street behind me.

No parked cars, no gaping potholes, and only the one slight dip near the curb leading into the drain.

Good. No. Great.

The way was clear. I could do this. Maybe without twisting an ankle.

Heart thumping as I faced Rollo again, I allowed my eyes to close. I blocked out the familiar sight of him and focused on the prickling energies I associated with touching a soul. His was more vibrant. Stronger. Because, I realized, he was alive. And to have proof in my hands, not half-baked theories or relative certainties, drove home a truth I had been afraid to believe since setting eyes on the parade.

If Rollo was alive, then so was Matty.

If Rollo could be saved, then so could Matty.

So could Vi.

So could all the other afflicted.

“Gather him into your hands like you would cradle a moth,” Anunit counselled. “Be gentle. Do not crush him.”

There were no words to describe what I did or how I did it. I didn’t understand the mechanics myself. The sensation wasn’t so different from when I reached into a body to snuff out their soul.

Now that I thought about it, that was the only time I had ever held a living person’s essence.

No pressure.

Literally.

One wrong flex, and I would be left with a handful of ashes.

Though, in hindsight, if I had to practice on someone, I wasn’t mad Rollo got the honors.

“What now?” I ignored the sweat pooling in my palms that called me a liar. “Do I carry him out or...?”

“For his sake, I would hold your ground. Imagine him as a rock in a stream. He stands a better chance of survival if the magic swirls around him and washes away rather than you lifting him onto dry ground.”

“Survival?” I fought to prevent my fingers from contracting on reflex. “This could

kill him?”

“Yes.”

“That would have been nice to know ahead of time.”

“Leave him here, and he will die. You might as well attempt to save him.”

Confirmation my brother and Vi would be lost if I didn’t figure this out had me tasting bile, but it was a good first step. I had to believe that. And so, despite our history of animosity, I cradled Rollo with infinite care, throwing my eyes wide open. I couldn’t risk fumbling my grip. Not here at the end. Not with success so close at hand.

“You are doing well,” Anunit praised me. “Hold your focus and brace yourself for the severing.”

The severing did not sound like a good time.

Acid churning up the back of my throat, I planted my feet, barely breathing for what felt like an eternity. Just as I was starting to believe this would work, a cold wind kicked up around my ankles, rising higher. I faltered, stumbling back, panicking as a persistent suction pried at my fingers.

“This isn’t going to work.” I locked my hands like a cage to steady them. “He’s slipping.”

Warmth encased my spine, and Kierce reached around me, cupping my hands in his, and his power sank into my skin. I sagged against him, soaking him in like a sponge, and together we cradled Rollo’s soul until Anunit released a faint purr.

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“I cannot hold this form much longer. I have expended too much energy. I must go.” Her voice softened, and she withdrew from me. “I will return to the body with nice teeth.”

A shiver coasted over my skin as she peeled apart from me, leaving a hollow ache as if the parade had swept away my energy.

“Hold on.” I lurched after her, frantic for her to finish walking me through this. “What do I do now?”

“You must place him where he belongs before the dawn burns away his soul.”

The faint whisper of her voice faded away, and she did too, leaving me protecting a glowing orb leaking blue light into a night that didn’t feel quite as dark as it had been moments ago.

“We have to go.” I jerked my head toward Kierce’s pocket. “Call us a Swyft.”

“All right.” He plugged in the information, shared the make and model of our ride, then brought the phone to his ear. “I’m going to let Jean-Claude know to expect us.”

About to ask him to text Josie an update, I nixed that, knowing Jean-Claude would be on top of it.

“Matty and Vi? Did you see them?”

“No change from last night for Matty, but Vi was more sedate and less talkative.”

Not great news, but also not the worst possibility.

Focus on the positives. I could do that. Sure I could. Maybe. I hoped so.

“Why isn’t he Rollo-shaped?” I peeked between my fingers. “Souls retain the form they recall...”

“Yes.” Kierce picked up on my thoughts. “His memory has been too damaged to retain his Rollo-shape.”

Fifteen excruciating minutes later, Kierce lifted a hand in greeting to the driver of a slowing car like he had been hailing Swyfts all his life. As soon as he got me settled in the backseat, earning us a soft smile from our driver, who must have mistaken the move for chivalry, he climbed in beside me.

Had I not been terrified one wrong move would shatter Rollo like a raw eggshell, sending yolk dripping between my fingers, I would have risked leaning over to kiss Kierce. “I’m glad you’re here with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Happiness lit me up from the inside, and for the first time since Harrow drove an unconscious Matty to the shop, I allowed myself true hope.

Thanks to that quick call, Jean-Claude met us at the door at street level. He let us in, got us upstairs, and did a bang-up job of prepping Rollo’s body for what came next. By the time Vi declared me a graduate from her homeschool for necromancers, he had learned as much about the theory of necromancy as me.

That was why I found Rollo’s body lying on the floor in his room inside a perfect salt circle dotted with the burned-down nubs of candles Jean-Claude had taken from my

bag. And why I was able to step right in with Kierce, who would have to handle my usual part, behind me.

“Light the candles moving widdershins,” I told him. “We need to raise a circle to contain Rollo’s soul.”

A tether remained between his spirit and his body. Otherwise, his body would have stopped breathing, pumping blood to his heart, and all the other things that kept a person alive. I had to hope that conduit was enough for his soul to latch onto and root itself where it belonged.

With deft hands, Kierce lit the candles, singing a hymn under his breath that prickled my skin.

Magic rose around us, doming above us, and sealing us in with Rollo—body and soul.

“Here goes nothing.” I knelt beside him, bracing my wrists on his sternum, holding my cupped hands over his heart. “Let’s hope both halves want to be a whole enough to figure out what comes next.”

The magic I used to reach into people, to rip out their souls, wasn’t gentle. I wasn’t sure it worked in reverse either. We might end up there regardless, with me attempting to reverse-engineer my process, but I would exhaust all other avenues first.

Gently, as though I were releasing a butterfly, I opened my fingers.

The ball of light dripped over my fingertips like melting wax, splashing onto Rollo’s chest.

“That’s good,” I coaxed it, unsure why I was baby-talking his spirit. “Very good.”

Afraid to blink, I waited for the glimmer to soak in. To absorb. To do...something.

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“There’s too much resistance.” Kierce pricked his finger then palmed Rollo’s forehead. “His soul isn’t strong enough to fight through whatever is preventing it from reentering its vessel.”

“Do you think it’s because he’s alive?” I probed the substance on his chest with careful fingers. “But why would that bar his spirit entry when souls who astral project can slide in and out of their bodies without a problem?”

Though Rollo wasn’t as strong as Vi—few practitioners were, honestly—he was a perfectly capable astral projectionist, as he had demonstrated when he appeared to me in my home. His soul should know the mechanics even if it rarely got a chance to experience the process.

“Perhaps the enchantment altered his soul, or his body.” Kierce wiped Rollo’s forehead clean. “One half might no longer recognize the other.”

“The magic is parasitic.” We knew that much thanks to Vi. “As their souls are consumed, they forget who they are, making them more docile and willing to remain trapped, which further degrades them. Are the missing bites really enough to fundamentally alter the core of who they are?”

“Can a person be whole without their memories?”

The question was meant to come off as rhetorical, I was sure, but it lodged in my mind like a splinter.

“The past can drive us,” I said carefully, “but it can also hold us back.”

The dead behaved the same way.

Some souls were tough enough to stick around after death only to erode as years passed without them resolving their unfinished business. Others lacked even that much agency. Residual spirits were a single scene that played out over and over. A visible memory, more or less, that repeated until they ran out of energy and vanished. Forever.

There was no way to guess how long a soul lasted when plugged into a battery like this spell. That it existed at all was an unthinkable crime against the dead.

“Perhaps if we pierce the skin.” Kierce rubbed his jaw. “A small cut would tell us if it’s the right idea.”

“Okay.” Blood was a common spell ingredient, so the idea had merit. “Grab my athame?” I realized my mistake as soon as I said it. “I left the bag in my room.” I noted the thinner consistency of Rollo’s essence and knew there was no going back. “We can’t risk lowering the circle. His soul is too vulnerable. Do you have any ideas?”

“Yes,” he said after a brief hesitation. He folded his fingers into his palm except for one, which curved and blackened into a massive talon that explained how he pricked his finger earlier. “I can do it.”

That was new, but I wasn’t surprised, given his god aspect. “You’re full of cool tricks, you know that?”

“You’re the only one who has ever thought so,” he said, slicing Rollo’s shirt open a few inches below where his soul puddled and then peeling the fabric aside to reveal his bare chest. “I won’t go deep.”

With a light hand, he parted Rollo's skin in a line about six inches long.

Blood welled and spilled down his sides, but he didn't so much as twitch from the pain.

"Here we go." Gently, gently, I smeared his soul like ointment over the cut. "And..."

The bluish glaze didn't sink in or otherwise react upon contact, which set my stomach churning.

As if the heat of my palms were melting it, Rollo's soul liquified the more I handled it.

"Nothing." Kierce beat me to it. "There's still a barrier preventing the two from joining."

Mentally, I took back the petty thought I was happy to experiment on Rollo. I wasn't. Not even a little.

"We have a couple of hours left before dawn, but I don't think his soul will last that long."

A spirit this vulnerable couldn't survive sunrise outside of a host. Not without the enchantment holding it to the earth. I wasn't sure even the box I used to transport Pedro could safely contain him, and I wasn't eager to find out.

"You sound like you have an idea." He waited for me to elaborate. "If you do, you need to act soon."

"You saw what I did to Ankou. Or maybe you didn't. You were in bad shape."

“Yes.” His eyes held the faint glow of pride. “Are you afraid you’ll hurt Rollo?”

“I’ve only ever used that particular power to protect myself. I’m not sure it can be used any other way.”

I killed with it. Plain and simple. It was a defense mechanism the sisters of St. Mary’s had triggered in me when they went after Josie that fateful night. Since I couldn’t see any other use for sticking my hand into a person’s chest, metaphysically, and crushing the spark from their soul, I was hesitant to think that this was a safe use of my talents.

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“You’re stronger now. You’ll have more control.”

Demigoddesshood hadn’t come with an instruction manual any more than necromancy had when I was a kid with powers I hadn’t understood until Vi stepped in to coach me much like Kierce was doing now.

“Yeah. One day I will. Maybe. If I start practicing. Rollo doesn’t have that kind of time.”

Gently, he reinforced a truth I didn’t want to acknowledge. “He doesn’t have time either way, Frankie.”

Hearing it out loud hurt worse than I expected when Rollo and I had been at each other’s throats for years.

“You’ll have to anchor me.” I shook out my hands. “What I do requires me to leave my body.”

Astral projection? Maybe. I wasn’t sure. I hoped this never became routine enough for me to be certain.

“If you’re lost...” he hooked a finger under my chin, “...I will find you.”

Fear had always triggered the out-of-body experience that allowed me to affect other souls. I might have worried I lacked the necessary adrenaline dump to kickstart the process had I not been terrified of what losing Rollo would do to Vi.

With a cold stone lodged in my gut, I placed my palm over Rollo's wound, where the residue of his soul was congealing.

I could do this. I could be careful. I could use my powers for good.

I just had to focus.

Closing my eyes, I sank deep within myself, lowering the barriers that inched up whenever it hit me how much I had changed. I wasn't the same girl who defended Josie from the ravenous claws of the vile creature hunting her.

I was an adult. I was a demigoddess. I was...

...spiraling back into the abyss of those bottomless memories.

"I hear you, little one," a honeyed voice coaxed. "Come out. All will be well. Your sin is already forgiven."

From where I stood in the hall, peering around the corner into the kitchen, I figured Josie was in one of the lower cabinets. That meant I had to lure the sister away. If she caught Josie sneaking food again...

"Sister?" I used my most polite voice and avoided eye contact. "Is something the matter?"

"No, darling child." The sister, dressed in a full nun habit, laced her spindly fingers at the level of her belt. "All is well."

"Do you need help cleaning the chapel?" I kept my head low. "I can get the broom."

"Helpful, aren't you, Mary Frances?" Her hem made no sound against the stone as

she approached me. “You are close to Mary Josephine. I have heard you call her sister. Do you know where I might find her?”

“I haven’t seen her since lunch.”

“I do not enjoy punishing those in my charge.” Her shadow grew taller, leaner. “I am but a caretaker.”

“Yes, Sister.” A tremor shook my voice. “You are merciful.”

Fingers lengthened to needlelike tips. The sister grew until she hunched to avoid a hanging pot rack. Her breath, which had been sweet a minute ago, blew sour across the space between us. Her bones creaked when she moved closer, and her sinew popped as muscle protested the change in her nature.

“Where is Mary Josephine?” She loomed over me, dark and hungry. “I will be lenient if you tell me.”

“I—I—I haven’t seen her s-s-since lunch.”

Hooking a finger under my chin, she wrenched my head up until my nose pointed at the ceiling, forcing me to stare into the empty sockets of her eyes. “You’re lying to me, Mary Frances, and lying is a sin.”

I was screaming before her smile revealed rows of serrated teeth with rotting meat stuck between them.

Terror burned hot in my gut while icy cold spread down my arms into my hands.

And reached.

And reached.

And reached.

“Frankie.” A strong hand clamped on my shoulder. “You’re levitating.”

“Mors tua,” I rasped, throat raw, “vita mea.”

Your death, my life.

“Don’t let your past rule your present.” Gentle fingers slid across my jaw. “You’re safe here, with me.”

Safe.

I wasn’t sure I trusted the word. Or the voice speaking it. But it was a nice voice.

And when soft lips brushed mine, grew firmer, more demanding, I couldn’t help noticing the light.

The soul before me glittered like diamonds, casting rainbows along the backs of my eyes. I reached for it to feel those hard edges. I expected it to be cold, but it was warm. So warm. I luxuriated in the comfort I found there, wanting to snuggle deeper and deeper and?—

A stuttering exhale whistled past my ear, my name a prayer on that agonized breath. “Frankie.”

The brilliant light I had been admiring flickered and twisted, a flame one draft away from extinguishing.

“Kierce.” I ripped away from him, thrusting myself back into my body. “Kierce?”

Sweat plastered his hair to his forehead, but he smiled down at me, trembling, his eyes sterling bright.

“Oh, God, no.” I stared at my hands in horror. “I’m so sorry.” I tucked my arms against my chest to keep them away from him. “I could have killed you.” I couldn’t breathe past the knot in my throat. “I’m?—”

“You did it.” Kierce shackled my wrist. “Look, Frankie.”

All I could see was him. His pallor. His strain. His ache. I couldn’t believe what I had almost done.

“Your hand...was in...my...chest.”

The hoarse voice snapped my attention to Rollo, who blinked like the overhead light blinded him.

“Hey.” I allowed that link to Kierce to calm my frantic heart. “How are you feeling?”

“The fuck you...think...I feel?” His head lolled toward me. “Your...hand...”

“Your soul didn’t want to go back where it came from.” He had inherited the sight from Vi, and like her, he could see my soul when it went wandering. To wake up with

me wrist-deep in him must have been a fright. “We had to take extreme measures.”

As he regained his strength, he lifted his head a fraction, noticing the thin line of blood down his chest. “You cut me open?”

“Again.” I patted his cheek, trying to play it off like I hadn’t been seconds away from shattering us both. “Extreme measures.”

“We should get him into bed.” Kierce scuffed the salt line with the toe of his shoe. “He needs to rest.”

As the circle fell, Rollo’s complexion waned, and it gave me an idea. “Jean-Claude?”

We must have worked on Rollo longer than I realized since Jean-Claude had left to wait with Pedro and Josie in the living room. I recognized the squeak in the old floors as he rose from the couch and hustled down the hall. As soon as he cleared the doorway, he crossed himself and spoke a low prayer in French.

“What can I do?” He hovered on the threshold. “How can I help?”

“We need to move him to the bed, but I want to set a circle around him until we’re sure his soul is stuck tight. Can you and Kierce pull the frame out from the wall? I don’t want to leave any room for mistakes.”

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“No problem.” He lifted the right side like it weighed nothing. “Two feet enough?”

“That’s fine.” I watched as Kierce picked up the left with the same effortlessness. “Thanks.”

After repositioning the eyesore of a bed and sweeping around it, Kierce laid a thick new line of salt.

Between the two of them, they had the whole thing done in under five minutes.

“Scoot aside, cher.” Jean-Claude knelt opposite me, his big joints popping like gunshots. “I’ll get him settled in.”

“I can...do it...myself,” Rollo muttered, already half asleep. “Stop...fussing...over me.”

Until I failed my first attempt at standing, I hadn’t realized that I sat on my legs for so long they had gone numb. I didn’t have time to catch my balance before Kierce scooped me off my feet and retreated to the far corner, clearing a path for Jean-Claude to tuck in Rollo.

“Wait here.” He set me on a decorative stool, backing away with reluctance. “I’ll close the circle.”

“I’ll stay with him.” I rubbed my face, exhaustion setting in, wishing I had a pot of chicory coffee to gulp. “Someone has to reset the circle if he needs to get up and pee or whatever.”

With so many cemeteries nearby, the urge to sneak out and recharge almost overwhelmed me.

“No. I’ll stay with him.” Jean-Claude cut me a scowl. “You’re about to tip over just sitting there.” To forestall any protest, he raised a gnarled hand. “If I need magic help, I’ll ask your magic man.”

A laugh made it halfway up my throat before the room tipped onto its side with a loud thump.

Or maybe that was just my head hitting the floor.

“Are you ever going to wake up?” Cool fingers pried open my right eyelid. “Hello in there.”

“Brat,” I grumbled at Josie, turning on my side in the bed I didn’t remember climbing into this morning. Or had it been last night? I wasn’t sure anymore.

“Suit yourself.” A cold, rough weight hit my chest. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

As I lifted my head to squint at what she had thrown at me, I came face-to-face with...

A single beady, black eye gleaming with malice. White innards spilling out in stringy clumps. Bumpy hide crosshatched with old scars. And teeth.

So many needlelike teeth.

“Oh, God.” I flicked the covers and sent the thing flying, adrenaline spiking my sluggish brain. “What is that?” As it sailed through the air, I scrabbled out of bed, tripping on the rug and smashing my tailbone on the hardwood. “Mary, you better start talking fast.”

The object in question hit the lazy blades of the ceiling fan whirling overhead, bounced off a paddle, and flew into the window. Sparrows did that sometimes at home, but they collided outside. Not inside. What the hell kind of fresh horror had gotten in the house while I was sleeping?

Josie, worthless sister that she was, couldn't breathe through her laughter to answer.

"Are we under attack?" I rubbed my eyes with my fists. "How did it get past the wards?"

But the mystery attacker wasn't done yet. It smacked against the windowsill, flinging itself onto the floor in time for Badb to swoop in through the open door and dive-bomb it with terrifying cries of vengeance.

The spectacle only sent Josie into more hysterics as Badb slung the dark blur by its tail with such force the body went sailing, whacking Josie in the shoulder as the crow horked the rest onto the foot of my bed.

Gingerly, I reached down to poke the corpse, felt a dried line of glue, and spat a curse. "Really?"

The tail, stuffing exploding from the base, belonged to the alligator Anunit had been using as an avatar.

"I found Badb with it earlier." Josie sucked in air between peals. "Shereallyhates that thing."

"It's ruined." I tossed the leathery scrap into my trash can then got an eyeful of what Josie meant. The body, what remained of it, was mostly head and torso. Badb had been pecking it to pieces for a while to have done that much damage. Its costume was long gone. No wonder I hadn't recognized it. "There's no salvaging that."

“Anunit isn’t back yet, according to Kierce, so we’ve got time to figure out something else for her.”

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That would have to rise up the priority list before she selected some random tourist as her lucky host.

“She spent a lot of energy helping me with Rollo.” I jolted as the events of last night crashed around me. “How is he?”

“Awake and talking. Kierce brought him food about an hour ago. He’s starting to get crabby about the whole bedrest thing, but oh well. He’ll get over it. He ought to be grateful for you saving him.”

“It was a group effort.” I dusted off my hands. “I hope Anunit didn’t hurt herself.”

“I doubt she would risk permanent damage when she’s this close to being free. She only has to train you as the new Alcheyvaha guardian before she gets to spend her afterlife in peace with her mate, right?”

“That’s what she told me.” Relief trickled in at the reminder. “I’m sure it’ll be a nice change to rest without fear of being awakened by looters or trespassers.” That joy would now fall to me. “After all this time, she deserves to retire.”

Proud of herself, Badb landed on my foot and preened as if to take credit for saving me.

“I would be more impressed with your heroics if you hadn’t already had it in for the lizard.”

The lack of praise caused her to bristle, and she sailed into the hall.

“She’s going to tell on you.” Josie clucked her tongue. “That bird is a giant tattletale.”

Buoyed by our success with Rollo, I was eager to check on the patient and plan our next steps. Not even a pouty crow could bring down my mood.

“She’s been spoiled rotten.” I got to my feet and pulled on clothes. “She’s not used to sharing Kierce.”

Or being held accountable for her larcenous tendencies.

“She’s a brat. That’s what you mean.” She chuckled at my flinch. “I spoke to Carter earlier.”

How could such a simple sentence fill my heart with such dread?

“Oh?” I crossed my fingers, hoping my name hadn’t been mentioned. “How did it go?”

“Sugar Brown doesn’t exist. Carter says there’s no plot registered to any variation of the name. There were also no funerals registered at Lafayette Cemetery No. 2 during the week the gathering occurred.”

Chewing on my bottom lip, I turned this information over in my head. “Have you told Rollo any of this?”

“Uh, no.” She made a rude noise. “He’s acting like he’s got man flu.”

“He did lose his soul,” I chided her, though he did tend to be a whiner. “I had to cram it back in there.”

As focused as I had been on Kierce, I wasn’t certain how or what I had done to Rollo.

I would have to examine him to be certain before I tried it again. The next time, I didn't want to flail and fumble like I had with him. We wouldn't know if I had done irreparable harm to him for some time yet, but I could comfort myself with the knowledge there hadn't been a better way. Even he had to acknowledge that.

"His Royal Highness can hear that you're awake." Pascal, and I could tell it was him by his inflection, stuck his head in the room. "Put some pep in your step."

With a flap of her wrist toward him, Josie explained, "Kierce swapped out the Suarezes."

"I'll never get used to that." I picked at my thumbnail. "The way he pitches in."

Or the fact our powers were similar enough that we could take on responsibilities for one another.

"He would do anything for you." A sad smile tugged on her lips. "It's cute."

The expression paired with her tone set alarm bells ringing. "What else did you and Carter talk about?"

"The weather." Josie rolled a shoulder like it didn't matter. "That's when you know it's really over."

Determined not to stick my foot in it again, I swore to myself to keep my position neutral.

"I'm sorry." I walked with her down the hall. "I wish things could have been different."

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“Me too.” She massaged the base of her neck. “I’m not in a great place for a relationship anyway.”

Armie had dealt her pride and self-esteem a devastating blow. But, luckily, she hadn’t loved him as more than a friend in a long time. If she ever had seen him as more. With Josie, it was hard to say. She loved falling in love, the rush and excitement of it, but staying that way hadn’t happened yet.

Had Carter caved to her charms sooner, or put her foot down harder, their situationship might have already fizzled out. As dead set as Carter was against pursuing Josie, we would never know either way.

As we entered Rollo’s bedroom, Kierce rose from a chair and Jean-Claude straightened from his lean.

“You all right?” The good doctor swept his gaze over me, a pinch in his lips. “Need anything?”

“She needs to get me out of this damn circle.” Rollo tossed his sheets aside. “I have business to attend to, and I can’t do it from this bed.” He folded his arms over his chest. “I’m fully recovered.”

Judging by the flush staining his cheeks, he was either feverish or mortified I had seen his inner sanctum. Gaudy as his wannabe Louis XIV decor was, I couldn’t say I blamed him for locking and bolting his door.

“What business do you have that’s more important than telling us everything that

happened to you?” I let him read in my expression that I was fine with leaving him in there until he gave us the details. “You survived the Midnight Parade. Now we need you to tell us how you ended up there so we can get the others out.”

With him, the enchantment hadn’t sunk its claws too deep, and it had still been a near thing.

For Vi, and especially Matty, we needed a clearer idea of how it was happening in order to stop it.

“I don’t recall.” His legs dangling from his tall bed reminded me of when he was a gangly youth, a few years younger than me, sitting on the stools where we took our lessons. “I was in my office. I had an invoice in my hand. Then I was here, waking up in bed.”

No mention of the glass he claimed to have been holding when I found him in the parade, but we hadn’t found any evidence he had drank from his, so I let it go.

“He remembered more, earlier.” Kierce came to stand beside me. “I did my best to get as much information as possible, but either the enchantment or the trauma has wiped the details from his memory.”

Ah. That would explain it. No memory, no glass.

“Do you think it’s safe to let him out?” I lamented the loss of my earlier hope, even though I had known it was a long shot. “I don’t want his soul to wander back to the parade.”

“I’m tired of being cooped up in my room,” Rollo growled, “and stared at like a tiger in a cage.”

“Oh, please.” Josie snickered at his harrumphing. “You’re a monkey at best.”

With the mood he was in, I might as well stick to my guns and keep him where I could question him. “What do you know about a funeral Vi attended prior to her illness?”

“She didn’t attend a funeral.” He quirked a brow. “She did ask for fifty thousand in cash, though.”

“Incash?” Josie’s eyes bulged out of her head. “Who does that?”

“Vi does.” I padded closer to Rollo. “Every time she attends an auction.” I dared to let hope pay me another visit, but I didn’t let it take its shoes off at the door. “Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

“Jean-Claude gave you my list. I been hitting the streets to find anyone who might have been there, who might have seen Mamaw, but everyone I knew to try had already come down with the affliction.”

“So, the funeral wasn’t a funeral.” Josie vibrated with excitement. “It was an auction.” She scrunched up her face. “The attendees must have shared a cover story with their families in case of an emergency.”

“Most people involved in auctions keep their loved ones as far from the action as possible.” Even telling them about the “funeral” and its location, barring any last-minute tweaks, was a risk. “So, that tracks.”

“I wasn’t sitting on the evidence for funsies. I wanted to be certain before involving more people who’ll figure out Mamaw is...” he set his jaw, “...not well. With her enemies on the spirit plane, we can’t afford to let folks know her body is sitting empty and ripe for the plucking.”

“I understand.” I wasn’t happy about it, but I got it. “Do you know if she bought anything?”

A handy relic or artifact that we could smash and break the curse along with it would be nice.

“She didn’t say.” He cut me a look that dared me to think less of him. “You know how she gets when she wants to protect us. Like you, I figured the money was for an auction, but she didn’t share any details.”

“As dangerous as it is to carry that much cash,” Josie asked, “and she didn’t give you a heads-up?”

“That’s not how it works,cher.” He gentled his voice for her. “Locations aren’t static. They can shift minutes beforehand if the address is compromised by uninvited guests.” His lips twitched once before he remembered to scowl. “They aren’t exactly legal, yeah?”

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Josie's confusion made sense, if you hadn't attended one of the pop-up auctions held across the city to move black market items. Vi was a regular attendee. She bought, sold, and traded minor artifacts too. Mostly, she was searching for relics that once belonged to her family. Heirlooms sold off in times of hardship. That kind of thing. But she also purchased items to help with her business, to aid specific clients, and as investment pieces.

"Jean-Claude." I watched him stiffen at the sound of his name. "Did she mention anything to you?"

"Vi don't involve me in her business." He pushed out a sigh. "You know that."

Between the two of them, they had an unspoken agreement not to meddle. But they both had keen eyes and sharp ears, and sometimes they overheard tidbits. I should know, seeing as how I had stumbled into a thing or two accidentally over the years.

"How are you so familiar with them," Kierce rumbled beside me, "when the others aren't?"

"I attended several as part of my training." I couldn't bear for him to think badly of Vi when it had been my idea. "I wanted to get a feel for how they work. There are auctions just like it across the southeast. There's even one in Savannah." As I said it, I wondered if I should have taken a wider view on this angle. "But Matty would never attend. He doesn't have a reason to, and he wouldn't know how to go about getting an invite anyway."

The big reason I hit those auctions was I wanted options. I wasn't above stealing to

provide for my family. I had done it as a kid on the streets. But I had felt bad for taking from people who couldn't afford it. The idea of snatching artifacts from those who could write off the loss while gaining a foothold in the trade in the process? That had appealed to me.

Until I witnessed, at an auction no less, what happened if you got caught selling stolen items. It had changed my mindquick. I hadn't thought about them in years. Not since I left New Orleans for good. Now I was kicking myself for not considering them as a possible connection sooner.

"Maybe I should go home and dig into the Savannah auction scene, just to be sure that Leyna didn't get our brother mixed up in anything dangerous." Josie drummed her fingers on her arm. "Here, I'm stuck on the sidelines, and it's driving me crazy. I could conduct interviews in person at home." Her tone grew bleak. "But I guess Carter could do that without me." She dropped her arms. "I just want to help more. Most of the city's plants are isolated in containers, and that keeps them out of touch with the earth. That angle hasn't given me a single lead, and I feel so useless dialing numbers and taking notes."

"You got us the funeral link, which led us to the auction." I tapped her hand. "That's huge."

"You would have found it eventually."

"Right now, every second is precious. You got him more time. That matters. Youmatter."

"Fine." She ducked her head to hide her flushed cheeks. "I'll stay."

"Good." I grinned at her. "I'm glad." I glanced around. "Where did Pascal get to anyway?"

“In here,” he called from down the hall.

“He’s in the kitchen,” Jean-Claude explained. “He’s baking us a tres leches cake as a treat.”

“The mood doesn’t strike him often,” I said, patting my belly, “but he’s an incredible baker.”

When he heard about this, Paco would be kicking himself for missing out on his favorite dessert.

“Maybe by the time he’s finished icing it,” Rollo grumbled, “I’ll be released from house arrest.”

“That’s not a bad idea, crybaby. I’ll let you go, but you must stay in the building. That way, if your soul comes loose, the wards will contain it.” The enchantment had punched a hole through them to steal his soul and Vi’s, but now the only threat should be...well...leakage. “Can you keep an eye on him, Jean-Claude?”

“You think I’m leaving before I’ve had cake?” He eyed me like I was crazy, but I saw through his bluffing. “I’ll be right here.”

“Then while you play nurse, and Josie makes her calls, Kierce and I will see if we can get lucky.”

I knew it was the wrong thing to say as soon as the words exited my mouth.

“Ooh.” Josie fluttered her lashes. “Do tell.”

Sadly, between the dying, the kidnapping, and the soul-snatching, Kierce and I hadn’t advanced much in that department. As often as gods got it on in mythology, their

lives were either less chaotic than mine, or I was doing this demigoddess thing wrong. “Not that kind of lucky, pervert.”

With assignments passed out for the night, Kierce and I went to the crypt to check in with Pedro, whose absence from Bonaventure appeared to weigh on him more with each passing day.

“Pascal tells me there were side effects that first night that you maybedidn’t share with me.”

“You’re under enough strain.” He shook his head. “You didn’t need me adding more to it.”

“You’re family, Pedro, and that means we don’t take unnecessary risks with your health.” I made a vague rolling gesture with my hand. “Or the spiritual equivalent.” I pegged him with a stern glare. “Give me the rundown.”

“There’s not much to tell,” he said sheepishly. “I wasn’t sure, at first, if it was the effort of spending so much time possessing Matty since he became afflicted or if it was because Pascal and I are now splitting twelve-hour shifts. Those things make me tired, yes, but I realized, after the fact, it was more than that.”

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“Do you feel like the parade was trying to suck you in?”

“I didn’t feel it when it happened.” He shifted his focus inward. “I think, allowing Matty to pass through me during the parade, either because I was in his body or because I am a spirit myself, the magic sipped on my energies. Not much. Not enough for me to feel the lack. Until I relinquished Matty for the night.”

“Then that settles it. You’re not going anywhere near the parade again.”

A theory had been tickling the back of my mind that could explain why the souls had been left with a thin tether to their bodies rather than the magic harvesting the souls the moment the affliction took hold. What if that bond made the souls last longer?

Biofeedback from the bodies, even across state lines, might be enough to boost the spirits’ energy. The stronger the souls, the longer they could be fed on. Having Matty’s body in the same area as his soul might very well have caused the parade energies to recognize him and take a bite out of Pedro.

“I understand,mija.” His gentle expression eased into relaxed lines. “Are you any closer to retrieving Matty?”

“I’m not sure.” I leaned against the wall, the cold seeping through my shirt into my shoulder. “I thought Rollo would have answers for us, but he’s losing his memory. Kierce had the presence of mind to question him before he forgot everything, but he would have already told me if there was anything of consequence.” I glanced around the crypt, which was nice but not as nice as home cooking. “Why don’t you head upstairs with the others? You don’t have to hang out down here alone.”

“The quiet is nice.” He notched up his chin. “Bonaventure is home, but it’s busy. This is...peaceful. I could do with some peace right about now.”

“I’ll check in when I get back then.” I focused on his arm so I could squeeze it, worried he was more exhausted than he was letting on. “If nothing else, I can let you and Pascal swap out long enough for you to eat a slice of tres leches cake.”

“I’d like that.” His eyes grew misty. “He uses our mother’s recipe.”

They had told me that before, but I nodded like it was the first time I was hearing it. There was power in memories. Speaking of the things we loved strengthened them in our minds. Sharing our stories helped to hold on to precious details we didn’t want to forget. Fond repetition helped the past live on.

Out on the street, I crossed the road then turned back to gaze at Vi’s house as Kierce caught up to me.

“I don’t believe this is simply an enchantment.” Kierce shifted so our shoulders brushed together. “There’s another component. A cursed object perhaps. Even that seems insufficient.” His fingers threaded through mine. “I don’t understand how the effect is so widespread.” He cut his eyes toward me. “I haven’t frequented many auctions, but none of them allowed the items to be touched except by staff and the buyer.”

“The risk of damage to the original or switching it out with a forgery is too great,” I agreed with him. “But if it is a cursed object, then maybe we should consider what it’s purported to do.” Original intent could be twisted in the wrong hands until that perversion of purpose became an object’s default. “We know it feeds on souls, but to what end?” I picked my brain for off-the-wall ideas. “A cheese knife that severs souls from their bodies? A pen that writes the names of the damned? A sandwich bag that seals in your last breath?”

A faint smile tickled Kierce's lips as he listened to my list grow more deranged, but then he surprised me by adding one of his own. "A toothpick that pierces souls as well as olives?"

"Olivethat one," I said, snickering at my pun, and because he was too polite not to, he laughed with me.

Armed with the only solid lead we had left, that the afflicted had congregated at Lafayette Cemetery No. 2, Kierce and I caught a Swyft to Washington Avenue. He had warmed up fast to using the rideshare app as our primary mode of transportation, probably because it didn't require him to sit behind a wheel.

Five minutes later, we climbed in an SUV, and fifteen minutes after that, we stepped out to a party at St. Joseph Cemetery. Most of New Orleans, even after death, loved a reason to put on the dog.

Since St. Joseph's was still open to the public, it made for a less conspicuous drop-off point, and it was only a block away from our actual destination.

"We should get dinner after we finish here." Kierce trailed his fingers down the back of my arm. "You're not eating enough. Sweets don't count. You don't have to starve yourself until we get Matty back."

"Hmm? Yeah. Dinner." I examined the street, searching for any spirits I knew. "That could be nice."

His huff of a laugh promised I hadn't fooled him with my distracted response.

"Do you think Anunit is okay?" I tensed like she might prowl out of the shadows after hearing her name. "She was pretty burned out from helping."

“As the spirit of a divine being, I believe she would have retreated to one of the cemeteries to rest.”

“She commandeered Harrow to get to New Orleans.” Her travel range must not be great without a body to ride in. But that couldn’t be right. She zipped straight to me when I was swept away to Dis Pater’s house. Why would coming to New Orleans be any different? No. There must be another reason why she decided to borrow him. “If she doesn’t return to Vi’s soon, we’ll have to hunt her down.”

We couldn’t risk leaving her here, or she might kidnap some other poor soul and wear them home.

“We could ask Pascal to make inquiries, but we don’t want to call attention to her while she’s weak.”

“You’re right.” I pushed those concerns aside for the time being. “That’s a worry for another day.”

At Lafayette Cemetery No. 2, we climbed the fence and landed with a fresh purpose in the middle of what was clearly a rivalry between the two cemeteries to see which one could party the hardest.

As far as afterlives went, hedonism wasn’t a bad way to spend one.

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“Divide and conquer?” I noticed a few spirits shying away from Kierce and knew we had to be cautious. “You can take the left, and I’ll take the right.”

A long caw rent the air, comforting me that Badb was in the skies watching over us.

Kierce must have told her where to meet us, since I hadn’t noticed her trailing us earlier.

With more confidence than I felt, I peeled off to the right in search of spirits eager to chat.

“You’re a neck-romancer,” a dark-eyed girl asked, hiding behind a tree. “You romance ghosts, right?”

“Um.” The kid might have been eight or nine, and her clothes placed her death in the eighties. “I’m more of a neck-friendancer.” I rubbed a finger between my eyes. “I’m friends with ghosts. That’s what I meant to say. I have a boyfriend. Who’s alive.” As far as I could tell. “So. Hi. I’m Frankie. Nice to meet you.”

“With lines like that, I believe you.” She burst into bubbling giggles. “I’m Tina.” She craned her slim neck, which seemed longer than it had been a minute ago. “What brings you to the cemetery? Are you looking for someone?”

“I have a few questions for anyone who might have seen or heard anything about a recent auction.”

Recentkept the time frame vague enough I could hope a spirit would remember, but it

was a crapshoot.

“Those happen all the time.” She teased her hair-sprayed bangs to even greater heights. “You’ll have to be more specific.” She shook glitter off her fishnet-gloved hand. “Ghosts aren’t great with time anyway.”

A niggle in the back of my mind prompted me to pay closer attention.

I could have sworn she was younger than ten when she made the neck-romancer comment, but her face seemed thinner than when I had first noticed her. Up close, she also appeared taller. Almost like she was aging in front of me. Her self-awareness struck me as peculiar too.

Most ghosts had a loose grip on time made worse by the fact they didn’t realize how fast it slipped past them, but she was aware.

And the longer we talked, the more her speech and posture altered with subtle but visible tweaks.

“You’re not a spirit,” I said, taking a shot in the dark.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t bumped into one of my kind yet.” She laughed, delighted. “Am I your first?”

Definitely maturing before my eyes, but I wasn’t sure how she managed the trick. Spirits could alter their appearances, but to change so much? Had she been playing at being a kid and was older? I could see her using that trick to attract prey...

Oh.

Crap.

She lowered part of her glamour, revealing green slitted cat eyes, which she winked at me.

“You’re a nekomata.” I jolted at the realization. “Definitely my first.”

Nekomata were cats who gained the ability to shapeshift into humans and could then feast on their souls. Few cats achieved what was, for them, a sort of divinity. Parasitic though it may be.

“I’m honored then.” Her smile grew more pointed with needlelike teeth. “Hunting is good here, so I’m always around. Funerals are a particular draw, and auctions aren’t so bad either.”

“What do you know about the last auction?”

“Offer me a good deal—” she flexed her fingers, and tiny claws pierced their tips, “—and I’ll tell you.”

This was better news than I could have hoped for, in the sense she would know dates and times. Better than a spirit anyway. Which, honestly, might not be saying much. Still. It was worth a try. If I couldn’t get information out of her, there was an entire cemetery full of potential witnesses to canvass.

Carter would have been proud. I had almost sounded like a professional investigator there for a minute.

“What kind of deal?”

The cool voice washed over my shoulder as Kierce stepped up beside me, and I said, “Hi, honey.”

A faint stain painted his cheeks at the endearment, tempting me to tease him more often. “Hello.”

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“Huh.” The cat woman tilted her head. “What brings a god to my cemetery?”

Odd how she couldn’t quite put her finger on what I was, or he was, but maybe it was a difference in her perception along the lines of a cat may look at a king. Then again, lots of folks mistook us for gods when we weren’t exactly. Probably I was thinking too hard. “What could tempt you to answer our questions?”

“Your souls?” A wicked smile spread across her rosy cheeks. “Just kidding.” She tapped a finger against her chin with a low hum. “How about this? Agree to deliver fifty pounds of dry cat food a month to this address for the next year. That would satisfy my requirements.”

Hesitant to question our luck, I failed as curiosity won out. “I thought nekomata only ate souls.”

“Oh, it’s not for me.” She laughed at my expression. “It’s for the strays in the city. I feed them.”

“That’s kind of you.” Kierce glanced overhead as Badb sailed past. “We accept your bargain.”

Curious what put the crinkle in his brow, I decided it was just Badb being Badb when it came to cats.

Lucky for us, no one else could speak to her. As long as she kept to the skies, we might pull this off.

“Excellent.” She hopped onto the nearest bench and swung her legs. “Then ask away.”

When Kierce remained silent, I took the hint. “Does the name Sugar Brown mean anything to you?”

“That was the password for the last auction.”

“Ah.” A beat of excitement pounded in my chest. “Do you recall what items were on offer?”

“Tons of trinkets.” She lifted a narrow shoulder. “Most of it junk. Some of it legit.”

“Nothing stood out to you?” I waited until she shook her head to ask, “What was the hook?”

Regardless of the quality of the rest of the items, there was always one legitimate piece meant to snare the attention of serious collectors with seriously deep pockets.

“The finger bone of some saint or other. It was supposed to grant its owner immortality.”

That wasn’t the type of object Vi would want for herself, or as an investment piece, so it must not have been the draw. Which meant we needed to learn all we could, including who had won what, just in case a purchased item held the key to disbanding the parade.

“Can you be more specific?” Kierce shifted his weight. “The bones of saints are sold the world over.”

He wasn’t wrong, but it didn’t make it right that people got chopped up for parts like

stolen cars.

“They all sound the same to me.” The nekomata twitched her lips in a smile. “I do remember the name of the guy who won. Hard to forget. It appealed to the feline in me. Kitt Gato.”

Kitt Gato.

The crime-solving cat who belonged to the titular character in Dis Pater’s cozy mystery series.

A roaring filled my ears as implications tumbled through my mind, deafening me to my surroundings.

Until the screams began.

Spirits begged me, pleaded with me, cursed me. Their grasping fingers sank into my flesh, digging at me. I couldn’t shake them off, couldn’t block them out. They clamored for my attention, tunneling my vision until their spectral hands were all I could see.

“Enough.”

Kierce spoke the word like a promise of violence, and the dead cowered from him in fear.

“Thanks.” As hearing and sight returned to me, I bent over, bracing my hands on my knees. “Haven’t had one of those in a minute.”

The fits were less common now than when I was alive, but Kierce had warned me I couldn’t master them until I figured out the root cause: what the dead wanted from

me.

“Breathe through it.” He stroked a hand down my back. “It’s all right.”

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“Do you have seizures or something?” The nekomata wrinkled her nose. “That can’t be good for you.”

Kierce and I exchanged a puzzled glance, but it was clear she hadn’t heard the commotion.

Once I caught my breath, I asked, “Can you see spirits?”

The heavy plastic bangles on her wrists clanked together as she toyed with a bit of frizzy hair. “Yes.”

I had my doubts—there were definite gaps in her perception—but I only needed her help figuring out what happened here. And now I knew enough about that I considered her side of the bargain fulfilled.

“We appreciate your help.” Kierce tucked me under his arm, helping me support myself, or maybe he wanted to keep me stuck to him so I couldn’t indulge in the temptation of grave-dirt uppers on my way out. “You’ll receive your first shipment on Monday.”

With a hop, she hit the ground, her form compacting into a calico cat that sashayed away, tail held high.

After she was out of sight, Kierce helped me to the stone bench she had vacated.

“Do you think we can trust her?” I was grateful for a place to sit. “I get the feeling she was lying. Not about everything, but here and there. For one thing, I don’t think

she can see spirits.”

“I’m not sure.” He tilted his head in a birdlike way. “Her perception is different than ours, for certain.”

“Too bad Anunit isn’t here. She could confirm whether it’s a divine animal trait. That’s what nekomata are, right? Felines touched by divinity?”

“Nekomata can be created by something as simple as a god stroking a hand down a beloved cat’s back.”

“Ah.” I tried picturing Buttons, Dis Pater’s beloved pet, as a cat god but couldn’t. “So, the divine touch can be literal.”

A loud squawk alerted us to an incoming messenger. Or, based on how she cuddled Kierce after landing on his shoulder, maybe she was just jealous and wanted pets. With Badb, I had given up predicting her motives.

Especially since she and Kierce could communicate while she was in the air, making landing for updates moot.

“She says there are spirits in a mausoleum at the rear of the property worth talking to before we go.”

“Okay.” I pushed to my feet. “Let’s check them out.”

“Are you up for it?” Concern sat heavy in his voice, but we couldn’t risk talking about it here. Dis Pater could have ears everywhere. Though, I suppose, Kierce counted in that number too. An unsettling reminder I could have done without. “I could go if you need to rest.”

“No rest for the weary.” I offered him a hand up, smiling when he put no weight behind his pull as he stood. “We need answers. Preferably before midnight. I want to try our luck extracting Vi tonight.”

“All right.” He jerked his chin at Badb, who nodded then flew away. “She’ll guide us.”

A few rows away, we came across a mausoleum stacked nine high and nine wide with vaults. Before health and life insurance gained popularity, it was common practice to belong to a benevolent society that provided members’ families with cash for funeral expenses and resting places upon their deaths. Badb landed on the cross topping this battered example of a society tomb, and her flight earned us the attention of four toughs who looked like they ate small children rolled into their breakfast burritos. Or had, when they were alive.

Prickly magic radiated off the marble into the surrounding air, brushing against us as we drew closer. The steady pulse of it convinced me the structure had been warded recently. Perhaps in the last week. That must have been what caught Badb’s attention.

The musclebound spirits, oddly enough, exuded similar energy signatures.

“Keep moving, lady.” Tough One cracked his knuckles. “This ain’t no sightseeing tour.”

“You heard him.” Tough Two elbowed his friend. “Feel free to tip your guide, though.”

“How about you lift that shirt?” Tough Three suggested. “I got some beads for you, if you do.”

Faster than he could smirk to his buddies, Kierce palmed Three’s throat and squeezed

until the spirit's eyes bulged in shock. Souls got used to the idea they were untouchable by the living. Kierce was simply reminding him he wasn't as impervious as he thought. "What are you guarding?"

"You can't just waltz in here and—Gack." Tough Four dangled, his feet scrabbling above the dirt, while Kierce held him aloft by his collar. "Put...me...down."

"The thing is, fellas, my boyfriend takes offense to perverts asking his girlfriend to flash them." I pretended to sympathize. "You guys don't strike me as the kind of men who are hired for their brains, so I'll point out what you should have noticed from the start. We're gods."

Okay, fine. So, I spent a lot of time telling people I wasn't a god and neither was he. But these toughs had no clue what we were, or they would have hesitated. Maybe not dropped their routine, since I was sure it had proven effective in the past, but hit pause for a second or two.

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“That’s what that shiny thing means?” One looked taken aback. “I thought it was a costume.”

“You get a lot of people like us in costume—” I cut myself off, remembering where we were and how often masquerades were held in the city. “The point is, we can see you, hear you, and punt your asses into the great beyond if you don’t cooperate.”

“Chill, man.” Two shook out his shoulders, glaring at Kierce. “Ain’t no need for violence.”

“Let’s talk,” Three agreed, like they hadn’t been the ones who started it, “like civilized people.”

With that, Kierce released them, but he stood close enough his threat never wavered.

Happy they saw reason so quickly, I pressed, “What are you guarding?”

“Mumbo jumbo that didn’t move in the last auction.” One knocked against the nearest vault. “Leftover junk is always sold at cost to a dealer. He’s coming through to pick it up tomorrow or the next night.”

That was one way to keep inventory fresh, but trusting spirits to deliver was risky. “Who’s the dealer?”

“Dunno.” Three shrugged his beefy shoulders. “Boss don’t like it when we ask questions.”

Picking up where I left off, Kierce took a menacing step closer. “Who is your boss?”

“Desmond Patel.” One flinched when Kierce’s attention fell on him. “He writes them children’s books.”

Desmond Patel? Dis Pater’s pen name? That was nearly as bad as using Kitt Gato as an alias.

Either this was a spectacular frame job, or Dis Pater wanted to get caught.

But caught doing what, exactly?

“Um.” A laugh got trapped in my throat. “I think you mean cozy mysteries.”

“They got kitties on the cover,” Four argued. “They must be for little kids.”

“Sure. Fine. Doesn’t matter.” Dis Pater’s branding choices weren’t our problem. “Do you remember the last auction?”

“Yeah.” One tapped the side of his head. “We gotta have sharp memories to do our job, don’t we?”

Now that was interesting, but it did make sense. I wasn’t sure how you could grant a soul the ability to perceive time without driving them insane in the long run, but Dis Pater wouldn’t be concerned with any fallout over his gifts, and this group wasn’t quick enough to fear what that type of awareness might do to them as decades slipped past. Perhaps that explained why their energy signatures mirrored the vault.

Thanks to the nekomata, I already had an idea, but I asked them anyway in the hope they could offer more insight. “What was the big-ticket item?”

“A finger bone.” Two shuddered. “Came from a saint or something.”

“But it was cursed.” Three tried to cross himself, but it looked more like a square to me. “Nasty thing.”

Plenty of religious icons ended up cursed from a misuse of their powers, so that didn’t surprise me. “What kind of curse?”

“Dunno,” One said, checking with the others, who had no clue either.

“Walk me through it.” I rolled my wrist in a circular motion. “What, exactly, did you all do that night?”

“We handle security for events the boss attends,” Two explained, pensive. “We protect his interests.”

“How does that work?” I didn’t want to come off as rude, but it was a valid question. “You’re all...”

Invisible to most. Intangible too. Not a great combo for deterrents.

“He makes us so we can touch people. And things. That’s how he pays us.” One slid a hand through his hair. “We can even eat if we want, but the food don’t taste like nothing.”

“That’s right.” Four snapped his fingers. “The boss wanted help with refreshments this time. Not our job, but sure. Whatever. He told us to make sure everyone had a drink in their hand for some toast or another.”

Everyone had a drink in their hand.

The toast almost guaranteed even the teetotalers sipped once for show.

Could the answer be that simple?

Hope thumping in my chest, I pressed for more details. “What kind of refreshments?”

“Boss had lemonade brought in from some fancy-pants restaurant. Real fine stuff. Barrels of it.” Two wiped a hand over his mouth. “Then he put the finger in the lemonade. Left it in each barrel for a minute or two, gave it a stir, then resealed them.”

“It was a bone.” Three frowned at Two’s obvious distaste. “Not like it was fresh with blood or tendons or nothing.”

“Okay.” I was grossed out, but I had heard of worse. “Do you know why?”

“Yeah.” Four made it seem obvious. “He always does a demo for the spendy ones.”

Providence was required as well as proof the objects did as they were meant to, but it also depended on how demonstrable their effect was. “What was the demonstration?”

“The bone makes its owner live forever,” Three stated, making out like that was any kind of answer.

“What happened,” I said slowly, hoping for clarity, “to everyone who drank the

lemonade?”

“Nothing.” Three eyed me funny. “They drank it and went home.”

They drank it, went home, and later—I was willing to bet—every single one of them lost their soul.

The bizarre parade was a manifestation of the people ensnared at the auction. I had no idea whether Dis Pater had dreamed it up or if its form was linked to the saint’s identity. That made more sense, now that I thought about it.

Vi wasn’t much interested in bones, but if this one had belonged to a local priest or priestess? That changed things. I could see her wanting to ensure the remains were returned to their family. That was the only lure I could imagine hooking her into a bidding war, and she had definitely come to play with fifty thousand as a deposit.

Using a proxy—Kitt Gato—to place bids on his behalf was the only way Dis Pater, overseeing the auction as Desmond Patel, could have sold an item and then won it back with no one the wiser.

But if Dis Pater was the host...and also the winner...then he must be the one reaping the benefits.

Did that mean the whole auction was a setup from start to finish, meant to lure Vi out in the open?

The way Dis Pater was tossing his aliases around like confetti, he didn’t care if I came looking for him.

No.

With his choice of targets and location, I was starting to believe that was exactly what he—or anyone who might want me to believe it was Dis Pater—hoped I would do.

“Thanks for your help,” I told the spirits then locked gazes with Kierce. “We’re done here.”

The souls heaved sighs of relief they didn’t need as we turned to go.

With time to kill, I guided Kierce to a nearby oyster house where we could refuel before midnight.

And hash out reasons why Dis Pater, à la Desmond Patel, might be gunning for my family.

Kierce and I were the only ones on the back patio at the oyster house. Not surprising, given the hour. He was working his way through a platter of smoked oysters served on a bed of crushed ice with fresh lemon wedges and a rich mignonette sauce on the side while I polished off a bowl of catfish courtbouillon.

Until I shook hot sauce over the oysters, I don’t think it had ever occurred to him to try it. His hum of approval made me smile. New Orleans wasn’t my hometown, but it was a second home to me. Food was iffy for Kierce, and it pleased me to see him savor a meal instead of simply devouring it.

His enjoyment of the oysters from the restaurant near Café du Monde had inspired me to have him taste slight variations on a new favorite menu item, but the distraction only lasted for so long.

All signs pointed toward Dis Pater being the god behind the Midnight Parade.

Had those signs been planted by someone else, or had they been meant as a challenge

to me?

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With no clue as to who else could be gunning for me, I elected to focus on the easy target.

“What are the odds Dis Pater rummaged through his closet for this relic after I pissed him off?”

The saint bone hadn't changed hands, so he must have been saving it for a rainy day.

Too bad I hadn't checked the forecast before I smarted off to him about my new guardian role.

Based on the degree of decline in Matty's cognitive function, he was among the first victims if not victim zero. Which meant Dis Pater must have gone out of his way to expose my brother to contaminated food or drink in Thunderbolt slightly before or simultaneously as the outbreak spread through New Orleans. His friend, Leyna, must have been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Had he known I had connections to the city, or had the bone dictated the secondary location? I could see it going either way, but the existence of the toughs indicated auctions were a regular side gig for the god to rake in money or power or both.

As Vi had taught me, if you had arcane trinkets to unload, you couldn't find more eager bidders than in New Orleans.

Dis Pater struck me as petty, but would he go through that much trouble just to put me in my place?

Considering he killed me out of curiosity, yeah. I could see him deciding I had stolen the Alcheyvaha from him, so he would take items of equal value from me. I just didn't see why the burial grounds mattered so much to him.

I had taken a job off his hands. I was freeing up more of his time to write. As much as he harped on deadlines and bills, he ought to be grateful.

“The only documented cases are in the Savannah and New Orleans areas, and with both Matty and Vi afflicted, I'm inclined to agree this is a punishment.”

Heart in my throat, I asked, “I can't count on you if I have to go up against Dis Pater, can I?”

“He's my master,” he said simply.

Kierce mashed his lips into a hard line, promising he would fight every step of the way, but until I found a way to free him from Dis Pater—and I hadn't begun to look—we might find ourselves on different sides of a fight neither of us wanted.

Already I was making contingency plans that didn't rely on his help, knowing what it would cost me to shut him out. But I refused to pay with the souls of innocents, even if it got my heart banged up in the process. “Do you think your bond to Dis Pater is what tipped the scale with Rollo?”

Until Kierce pitched in, Anunit and I had been struggling in vain to cut the final cord binding Rollo.

“I don't think so, or I would have had more luck with Matty that first night. Rollo hadn't been part of the parade for long. He was more lucid than the others. There was more to grip.”

“If we can’t pry Vi and Matty out, if they’re too far gone, I’ll have to visit Dis Pater and bargain with him for the finger bone. Destroying it might be the only way to free Matty and Vi, and everyone else.”

“I pray it doesn’t come to that.”

“Me too.”

* * *

The Midnight Parade could have been a movie projection the way its revelers never missed a beat.

Of all the choice locations in the Quarter, I wondered why this one was special. “What anchors them to this street?”

Kierce, cocking his head birdlike, considered it. “Perhaps the saint lived on Ursulines?”

“Or died here?” That was always an option. “Midnight is the witching hour, but I don’t get why they’re only visible for ten minutes before vanishing. I don’t see why they would be visible at all, really.”

Unless the spirits had to materialize daily to maintain the tenuous connection to their bodies.

“The parade is a rather specific manifestation. We would have to know the saint’s name to determine the particulars.” He considered it. “That or the name of the person who turned the finger into a relic.”

By the time we heard drums, we had positioned ourselves in the middle of the street.

We held our ground as the parade swirled around us in a blur of dancers, singers, and musicians.

Halfway through the crowd, I spotted Matty and had to lock my knees to keep from running to him. That I had to prioritize Vi gutted me. I wanted my brother back. Now. Tonight. But I had to be smart about it.

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Just as I began kicking myself for not making a move on Matty, since I couldn't spot Vi, I saw the same pair of men as before. Their grip had eased on Vi, and she no longer fought them. That wasn't good. I preferred it when she was spitting in their faces.

"Vi." I strained for confirmation she was still in there. "Can you hear me?"

Her dull eyes lifted to mine, and my heart dropped into my toes.

"Oh, Vi." I focused on solidifying her, but it was like trying to catch smoke. "I'm so sorry."

"Frankie," she mumbled, her eyes widening in understanding I was really here. "Frankie."

"Vi." I reached for her again, but my hand swept through her. "We're going to get you out of here."

Hope gave her the strength to lash out at the men to either side of her. Her sudden violence after her docile walk allowed her to take them off-guard. She sank her elbows into their guts then stomped their insteps as she grasped for me. Our hands slid through one another, and her frustration threatened tears.

"Kierce." I'd had Anunit's help in anchoring Rollo before Kierce arrived. I wasn't sure he and I could do it without her help, but we had to try. "It's now or never."

He stepped up behind me, and as I mimed clasping on to Vi's wrist, he covered our

hands with his.

Lightning crackled above us, streaking through the dark sky, and the hairs lifted down my arms.

“I feel you,” Vi sobbed with relief. “I can feel you both.”

“I have this little thing called work I like to do,” a multilayered voice boomed from behind us. “It’s how I make money. You’ve seen my house. Mortgages don’t pay themselves. Yet here I am, on this dirty little street, instead of home in front of my laptop, because someone is kinking my energy supply.”

The storm overhead gained momentum, the forks of electricity striking nearby lampposts, shattering the bulbs in a shower of sparks.

Brilliant light washed over me, but I wasn’t as blind to Dis Pater’s form as I had been the last time he up and appeared before me, and my skin didn’t so much as sunburn. Godburn? Whatever.

“Let Matty and Vi go,” I barked without turning, afraid of taking my eyes off Vi. “Then you can zip right back where you came from. Otherwise, you leave me no choice but to break them out myself.”

“Relic enchantments are fragile. You can’t just go around ripping out their parts.”

“Parts?” I gritted my teeth until my jaw popped, determined to hold on to Vi. “These are people.”

“They’re souls.”

“Their bodies are still alive, which means their souls can be returned to them.”

“Huh.” He scratched his chin. “That wasn’t in the fine print, but I sourced that bone ages ago. Maybe I just forgot.” He spread his hands. “I can see how that looks bad, but hear me out...” His expression thundered with animosity. “I don’t care.”

Here was the proof I had been right to lean into my suspicion this was all him. Not that the validation did me any good. Unable to risk keeping my back turned a moment longer, I pivoted toward the threat, forced to let Vi go.

“Then why do this? Why go after my family?” I spread my arms wide. “From where I’m standing, it sure as hell looks like you care if you’re wasting your precious writing time on targeting me.”

“That’s enough.” He snapped his fingers. “Kierce, I order you not to help her.”

“Leave him out of this.” Whipping my head around, I bared my teeth at the god. “He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“The list of wrongs he’s committed could wrap around the world twice.” Dis Pater scoffed at my defense of his vassal. “He deserves everything he gets and then some.” His voice turned pitying. “Why do you think I’ve loaned Kierce out to you? You’re a punishment. That’s it. That’s all.”

Pressure built behind my breastbone. Fear of how much Kierce knew, and how much he didn’t recall. His god might have let Kierce think he was free to make his own choices, and that he had chosen me. But he just as easily could have been told to infiltrate my life the same way Ankou had with Josie.

The thought of what we had being an act or a mission, and Kierce not knowing either way, wrenched my heart out of alignment. He knew pieces of him were missing, but Dis Pater had torn him apart and stuck him back together so many times, he couldn’t find the seams to begin lining them up again.

“You can’t loan him out. He’s not a library book.”

“You’re adorable, but that’s exactly how it works, mouthy girl.”

“You’re in no position to judge him, especially since every wrong he’s committed lies at your feet.”

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“Frankie,” Kierce warned me, his voice low.

“Is this a love thing? The famed rose-colored glasses in action? You have no idea who he is or what he’s done. You think he’s pretty or sexy or needs saving. You’re clueless. Ababy. Just because you got shiny new powers doesn’t make you a god and doesn’t give you a voice among us. It just makes you one more half human in a world populated with them.”

“And you’re one more asshole in a world populated by them. What’s your point?”

“You need to learn to accept your losses and move on. Otherwise, eternity is going to be one hell of a bad surprise. You can’t get so fixated on the small things. Think big picture.”

“My brother and my mentor aren’t small things. They’reeverything.”

“That kind of passion stirs the blood, Bijou.”

Chills skittered down my spine in a prickling wave.

No, no, no.

I didnothave time for this.

Bracing myself, I expected Ankou to have taken on a new avatar since I last saw him. But when I turned, he wore Armie’s face. And it hurt to see a friend standing there who never existed.

His grin also made my knuckles itch to sink them into his face for every wrong he had dealt my sister.

“Did you miss me?” Ankou blew me a kiss. “I’m good as new, thanks for asking.”

“You’re living dangerously.” I drummed up some bravado. “Kierce tells me you’re not welcome in this city. Something about pissing off Bacchus. Killing one of his lovers. Any of that ring a bell?”

“Kierce isn’t wrong.” Gaze cutting left to right, he rolled out his shoulders. “But I go where I’m sent.”

Too bad I didn’t know how to summon Bacchus.

Forget the gold Bacchus was offering as a reward, I would have turned Ankou in for a speck of pollen.

“Get lost, filth.” Dis Pater curled his lip at him, reminding me how low his opinion was of Ankou. “I’m in the middle of something.”

“Um, no.” He kept closing the gap between us. “You look ready to smite Frankie, and my master is too invested in her to let your temper tantrum ruin all our hard work.” He winked at me. “You have no idea how good it is to see you again in the flesh. Dreams are nice and all, but they can’t compare to reality.”

Smothering my fear before it could gasp for breath, I smiled back. “Do you want me to kill you again?”

“See? That’s progress. It tells me you missed me. At least a little bit.”

“How do you figure?”

“You could have just killed me without asking. Rude but effective.”

The god drama ran down the clock until all hope of saving Vi tonight vanished along with her. Without Kierce, I had no hope of freeing her, but it stung to have an opportunity wasted because Dis Pater had chosen that exact moment—when we were right on the cusp—to meddle.

Antagonistic as their relationship was, Ankou’s appearance must have been such a boon for Dis Pater. Yet another distraction for him to throw in front of me like a roadblock. Another way for him to screw me. Or screwwithme. The timing made me consider if they had planned it, but the animosity between Kierce and Ankou was real, an extension of their gods’ tumultuous relationship.

Which left me with having damn bad luck.

“Happy?” I shoved Ankou back a step. “Your interference could cost people their lives. People I love. People who don’t deserve to be swept up in this divine bullshit.”

“I could help,” he offered silkily. “I’m not beholden to?—”

His taunt choked off as Kierce gripped his throat in a brutal hold that made Ankou wheeze.

“You’re feeling very choke-y tonight.” I slanted Kierce a grin. “I don’t hate it.”

His lips twitched, but he didn’t look at me. He kept his eyes on the immediate threat. Well, the threat he could engage without divine punishment. Though it did beg the question if Dis Pater wanted to hurt me, why hadn’t he snatched Kierce away like a shiny toy I was no longer allowed to play with?

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Hello, paranoia. Too bad you've got valid reasons for this pit stop in my subconscious. Don't forget to validate your parking.

As the last of the revelers vanished, I was left standing in the street with Kierce, Ankou, and Dis Pater.

"Keep out of my affairs, mouthy girl, or I will make you regret it," the god snarled at me. "This is only a taste of what I can do to you, and your family."

Light flared in a blinding pulse, and Dis Pater vanished with a crack of thunder.

"No." I groped after him, clutching handfuls of air, then whirled on Ankou. "What were you thinking?"

"That you're wasting your time if you expect him to give you answers or show you mercy." His laugh was strained, his air supply cut short. "He won't help you save your family."

"And you will?" I couldn't believe his gall. "You expect me to believe that?"

"The only help he was going to give you was into an early grave." He feigned shock at his own words. "Oh. Wait. He already did that."

"You don't get to take the moral high ground with me." I imagined my fingers replacing Kierce's, closing around Ankou's throat. "You set Lyle up to murder me. He just couldn't pull it off."

“Rub salt in the wound, why don’t you?” He pouted at me. “Besides, I was acting in your best interests.”

“Are you serious?” I growled at him. “You never do anything without your own best interests at heart.”

Until Kierce flung Ankou back and away from him, I hadn’t noticed how close I had gotten to Ankou. Close enough that Kierce had released Ankou in favor of keeping his hands free to grab me if necessary.

“Dis Pater would have ended you just now. He would have snuffed out your eternal soul like a cigarette smoked down to the stub. I distracted him.” He spread his arms wide like I owed him a hug. “You can thank me now.”

The opening was too good to resist. I lunged at him, hands itching to bring my earlier fantasy to life. I was tired of listening to him talk in circles. I was done with all the constant death threats and senseless taunts. The suspicions he whispered in my ears were driving me insane. Which was probably the point. Because I would have to be crazy to put up with his brand of help.

Kierce snatched me out of the air, holding me under my arms while I kicked and seethed at Ankou.

“You’re a liar and a manipulator.” I flailed against Kierce. “I don’t believe a word you say.”

Dis Pater wasn’t done punishing me. Not yet. I hadn’t suffered enough. I hadn’t lost enough. He wouldn’t go to this much trouble then skip out on the big finale. He wanted me broken. And if I lost Matty...

Cold fingers tickled my arms, ragged voices moaning in my ears. The dead beneath

the city stirred as I spiraled from the magnitude of my frustration. Spirits whirled in my periphery. Whispering. Sobbing. The pressure bubbling in the back of my mind pushed against my temples, causing my vision to spark golden.

“You’re upset. I get it. Your brother is halfway to dead, and your mentor isn’t far behind. That sucks.” Ankou inched closer. “You have to look on the bright side, though.”

“There is no bright side,” I growled at him, shaking as I forced the spirits back to their resting places.

“Kierce, why are you so quiet?” Ankou, who didn’t appear to have noticed the restless souls frothing around me, angled his chin. “Oh. That’s right. Your god told you to sit and stay like the good boy you are, and you let Frankie’s loved ones slip through her fingers.”

Ankou was a first-class potstirrer, a facet of his chaotic nature, I was sure. He couldn’t open his mouth without making things worse, and I wasn’t inclined to help him. Unless by help, I could count shoving a roll of socks down his throat to shut him up for good. Barring that, I decided to play possum until Kierce relaxed his hold on me.

“Kierce can’t ignore orders any more than you can.” The second he set me on my feet, I swung my leg between Ankou’s thighs with as much force as I could muster. Impact drove him to his knees, and he clutched his junk before falling onto his side, twitching. “That’s for Josie.” I was tempted to stomp him again. “Consider it as a down payment on the pain you caused her and the rest of my family.”

A whistling groan slipped past his lips, and he vanished before I could decide on that second kick.

“He’s not wrong.” Kierce stared where he had been. “I’m a liability.”

“Nope.” I was done with this conversation. “You’re not.”

“Tonight, I was forbidden to help you, but it can get worse. Much worse. He has the power to command me to hinder you.”

Hindering me wasn’t what he feared. I could tell. Hurting me, though, made him pale with possibilities.

“You make it sound like I should kick you to the curb just in case.”

“It wouldn’t be the worst idea,” he murmured, his eyes downcast. “You should protect yourself from me.”

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“I have a theory.” I hadn’t been convinced of it until Dis Pater’s tantrum. “Humor me?”

“All right.”

“I don’t think he can force you to harm me. I think it’s tied into how I go where you go when you’re summoned. We’re bound somehow.” I rubbed my forearm and the hidden mark there. “There’s a chance he knew I couldn’t accomplish anything without your help, and that’s why he didn’t bother asking you to restrain me. If I couldn’t break his enchantment, then there was no reason to alienate us by pitting you directly against me.” As I said it, I had another thought. “Maybe it’s as simple as that. He could order you to get physical but won’t because he wants to cultivate our relationship in case I prove useful one day.”

“You’re not convincing me that staying is in your best interests...”

“It’s a risk.” I couldn’t deny he was right or turn a blind eye to the facts. “But you’re worth it.”

I wasn’t afraid to fight for him, even if one day soon it might mean fighting against him.

Back at Vi’s house, music spilled out the open doors onto the gallery, carrying down to the street where Kierce and I stood, staring up at what appeared to be a party happening in the living room. One that we hadn’t been invited to attend. Had Rollo gotten that desperate for social interaction? Really? He hadn’t lasted twenty-four hours under house arrest. I shrugged it off as Rollo being Rollo until it hit me.

Vi was upstairs. In her bed. Unconscious.

And Rollo, because no one else would have dared, had thrown a soiree.

My temper struck like a match after all the tinder Ankou had fed me, and I stormed upstairs only to stumble into a speakeasy from the 1920s. I might have been impressed with the flapper dresses and zoot suits, but it wasn't thanks to attention to detail. These were authentic pieces, worn by authentic 1920s' spirits.

"Frankie," Josie yelled over the noise, proving real music was playing. "Come help me in the kitchen."

Brain scrambling at the scene, I was glad for the direction. "Sure."

Kierce was quick to follow me through the path the spirits carved to avoid brushing against him.

As weird as tonight had been, I was almost comforted to see this crowd recognized him for what he was. I had been starting to wonder after neither the nekomata or the toughs registered his—or my—divinity.

As soon as I entered the kitchen, Josie shoved me into a corner. "What's going on out there?"

Back home, I was more mindful, but it was easy to forget when I was around so many who could see or speak to the dead, and her lack of ability to perceive spirits hit me like a ton of bricks. "Rollo didn't tell you?"

"You think Rollo of all people would be useful?" She scoffed. "He started greeting people I can't see then flipped on the record player. There are cold spots everywhere I walk, and I swear I feel eyes on me." She cuddled into my side. "I'm so glad you're

back. Can you take me to my room and make sure no one is in there?"

Spirits couldn't hurt her, most of them anyway, but that was still the safest place for her.

"Sure." I guided her through the hall to her room, searched it top to bottom, then left her on her bed. As I turned to go, I bumped into Kierce, who had followed me. "Let's find the man of the hour."

A few steps later, Jean-Claude, who stood watch outside of Vi's room, intercepted us.

"Care to explain what's going on?" I glanced past him, to the noise. "What does Rollo think he's doing?"

"He seized on the auction idea and invited Luca Tremain to visit, since he's not allowed to step foot outside the house." He rubbed his ears, the music too loud for comfort. "Tremain travels with this circus everywhere he goes." His scowl deepened as whoops rose from the crowd of spirits. "You'll have to reset the wards after they leave."

Hmm.

Rollo must have lowered them to allow Tremain access and then raised them, locking in his guests. Otherwise, I would have noticed the breach on my way in. Tremain must trust Rollo a great deal to allow the magical containment of himself and his entourage.

"It's no problem." I racked my memory, but the name didn't ring any bells. "Do I know him?"

"No." He gripped my shoulders and pointed me toward my room. "You don't need to

either.”

The stern look he shot Kierce confirmed he wanted me under lock and key until Tremain left. As much as I itched to wade through the bodies to find Rollo and demand answers, I trusted Jean-Claude’s assessment of the situation.

“Come get me when you’re ready.” I was too tired to fight with him. “Kierce and I will be in my room.”

No sooner had we shut the door behind us than it swung open on Pascal carrying two plates and two glasses of milk. He thumped his hip against the knob, shutting us in again. He must have been the one who actually required help in the kitchen, but Josie sidetracked us before we could offer him any.

“I brought refreshments.” He held out the cake slices to Kierce and me. “Josie said it’s my best yet.”

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“Thank you.” Kierce took his plate, sniffed it, then handed it back. “I’m done.”

Laughter stuck in my throat as his quirky manners totally missed the mark.

“No worries.” Pascal helped himself to the plate. “I was hoping you would say that.”

After inviting himself to flop onto my bed, he started shoveling in Kierce’s share like he might snatch it back. Kierce watched me savor the first bite, cocked his head to one side, and confusion wreathed his features until I poked him in the hip. “You okay over there?”

“Josie’s been teaching me polite ways to decline food.”

That explained a lot.

“That explains it.” Pascal echoed my thought almost exactly. “I didn’t expect you to bother pretending to be interested in the cake, so your lessons are going...um...great.”

Heartened by Pascal’s endorsement, Kierce grew earnest. “Did you find my excuse acceptable?”

A polite decline didn’t always work in the South. Folks showed their love through food. Even if you didn’t want to eat, you did. It was expected of you. For Kierce, a firmer stance might be required to get him off the hook in future social situations.

“Normally, I would say it might be more politic to take a bite then claim you’re too

full to hold anymore. You're not a fan of sweets, so I'm not going to put you through that for the sake of politeness." I recalled his expression when Carter attempted to feed him a cupcake after our first kiss. "You could claim you have a gluten allergy. It wouldn't work for everything, but it does cover a wide variety of baked goods."

"Hmm." He appeared to consider it. "I'll have to remember that."

A flicker of blue light snared the corner of my eye, and I glanced over to find Pedro massaging the joints in his hands that had ached in life. The habit, like so many others, had rolled over into death.

"Hey." I paused my snacking to examine the spirit. "What's wrong?"

"Dis Pater was in town tonight." He checked me over head to toe. "It's you I'm worried about, mija."

"How did you...?" I would have blamed Pascal, but he had stayed in too. "Who told you about that?"

"It's all the spirits Tremain brought with him are talking about." His clipped tone conveyed his distaste of Tremain, his spectacle, or perhaps it was filling the house with rambunctious spirits while Vi was vulnerable to possession that bothered him. But if the latter was the problem, he needn't have worried himself. Rollo would have taken every precaution. "They claim there was a showdown on Ursulines."

"Showdown is a bit wild west for what happened, but he was here." A sour taste flooded my mouth. "So was Ankou."

"I'll give us some privacy." Kierce rose and helped himself to my kit, laying a salt line around the room. He didn't speak again until he activated the ward, erecting a quiet bubble where no other spirits could overhear our conversation. "Now we can

“speak freely.”

As I vented about the events of the night, Pedro stroked my hair, his expression growing darker.

“What can we do?” He glanced at his brother, including him in his offer. “How can we help?”

That he was always so quick to pitch his lot in with mine left my heart full to overflowing, but I was too afraid that the parade might swallow him whole to invite him to come out with me. He would be safer behind the wards at Vi’s once I checked them over after Rollo’s guests left. Pascal would be too.

“I’ll let you know once I figure out our next steps.” I set the cake aside, unable to stomach it. “I don’t trust this sudden altruistic streak from Ankou.” I took a moment to check my messages and found one from Carter. “I need to make a call real quick.” I pointed at my cell. “Carter.”

To give myself a smidgen of privacy, I rose and stepped a few feet away from the others.

“I had a question,” she said by way of greeting, “but Josie already answered it.”

“Ah. Sorry about that. Somehow I put my phone on silent.”

“How is everything?”

“Complicated.”

Carter grunted in commiseration, but she didn’t press. For now.

“How’s Harrow?” I ought to text him myself, but she was already on the phone. “Any side effects?”

“He didn’t tell you?” She sighed, as if she wasn’t surprised to hear we weren’t playing nice, but I thought we had been. “He decided to stay in New Orleans and make a long weekend out of it.”

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A prickle started at my nape and stung its way down my spine. Harrow wasn't one for making spontaneous plans. And staying in the city? The odds of one of us bumping into him were too high for it to make sense that he hadn't given us a heads-up we might see him around.

"He didn't say a word." I thought back on the last time I saw him. "He's just hanging out?"

Doubt kept drilling down, deeper and deeper into my subconscious.

"I guess?" She must have heard something in my voice. "You don't sound convinced."

"Did he call or text you?"

"Text."

"And did it read like him?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm."

"That's not a goodhmm, is it?" She sighed. "What are the odds this ends badly for him?"

"Dis Pater popped in tonight, and Ankou. Plus Kierce and me. Anunit is here too.

That's five divine beings in the Quarter."

And one of those beings had a thing for Harrow.

Anunit wouldn't know how to text, but she was clever. During her time at the shop, she observed us talk that way often enough for her to grasp how to give him a vague order he could then interpret in his own voice. The same way she gave him a command to visit New Orleans without any clue of the intricacies involved in modern travel.

"You make it sound like New Orleans is a powder keg about to go boom."

"Um..."

"I can come get Josie and Matty, if you need me to."

"Thanks." I dragged my bottom lip between my teeth. "I don't think it will come down to it, but I'll pass the offer along to Josie. I wish I could send Matty home, but I need him." Saving Rollo had been a near thing. We would need every advantage we could get for Matty, and that meant keeping him close. "I would feel better if I could reunite body and soul ASAP."

"I understand." She cleared her throat. "The offer stands, though."

"Thanks." I smiled into the phone. "I appreciate it."

The music cut out in the living room, a sign the party might finally be winding down, so I let Carter go.

As I was considering whether it was premature to break the circle in preparation for spending the rest of my night in Vi's library researching the finger bone, the choice

was stolen from me as Jean-Claude swept into the room.

“You gotta see this.” He was dragging someone behind him by the arm. “I haven’t laughed this hard in ages.”

Craning my neck to see around him, I got an eyeful of the person he was restraining. “Harrow?”

A dirty tee caked in grease, blood, and food stains clung to his torso. His jeans rode low on his hips, a breath away from slipping off, which I blamed on him unbuttoning them to make room for his stomach.

Dear Lord.

His stomach, which had been flat, was now swollen as round and taut as a basketball.

Understanding smacked me upside the head as his golden eyes twinkled at me without an ounce of remorse, and I growled, “Anunit.”

“Your bird destroyed my avatar.” Not a shred of guilt laced those words. “What else could I do?”

“You were supposed to be recovering. I thought you were half dead after what we did. Half drained. You know what I mean.” I grimaced at the state she left Harrow in. “How could you do this to him?”

“You do not like this body, but I do.” She patted her distended stomach. “He holds much.”

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“Get out of him.” I stomped my foot, not caring if I was pitching a tantrum. “Now.”

“I am too weak to be without a host.” She jutted out her chin. “He will have to endure me.”

I would have to call Carter back and explain how her partner would be staying here for the duration of his recovery. And judging by his belly, things were about to get ugly in his en suite. I wasn’t sure if Harrow had meant to stay and relax, like he told her, or if Anunit had been pulling his strings even then.

“Go shower.” I dragged a hand down my face. “He’s disgusting.” I sighed at Jean-Claude. “Can you get him a change of clothes and put him to bed in the room next to mine? I’m going to lock them in for the day and sort out this headache tomorrow.”

One thing was for certain. Anunit had her hooks in Harrow. As close as the primary Alcheyvaha burial ground was to Savannah, he would never be safe from her without help. I had heard of a necromancer who tattooed runes on people. Mostly they were protective, I think. But I didn’t have the resources in that community to locate the practitioner responsible.

I had spent too much time running from them for that. Plus, as iffy as Harrow was when it came to magic, I wasn’t sure he would want an identifier inked into his skin when Anunit claimed to be a temporary nuisance who would leave after teaching me my duties.

“Of course, cher.” He cackled with delight. “Poor thing. He gone be sick when he snaps out of it.”

“Maybe bring him some antacids before tucking him in?”

“That I can do.” Fighting his grin, he yanked on Anunit. “Let’s go, you.”

After he shut the door, I kicked myself for not asking if the coast was clear, but I hadn’t expected Anunit to kidnap Harrow again. At the rate she was going, I would owe him more than an apology for what he was enduring at her mercy.

“I didn’t think when I agreed to become the new guardian that it meant I would be yanking Anunit out of bodies she has no business possessing.”

“I wonder how far he got before she caught up to him,” Pascal mused, tapping his chin. “We haven’t seen her since you all rescued Rollo.”

“If she was forcing Harrow to eat his way through the city, it would explain...” Kierce made a rounded gesture over his belly usually reserved for indicating pregnant women. “Do you think he should be allowed to digest it?”

“That’s a good question.” I shuddered to recall the tightness of his skin. “She’s used to eating massive quantities of meat. His stomach isn’t large enough to hold what qualifies as one normal portion for an animal her size. Let alone however many meals she’s force-fed him since we lost track of her.”

Despite the gravity of the situation, Kierce’s expression edged dangerously close to amused.

“I can’t believe I felt sorry for her, that I was worried about her.” I gritted my teeth, wondering if her farewell gift to Harrow—her cowgirl hat—was how she had tracked him. “Then again, maybe the best medicine is getting Jean-Claude to give her a dose of ipecac and let her enjoy the experience of purging her poor life choices.” As I was texting him the suggestion, Kierce chuckled. “What is it?”

“I was thinking cats vomit up their food all the time.” His laugh grew heartier. “You’d better warn Jean-Claude not to let her eat it again as soon as it comes up.”

“Eww.” I shuddered. “I could have lived my life without the mental picture of Harrow enduring that.”

I was definitely going to owe him after this. Anunit was proving to be more catlike in personality than I anticipated, from the purr in her voice to her sneakiness to her general disregard for rules when they clashed with her getting what she wanted out of any given situation.

“I’ll go tell him.” Pascal gathered the dishes. “I’ll see if Rollo’s shindig is winding down too.”

The sooner we reset the wards, preferably with a certain troublemaking goddess within them this time, the better.

As I tossed and turned in bed all day, my mind buzzed over what Rollo had learned at his party. Not that I had been allowed to question him. But the possibilities were driving me crazy. A short trip, these days.

Hosting had wiped him out, and Jean-Claude put him to bed with strict orders for me not to grill him. Which could only mean that what he found out wasn’t earth-shattering enough for Jean-Claude to deem it worth the risk to Rollo’s health.

Lucky for me, I had plenty of other worries rattling around to distract from that one.

For all the talk about trust, I had to face two hard truths at dusk.

Matty and Vi were running out of time faster than an easy solution could be found.

And I couldn't count on Kierce to help me do what needed to be done to break them free.

For whatever reason, Dis Pater had gone from viewing me as a mild irritant to a potential threat. That or I was being punished for leveling up in power. Not that I had planned to become the guardian of anything, let alone a pantheon of gods I didn't know existed until Anunit started killing people. I had my hands full with my siblings, thank you very much.

Kierce was in danger of getting hit with fresh orders that he couldn't ignore, and I couldn't risk creating a situation where that was a possibility. Not in the state my brother was in. So, I had to look elsewhere for backup. The ideal candidate, as it happened, was the least desirable one. Even if he was also the most qualified for what I had in mind.

Unable to stomach waiting a moment longer, I tugged on clothes and crept down the bright hall.

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Hand poised to knock on Rollo's office door, I girded my loins for the conversation ahead of me.

"I can hear your teeth grinding through the wood," he called out. "You might as well come in."

After unclenching my jaw, I did just that and found him sitting at his desk with a ledger open. I scrounged for the best opening, debating how to convince him, but I kept drawing a blank. I couldn't tell if it stemmed from general distaste in asking him for a favor or if it was my gut warning me the plan was doomed to fail.

"Well?" He spun his chair around and crossed one leg over the other. "What you want, maroquin?"

To smack him for the nickname, but that was old news. "To know what last night was about."

"An acquaintance ran down the name of the saint to go along with your finger bone."

An unexpected surge of hope had me ready to forgive him the nickname. "And?"

"Claude Tremé." He noticed my eyebrows inching higher. "Yes, that Tremé."

Back in the 1800s, Claude Tremé bought the Morand Plantation. He combined it, along with two forts—St. Ferdinand and St. John—into a project that would go on to become the iconic neighborhood many of New Orleans's free people of color had called home.

The Storyville red-light district. Congo Square. St. Augustine Church. St. Louis Cemetery No. 1.

All those famous landmarks called Faubourg Tremé home.

Tremé was also famous for its jazz funerals and second line parades.

But that was thanks to the people, the heart and soul of the community, not the founder.

A white French hatmaker, Tremé married a freed slave, true, but he also owned slaves. Some twenty years prior to subdividing the plantation, he was sentenced to five years in prison after killing an enslaved man. Not what I would call saintly behavior. “How certain is your source?”

“He was integral to founding a historic neighborhood that has been praised for its culture and immortalized in film and photographs since its creation.”

“Hmm.” I thought about what he wasn’t saying. “I didn’t realize the loophole could work that way.”

Similar to how death gods absorbed praise and prayers spoken in cemeteries and graveyards, he was implying historical figures could reap the benefits of their achievements long after their deaths. That, posthumously, their remains could become relics.

“Neither did I, but it’s the only explanation that makes sense.”

“Someone must have seen the potential and decided to help themselves to his bones.”

“We’re careful with our dead here in the city, so it’s hard to grave rob. Nowadays,

anyway. At the time of his death, Tremé hadn't garnered enough fame to make his remains valuable, I wouldn't think. But, if someone waited a few years for a good flood, and if bodies started floating to the surface, then anyone aiding with cleanup and reinternment could help themselves to what they wanted with a much lower risk of getting caught."

The reason mausoleums, vaults, and crypts were popular in New Orleans was a practical matter, not an aesthetic one. The city was bowl-shaped, and when hurricanes struck, neighborhoods flooded. Much of the area was well below sea level, making natural drainage impossible.

Settlers learned quickly they couldn't bury their dead, or every time a storm blew through, bodies would wash out of their graves into the streets. The solution was building aboveground structures to house the dead. Mausoleums were popular, though only the rich could afford private ones. Everyone else relied on crypts or vaults.

In the end, rich or poor, the result was the same.

Each corpse was sealed in for a year and a day, allowing the intense Southern heat and humidity to cook the flesh off the bones. Then, the next time a family member died, the remaining bones were bagged up and tossed in the rear of the chamber. Then a fresh body was slid in to begin the process over again.

Using that method, dozens of family members over generations could share a final resting place.

Tremé was buried in a sealed mausoleum with his wife, Julie Moro Tremé, in St. Louis Cemetery No. 2.

The cemetery had been temporarily closed due to vandalism and negligence, creating

the perfect atmosphere for a determined thief with the right tools to help themselves, but that was a recent problem. There were a whole lot of opportunities between 1828, when he died, and now to snatch one.

“What are the odds it’s actually Julie’s bone? She passed before him, right?”

Until he got me thinking about her, I had forgotten the Moreau Plantation had been her inheritance. Claude came into possession of its title through their marriage. That gave her even stronger ties to it.

“Ten or fifteen years earlier, yeah.”

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One of her bones could have wound up in someone's pocket while her husband's final resting place was secured, but it was all speculation.

"I don't suppose it matters which Tremé was violated beyond it explaining where the parade is held and why the enchantment manifests as a parade at all. The important part is, I know who has the bone and where he lives."

"And just who is that?"

"Dis Pater."

"Dis...Pater..." His eyes grew impossibly round. "Thedeathgod?"

"Um. Yes?" I plucked at my bottom lip. "I've been to his house via astral projection, so I think I can find that pathway again."

"What good will that do?" He tapped his pen on his desk. "You can't bring it back with you, and you can't destroy it there, since you can't touch it."

There were no guarantees the bone wasn't in Dis Pater's pocket, given its diminutive size. But, petty as he was, I got the sense he would have flashed it at me if he had been carrying it on him. That left his home as the most likely location to store it. His house was protected from everyone but me. And, as Rollo pointed out, I wasn't a threat to the relic if I couldn't put hands on it.

"The plan is to sneak in, get the physical address, and thenpoofmyself there in the flesh. Then I can either steal the relic or destroy it. Depends on what I walk in on."

That was a beat of rogue optimism talking. More than likely, a plane ticket would be involved.

“Do you make sense to other people, or do you save your crazy for me?”

“I managed to...I don’t know...teleport? Only once, and I was out of my mind at the time, but still.”

“So, what I’m hearing is, you really are crazy.”

“It was a stressful few minutes, okay? I had just seen Josie’s throat slit. I lost track of time for a beat.”

“Josie?” The color drained from his face, and he glanced toward the door. “I...”

“I was able to heal her, with Anunit’s help.” More or less. “She’s fine. Fully recovered. Not even a scar.”

“Then what...?” Slapping his hands on his thighs, he planted both feet on the floor. “Can we start again?”

Poor guy. It was a lot. I understood his confusion. Really. My life was a dumpster fire lately, and random gods were holding the matches. Except for the ones donating the gasoline. Normal people didn’t have these problems. I was just lucky, I guess.

“I need you to anchor me.” I broke it down for him. “I want to trace my path back to Dis Pater’s house.”

“Have you lost your damn mind?”

“The jury is still out.” I narrowed my eyes on him. “I askedyoufor help, didn’t I?”

“This bone...” He rallied himself. “You think destroying it will end the parade?”

“I do.” I hesitated, but he caught me at it. “But, in the interest of full transparency, it might also end the people in the parade.”

That was why I would prefer to steal it then bring it here until we decided how to dismantle it properly.

“The souls who have been trapped the longest.” He followed my train of thought. “They might be too weak to survive the trip back to their bodies.”

“If they aren’t trained in astral projection, they won’t have any clue how to navigate if they’re simply cut free. We have to hope they’ll be sent back to their bodies the same way their souls were snatched out of them.”

“But you’re not reversing the enchantment,” he pointed out. “You’re ending it.”

Meaning, potentially, that the souls would be cut loose, and it would turn into a free-for-all.

“If we leave them, they’ll die. Some of them will no matter what we do.” Including my brother, and Vi. “We have to do something, and we have to do it fast. We’ve wasted enough time tracking down leads that go nowhere.”

“Okay.” He slid his sharp gaze past my shoulder. “Why isn’t your boyfriend helping you?”

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“Dis Pater is his god. Kierce can’t act against his best interests. He’s already been ordered not to help me physically remove spirits from the parade, and I can’t extract individuals the way I did with you without him. That’s why you and I are doing this. Now. It’s the only way I can think of to save them.”

“Josie wasn’t lying.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “You have the worst taste in men.”

Hard to argue the point when one was currently possessed by a divine beast who had used his body as a vehicle for an all-she-could-eat tour of the city and the other was one order away from being a threat to everything I loved. Everything else I loved?

Okay.

Skip the love part for now.

That was a big word, and this trip had thrown up some serious roadblocks. Like free will.

“Are you going to help me or not?” I decided to hit below the belt. “I did save your life, after all.”

“I knew that was coming.” He grunted as he stood. “I could see it from a mile away.”

“Should we do it in here?”

“Words I never thought I would hear from you.” He laughed at my sour expression.

“And no. Not here. I don’t want my things destroyed when your man realizes who’s helping you act a fool.”

“Then where?” I shifted my weight. “The others will be awake soon.”

Kierce didn’t really sleep to start with, so he was more likely to rise early and investigate my absence.

“Let’s go down to the crypt.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Your mechanics are the only spirits in residence, so we can ask whichever one to vacate the room then set a circle to keep out distractions.”

There were additional protections on the crypt for souls who came for a visit, which would have been an added benefit if I hadn’t intended to fling myself out of my body toward a surly god and hope for the best.

Out in the hall, we both froze as metal springs creaked in the direction of Josie’s room.

“Just rolling over,” I whispered a moment later.

A scuffling noise, the thump of a boot on old planks, carried across the hall from the other direction.

“Jean-Claude,” he whispered back, “pacing in Mamaw’s room.”

All familiar, usually comforting sounds

Exchanging nods, we crept toward the elevator.

We eased in, and he mashed the button for downstairs while I crossed my fingers we

didn't get caught.

I expelled a slow breath once we hit bottom and stepped out into the garage.

Our arrival alerted Pedro to our presence, and he glided out of the crypt with a smile for me.

Until he noticed Rollo.

“What's wrong?” He drifted over to stand in front of me. “Mija?”

“I have to astral project, and I can't tell the others that's what I'm doing, so I need a space where no one can interrupt.” I put on my best wheedling voice. “Keep an eye out for me?”

“Are you sure Josie shouldn't know?” He set his fists on his hips. “Or Kierce?”

“Kierce can't be a part of this. It wouldn't end well for him. And it's best if I tell Josie after.”

Otherwise, she would raise holy hell to keep me here out of fear of losing another sibling.

“I trust you.” He let his gaze linger on Rollo. “You're sure you want him to help you?”

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“She’s the best chance I have at getting Mamaw back. She’s in safe hands with me. I swear it.”

That appeared to mollify Pedro, slightly, but he still wasn’t happy. “Be quick and be safe.”

“I will.” I gave him enough substance I could buss his cheek. “I’ll be in and out in under fifteen minutes.”

Most everything was digital these days, so I worried there would be no handy printed bills or contracts from publishers lying out in the open for me to peruse. He must have a paper trail, right? He was playing human while he wrote his cat mystery books, and life wasn’t cheap.

Oh.

That reminded me. I might get lucky with a pill bottle for Buttons, his cat. A pet that spoiled would have boxes of preventative medication somewhere. All I needed was one label turned out where I could read it. Find that, and I could zing back here before anyone was the wiser.

If they got impatient, at least Pedro could tell the others I was in the crypt with Rollo and that I was safe. More details than that would be too risky. Mention astral projection, and Kierce would piece it together in seconds. I couldn’t afford for him to cut me off or ring the alarm bell for Dis Pater.

Thinking of him as a potential threat hurt my chest. Potential concern was only slightly

easier to swallow.

“We need to get started,” Rollo snapped out, jarring me out of my thoughts.

Working together, a minor miracle, we cleansed the space of the residual energies that tended to cling where spirits lingered and then set a modified circle to prevent anyone from coming in while allowing my astral self to leave.

Then all that was left was to lie down on the marble slab and hope for the best.

“Give me your hand.” Rollo waited a beat then grabbed it. “If you can’t trust me, this won’t work.”

Knowing he was right, I mumbled an apology and suppressed a flinch when he linked our fingers.

“This is how we do things in this house.” His grip was dry, warm, and firm. “I’ve got you, Frankie.”

Hearing him call me by name was rare enough it snapped my attention back to the task at hand.

“I’m going to guide you. I’m going to anchor you. And, when this is over, I’m going to bring you home.”

“Thank you.” I squeezed his fingers. “I mean it.”

“Don’t go getting sentimental on me.” He faked a shudder. “It weirs me out.”

“Understood.” I shut my eyes and drew in a deep breath. “Ready when you are.”

“Clear your mind.” He modulated his tone to a soothing bass rumble. “Focus on the path you wish to travel.” His voice dropped lower. “Picture your destination.” His words rasped through my ears. “How does it smell? What can you hear? How does it taste? What do you see?”

The questions lodged in my brain, forcing me to recall the small details of Dis Pater’s home.

Crashing waves. Sparkling waters. Seagulls calling. Rock-strewn shorelines.

No.

Those were stolen impressions, glimpsed through a window. Deeper. I had to go deeper.

The smell of leather and books. A tidy office. The laptop Dis Pater was forever typing away on.

Those were my strongest associations with him, and I drilled down into them.

Chapter headings on his laptop screen. Cat hair drifting like motes past a sunny window. A briny scent, or was it a taste? Hard to tell if I was smelling seafood in his kitchen or the sea itself without my full senses. I saw well enough and heard clearly, but the rest was a bit foggy without my body to filter input.

“Let go. Just let go. I’ve got you. I’m right here.”

Across an expanding distance, I heard Rollo and allowed myself to take comfort in his presence.

A tug behind my navel jerked me hurtling through the worn path I had traveled so

often with Kierce by my side. I popped in where I always appeared, stuck to the ceiling in Dis Pater's office. His empty office.

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Thank God, Dis Pater wasn't hunched over his laptop for a change. That didn't mean he wasn't in the house. I couldn't let my guard down yet. He might sense me inside his wards, even if he couldn't prevent me from crossing them. I had to snoop fast.

Using all I had learned during my frequent trips to the Alcheyvaha burial ground, where I first met Anunit, I drifted lower until my insubstantial feet touched the floor. That step was unnecessary, but it did help me feel grounded in the space.

After checking behind me, I rushed to the desk and skimmed the papers littering the surface. Most of those pages were notes on the plot of his next book. Even the frequent sticky notes were nothing but character descriptions and underlined reminders on the colors of everyone's eyes.

Useless.

The laptop was asleep, but it wasn't like I could wake it to ferret out his online accounts anyway. None of the drawers had been left cracked open. The one letter that might have been a bill was flipped over, and the torn flap didn't tell me anything.

A pit stop at the window showed me waves, sand, and a killer sunset. No handy landmarks there.

This was getting me nowhere fast.

Right.

Time to brave the rest of the house.

Slowly sticking my head around the corner, I checked for signs of life. I strained my ears, but the crash of the sea was the only noise. The house was empty. Probably. I hoped so.

As I sneaked into a short hall, I spied the living room and the kitchen to my right. A closed door sat at the end of the hall on my left. I figured my chances were better in the kitchen, where the detritus of life tended to pile high on the counters.

Especially if, like in this house, there was a back door with a small table and a bowl for keys and change. There must be a garage or carport out there.

“Meow.”

Squeaking, certain I had been caught, that Dis Pater was going to barbecue me again, I shot into the attic with a burst of supernatural speed.

“Meow.”

The plaintive cry was muffled through the ceiling, but it yanked me out of my panic.

A few gulps and a pep talk later, I sank into the kitchen to stand before Buttons.

“You scared ten years off my life.” I crouched down and smiled at him. “Do you know your address?”

“Mrrppfft.”

“Yeah.” I rose with a sigh. “That’s what I figured.”

A car door slammed as I ventured into the living room, and I scrunched up my face, concentrating on the feel of Rollo’s hand covering mine. I needed to get out of here

before Dis Pater walked through the door and caught me creeping around his house.

“I want her dead.”

Then again, maybe I would stick around long enough to figure out if Dis Pater—and that was definitely his voice—meant little ol’ me.

“He will end you if you harm her,” a smoky voice answered, and chills broke down my arms.

“He doesn’t know who he is, let alone who she is. Neither of them have a clue. It’s fine.”

Heas inKierce? Did that meansheas inme?

“Anunit claimed her,” the smoky voice countered, his tone hardening. “She must suspect.”

Thatshe was definitely Anunit. Me? I suspected nothing.

“Anunit is smart enough to know none of her kind survived. Whether she wants to admit it to herself or not, there’s no blood between them.”

That should come as a relief, right? That she and I weren’t relatives. But she had looked so hopeful...

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“But there is bone.”

Bone? As in the toe Anunit chomped off as part of our exchange? That bone?

“And whose bright idea was that?” Dis Pater exhaled a growl. “This experiment of yours has gotten out of hand.”

Experiment? Me? I swallowed hard. That couldn’t be good.

“You knew the risks.”

“And I took every precaution,” he seethed at his companion. “I encased their memories in god glass. Any mention of their pasts, of their identities, slides off. Nothing they learn about themselves will stick. I could whisper his name in her ear, and she wouldn’t so much as blink. An hour later, it would be too slippery for her to recall, and the day after she wouldn’t remember ever hearing it.”

“Let us hope your confidence won’t be our undoing.”

“Oh no you don’t.” Dis Pater snarled, stomping closer to the door. “Get back here.”

Silence cut like a knife as we both waited for the smoky voice to reply.

But he was gone.

And two seconds later, as the doorknob turned, so was I.

Mumbled words rushed in as I sucked in a sharp breath and jackknifed off the marble bench.

“Whoa there.” Rollo gripped my shoulders. “You’re safe.” He checked me over. “What happened?”

“Dis Pater almost walked in on me.” I blew out a slow breath. “He was talking to someone outside the house. I don’t know who. Their voices echoed, so I heard them loud and clear, but I couldn’t see anything.”

Seeming satisfied I was in one piece, he asked, “Did you get the address?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I might have a hint, though.” I thought back on my glimpse through the window, one detail sticking out in my mind that hadn’t gelled at the time. “There was a tall ship on the water.”

“A tall ship?” His usual judging look pinched his expression. “Like a pirate ship?”

“Sort of?” I considered the history of the area. “You can book those for harbor cruises, right?”

“How would I know?” His eyebrows shot higher. “I don’t go on the water.”

“You drive over Lake Pontchartrain every time you leave the city.”

At nearly twenty-four miles long, the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway in Louisiana was the longest continuous bridge over water in the US.

“Since never you mind, maringouin.” He snorted. “Besides, I said on it, not over it.”

“Boston has a lot of them. Cruises. I don’t know about tall ships.” I couldn’t

remember why I knew that, which meant I probably learned it after watching a documentary with the other Marys after we used the old game spinner to choose a random show for us. “The view from the house is pure beach.”

“Google is your friend,” he said dryly.

“Yeah, yeah.” I got to my feet. “Thanks for the help.”

A negligent shrug pinched his shoulders. “Will you go back?”

“I’m not sure it will be safe. I don’t know if Dis Pater can sense me inside his wards or not. If I risk it, I’ll find out the hard way.” I broke the circle with the toe of my shoe. “I’ll do some research, see if I can shake anything loose. If I can’t, then I have to choose. I can’t give up on this angle.”

The second I exited the crypt, I bounced off Kierce’s chest and stumbled back a step into Rollo.

Bright, silver eyes bored into mine. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I indicated Rollo. “We were just?—”

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“You don’t have to tell me.” He cupped my face, tipping my head back. “I won’t force you to lie.”

Turning my face into his hand, I kissed his palm. “Okay.”

“I’ll help you however I can.” He made it a promise. “Don’t give up on me.”

Don’t give up on me.

The courage it took for him to ask me that threatened to break my heart. “I won’t.”

“Can y’all scoot aside?” Rollo shouldered past. “I have paperwork and virtual meetings I can’t miss.”

The longer Vi remained unconscious, the more her business would suffer. I knew the feeling. Intimately. I hated that finances were a consideration where health was concerned, but those were the realities of our lives. Bills didn’t stop piling up just because we couldn’t pay them.

Pedro waited until Rollo left to glide forward, a question in his eyes I could only answer with a nod.

I had done what I set out to do, but I hadn’t quite achieved my goal.

“Are Josie and Pascal still upstairs?” I gave myself a cheer injection. “What are they planning tonight?”

“They’re staying in.” Kierce tipped his chin. “They’re going to watch movies from a VHS stash Josie found in her guest room.”

That was the safest thing for the Suarezes to do, and her too, but I had other plans for them.

“What about Harrow?” I hated that, once again, he was an afterthought. “How is he?”

“He was heaving in the bathroom,” Kierce said, “when I went to check on him.”

“Still?” A bolt of guilt struck me. “Anunit really did a number on him. Even after she’s rode out the worst of it, he’ll still be sick and sore when we kick her out of him.”

“You should order in some broth,” Pedro suggested. “He needs to eat light the next day or two.”

“Good idea.” I could walk Kierce through the preferred local food app as an exercise. “Jean-Claude could swing it with enough notice, but good broth takes from twelve up to seventy-two hours. Harrow should get something in his stomach before then. Plus, Jean-Claude has his hands full caring for Vi and monitoring Rollo’s condition. I don’t want to heap more work on him.”

Except that was exactly what I did when I bumped into him upstairs and palmed Kierce off on him. I told myself it was better to let Jean-Claude walk Kierce through ordering. He knew the best restaurants, and he was familiar with technology. But Kierce knew I was buying a moment alone with the others away from him.

Away from Dis Pater, more like.

With the two of them set up in the kitchen, I summoned Josie and Pascal to her guest

room at the back of the house.

“This is weird.” Josie clung to Pascal’s arm. “Why are we the only ones in here?”

“What did we do wrong?” He worried his bottom lip with his teeth, and I smacked his arm so that Matty wouldn’t come back to a sore mouth. “Are we in trouble?”

“No.” I poured a salt circle and then raised it to give us privacy. “Why would you think that?”

“You ditched Kierce. You never ditch Kierce. He’s always part of the Marys’ inner circle.” Josie patted Pascal’s hand. “Suarezes are honorary Marys, so you don’t count.” She frowned. “Or you do count.” She flipped her wrist. “You know what I mean.”

“I might have sneaked into Dis Pater’s house tonight. Astrally speaking, I mean.” I cringed as Josie’s left eye started twitching. I definitely had that effect on people. “If I can find his home address, I can pop in physically. Then I can steal the saint bone, pop out, destroy it, and free everyone caught in the parade.” I flopped onto her bed. “Probably.”

“Let’s put a pin in how you’re not sure this popidea will work. I assume you couldn’t find his address?”

As one of two people present for my one and only time successfully teleporting, Josie had earned the right to doubt I could pull off this heist alone with that power as the linchpin in my plan.

“I didn’t have much time.” I omitted the precious moments I lost being a fraidy cat. “He was talking to someone outside, so I couldn’t see who. I think about Kierce and me. None of what he said made sense, though.”

“Tell us.” Foot tapping, Josie anchored her hands on her hips. “All of it.”

Happy to unburden myself to someone who wasn't Rollo, I spilled every single detail I could recall.

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“That doesn’t sound good, Francita.” Pascal rubbed his jaw. “Kierce could be sitting on something big.”

“Dis Pater shakes his brain like an Etch A Sketch.” I defended him, knowing how much he hated the gaps in his long, long life. “He isn’t concealing what he knows on purpose.”

“I’m not blaming him.” Josie held up her hands in a peacekeeping gesture. “I get it. Really. I do.” She took one step closer to me. “But you’re my sister, and it’s my job to protect you. Even from him.”

As much as I wanted to argue the point, I would have done the same thing for her.

“How can we help?” Pascal gentled his tone. “What do you have in mind?”

“I saw a tall ship in the water outside Dis Pater’s window. I was hoping you guys could help me check out the companies running cruises on them out of Massachusetts. There’s nothing but open water from that angle, so maybe we could track the routes? Narrow down the possible areas?”

This task was finding a needle in a haystack, and we all knew it, but I had to try something.

As the scope of the task sank in, Pascal winced at the work ahead of them. “Can’t you ask Kierce?”

“I’m not sure he could tell me,” I admitted. “I’m more worried if he can, if he does,

that Dis Pater has already given him instructions to report it back to him. Since I can slip past his wards, he could ditch that location and go somewhere else. Then I would never figure out where he's keeping the bone. And if that happens, I can't destroy the relic."

"Wait." Josie snapped her fingers. "You said he's got a cat?"

"Yes."

"Did it have a collar?"

"Yes?"

"With an ID tag?"

"Maybe?"

"Could it have had, say, its home address etched on its ID tag?"

"Crap." The urge to smack my forehead itched in my palm. "I didn't think about that. I'll check."

The vet angle had crossed my mind, but we hadn't had pets growing up, so that was as far as I got.

"Can you go back so soon?" Pascal shared a concerned glance with Josie. "It's not dangerous?"

Danger was a matter of perspective these days.

"You're not taking grave-dirt uppers to get over the hump," Josie warned me. "If

that's what you're thinking, you can forget about it."

Good grief. She made it sound like I walked around with pockets full of dirt to snort when her back was turned.

"I've seen Kierce do the popping thing," Pascal said, sitting next to me, "but he can't take anything with him or bring anything back, right?"

"Nothing else alive." I thought about Badb visiting Abaddon with him, but she was no ordinary crow. "I think that's how it works."

The only thing I knew for certain was teleportation was possible for me. I didn't know how I had done it, or if I could do it again, but I had transported myself from the Alcheyvaha burial ground to the commune in the blink of an eye. No time like the present to discover if it was a fluke or a new skill I had unlocked.

Speaking of flukes, I didn't want to vanish myself into the belly of a whale if I got it wrong on my first try, but I vaguely recalled the sisters at St. Mary's telling us a bedtime story about a guy named Jonah who...

No.

Wait.

He was in there in the first place for disobeying his elders, and now that I thought about it, I was pretty sure the sisters also mentioned the whale swallowing a shark to eat him for his sins, which the whale then spat out.

Maybe?

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The sisters had a way of always reducing anything remotely biblical to do as we say or get eaten.

Sharks were optional.

Hrm. I should practice. See if I could manage even a small hop before taking a bigger plunge.

The Atlantic would be freezing this time of year if I miscalculated on the beach house and hit the water.

“This doesn’t sound like a great plan.” Josie’s gaze tagged the door. “You’re sure Kierce can’t help?”

“Are you willing to trust Matty’s wellbeing to Dis Pater?” That was what it amounted to, now that I had gotten the god’s temper raging. “He did murder me for funsies.”

With the toe of my shoe, I broke the circle, unable to drive Josie’s idea about the cat ID tag out of my head.

Leaving her with Pascal, I sought out Rollo, who was about as happy to see me as expected after our earlier excursion.

“No,” he said sharply. “You’re not going out twice in one night.”

The flat refusal stumped me. “But?—”

“Mamaw would whoop me if I let you get hurt. Don’t like it? Ask your boyfriend to stand in for me.”

“That’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair.”

“Leave the boy alone,” Jean-Claude said from the doorway. “He’s only doing what Vi would do.”

When I tried to argue but found I couldn’t, I had to remind myself Rollo was the next best thing to a professional anchor. He was the most experienced one in this area and had the benefit of a lifetime of absorbing crumbs of information Vi dropped throughout her daily life. Jean-Claude had made his point. I should trust Rollo with my best interests, in this case.

The ticking clock was making me reckless if I was willing to storm Dis Pater’s house in search of his cat who, knowing my luck, would have a QR code engraved on his tag instead of his details. Which I couldn’t scan because phones and astral travel didn’t go together.

“You’re right.” I surprised both of them with my easy acquiescence. “I shouldn’t push my luck.”

“I don’t trust that look on your face.” Rollo rapped his knuckles on his desk. “What are you thinking?”

“Come on.” Jean-Claude gripped my arm. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t get into trouble.”

“That’s a bold claim, but you’re the one fool enough to make it.” He sighed. “Good

luck,mon ami.”

To keep the tentative peace, I let Jean-Claude drag me into the hall so Rollo could get back to work.

Leaning down, he guaranteed he held my full attention. “Have you considered all your options?”

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Kierce is in the basement, helping me with a project that will keep him occupied for a good hour.”

“Okay, well, you just shut down my sales pitch to Rollo, so...?”

“There’s more than one way to skin a cat,cher. Or, in your case, a cop.” He released me, pivoting on his heel. “One hour.”

I was embarrassed to admit I stood there for a full minute before his meaning sank in.

Anunit.

She could help me. Maybe. I had to brave Harrow to find out.

Nervous about the state I would find him in, I walked up to his door and knocked twice.

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A pained groan answered me, but I couldn't tell if it was him or Anunit without seeing for myself.

"I'm coming in," I announced, just in case, then let myself in and approached the bed. "You look rough."

Golden eyes accused me from Harrow's familiar face, and I almost felt bad for Anunit.

Almost.

"How did you find your way to Dis Pater's house?" I sat at the foot of the bed. "You didn't come with me the way I'm swept along when Kierce is summoned, I don't think, or you would have been there sooner. So, how does it work for you? Can you go anywhere? Only places you've been? Places I've been?"

Curled on her side, cuddling a heating pad shaped like a crawfish, she tucked in her chin.

"You did this to yourself." I had no sympathy for the pain she had inflicted on Harrow. "Are you going to help me or not?"

"Help how?" She shut her eyes. "This body is too frail."

"The body has a name, and it's Harrow. And he's not frail. He's just suffering the consequences of your actions. Human bodies aren't meant to eat pounds of meat at one sitting." We didn't know how many meals she had borrowed him for. "You're

lucky you didn't end up in the hospital getting your stomach pumped."

Actually, I wasn't sure that was a thing for overeating. It might be reserved for overdoses and other medically necessary need to puke now situations. Having stuffed myself to the bursting point once or twice during street festivals here in New Orleans, I could say with authority there were times I would have paid good money to correct my deliciously greasy mistakes.

"I followed your scent." She snuggled the crawfish. "I have an excellent nose."

"You can smell my soul?" I glanced down like I might find a scented candle glowing in my chest. "Seriously?"

Exasperation crossed her features. "Yes."

"You can track everyone," I realized, filing away that information. "Now that's a neat trick."

"It is not a trick. It is who I am."

"I apologize." I bit the inside of my cheek. "I didn't mean that how it sounded. I only meant it's an incredible talent. I didn't know such a thing was possible."

"You could learn." She watched me. "You have it in you to do the same."

"You said we're not related."

The conversation between Dis Pater and the smoky-voiced man bobbed to the forefront of my mind.

"We are not, and yet..." Her expression softened on me. "I feel a kinship with you."

The temptation to tell her what I had overheard, to get her opinion, almost got the better of me. But the smoky-voiced man wasn't my priority. "Do you think you could find your way back to Dis Pater's house?"

"Yes." She set aside the heating pad. "Have you lost your way?"

"I can project my soul there, but I need to go in the flesh." I picked at the comforter. "So far I've only managed to teleport myself once, and I have no memory of how I managed it." I considered her. "I'm not sure if what you did falls under astral projection, since you're all soul and no body, or if it counts as physical teleportation, since you're...well...all soul and no body."

Normal rules didn't apply to gods, so what I knew to be accurate for spirits wasn't always true for her.

"What difference does it make?" She lifted her head. "I wished to go somewhere, and I went."

"It can't be that simple."

"I am a goddess. I can do whatever I wish."

Definitely more cat than fox.

"I'm not sure that applies to me. Can I click my heels and appear in his living room?"

"We will find out." She sat up, hand on her stomach. "I will show you the way."

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This must be what Jean-Claude had in mind for me, but Lord. I was terrified of materializing in a room with Dis Pater, giving him access to my physical body. I didn't want to find myself locked in a cage in Abaddon next to Kierce. But I couldn't live with myself if my inaction cost Matty or Vi their lives.

"Okay." I rolled the tension from my shoulders. "How does this work?"

"I will go, and I will take you with me, and then you will know."

"That sounds vague, dangerous, and generally unwise, but I don't have any better options."

"I will need this body." She got to her feet. "I must have substance for you to grasp the process."

"Harrow isn't a rental car. You can't just drive him around when the mood strikes."

"He would agree." She swung her legs over the side of the bed. "You know this."

The bad thing was, I did know. He would agree out of guilt. He would let me run him into the ground to make us square. Even after calling a truce, he would sacrifice himself to atone.

As flattering as it would be to claim it had to do with our past, I was certain the present held sway over him. Lyle had done a lot of bad there at the end, and knowing Harrow, he would spend the rest of his life making up for it.

And that was before he kidnapped Matty, which he could have only seen as proof he was as twisted as his uncle. It would only spur him on to greater risks, like allowing Anunit to have her way, if he felt he was repairing the damage they had both done.

“Why did you kidnap him really? The truth this time.”

“You know this body, so you were unlikely to kill him before questioning him when I arrived here.”

“True,” I allowed, “but there’s got to be more to it than that for you to be a repeat offender.”

“I am not long for your world,” she said earnestly, convincing me she wasn’t trying to guilt-trip me. “I wished to savor its tastes and textures one last time before I go. I have lived a half-life for so long, and it has been its own kind of torture to never savor my food or truly experience sensation. This body was the ideal candidate for such an excursion.”

With her ability to manifest in the flesh, I hadn’t considered she lacked full use of her senses. But I could pity her while also holding her accountable. I couldn’t decide if I would trust the answer I got, but I had to ask. “Can I speak to him?”

“Yes.” Her eyes cut to the right. “I will give you five minutes.”

“You’ll give Harrow as long as he wants, and you’ll vacate his body if those are his terms.”

Her huff of annoyance was expected, but she allowed him to surface, her eyes rolling back.

“Harrow?” I gave him a moment to come back to himself. “Are you with me?”

“God, I wish I wasn’t,” he rasped, his voice raw from puking.

“I need Anunit’s help, and she claims it will go easier if she can borrow you for a while longer.”

“I haven’t felt this bad since I got strep back to back in the eighth grade.” He slumped on his bones. “I could hear your conversation. I’m good with the plan. Just maybe let this be the last time?”

Apparently, he had finally reached the end of his rope. I couldn’t say I blamed him. Anunit was running him ragged. Once we got home, I had to figure out how to block her from possessing him, or else he would never know peace.

“Thank you for doing this. Seriously. You’re going above and beyond.”

“I owed you.” His gaze fell to the floor. “I owed him.”

“Not after this.” I ducked down to catch his eye. “After this, we’re square. No debts. No grudges. No nothing. I mean it.”

Sticking out his hand like an olive branch, he asked, “Friends?”

Smiling until my cheeks hurt, I shook it hard. “Friends.”

“I’ve always wanted to see the East Coast.”

Between one breath and the next, his posture shifted, and he got to his feet. “We should go.”

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“Right now?” Things were starting to snowball, and I was being swept along. “Of course right now. That was the plan.” It was happening too fast but not fast enough. “It’s just...” I wet my lips. “What if I can’t do it?”

Butting Harrow’s cheek against mine, which wasn’t awkward at all, Anunit promised, “I will not let you fail, Frankie Talbot.”

“Okay.” I shook out my hands. “What do I?—?”

Anunit grabbed me in a bear hug, and the room dropped out from under my feet.

We touched down in a bathroom the size of a shoebox, and my heart thundered in my ears.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” I pitched my voice low. “I’ve never seen the bathrooms.”

“This god has a disturbing fixation on cats.” She indicated a mural in the corner I hadn’t noticed yet that looked like Buttons was peeking around the side of the toilet. “I would expect such from Egyptian gods, but there is no reason for Dis Pater to make a cat his entire personality.”

The slightly modern cant of her words left me wondering how much of Harrow she was absorbing while she was inside him, but I didn’t have time to let my thoughts wander. I had a mission. And the first step, now that we had confirmed we were in the right place, was finding the saint’s finger bone and then making our exit. I would prefer to destroy it elsewhere, when I had time to be more cautious, but I was willing

to keep my options open.

Shoving me into a corner, she got down on hands and knees and pressed her nose to the crack under the door. She drew in a few breaths, tilted her head, then glanced back at me. “The house is empty.”

Palms sweating, I wiped them dry on my pants. “You’re sure it’s safe?”

“I cannot promise you safety, but the god is not here.”

“Good enough, I guess.” I helped her up then leaned around her to open the door. “Let’s get searching.”

“Do you recall how you found the bones of my kin?”

“I touched them while they were in the ground. That taught me their resonance. Once I knew that, I was able to track the stolen ones to where they had been taken.”

“The same theory applies here.” She aimed, without fail, for the kitchen. “You touched spirits trapped in the enchantment. You have only to close your eyes and let your senses guide you to that source.”

“I...hadn’t thought of it like that.” I might have been too hard on her. This advice was helpful. “Here goes nothing.”

Focus. I could focus. I was great at focusing. Not like I was standing in a god’s bathroom. Or like that god would murder me for real if he caught me breaking and entering. Nope. No worries here. Justfocus.

Matty’s absence hurt the most, so I zeroed in on that. The joy at finding his soul, the grief at leaving him behind. I couldn’t touch him, but I recalled the brief sensation as

I swiped my hand through him.

Then came Vi. I had picked up more from her, especially this last time, but there wasn't a strong enough connection there to guide me. The contact had been too brief. But Rollo, our only successful extraction, had left an impression.

The stickiness of the magic. His determination to get free. The resistance as I fought the enchantment.

I would never forget how terrified I had been to hold his soul in my hands, how afraid I couldn't meld the two, or how I used extreme measures to save him.

A faint throb drew my attention, and I put my hands out in front of me, allowing the sensation to guide me. I bumped into a couple of walls then smacked into a table. I caught a vase full of flowers seconds before it toppled and decided I would keep my eyes cracked before I lost all hope of a stealth mission.

When I checked behind me for Anunit, I discovered she had abandoned me for her own pursuits.

I hadn't intended for us to split up, but she ought to be safe enough on her own.

No one could get past Dis Pater's wards. Except, for some reason, me. He would expect his home to be otherwise secure. But, given how fast he showed up after I began prying Vi out of the parade, I knew he would sense the moment I destroyed the bone. He wouldn't be happy with me, but I would figure that part out later.

Hopefully before he killed me.

Again.

That same icky-sticky sensation lured me to the rear of the house, to a closed door I pegged as the master bedroom. As much as I didn't want to know about anything that might happen behind said closed door, I shoved it open and invited myself in anyway.

The décor belonged in any upscale beachside hotel. Lots of blues, whites, and tans. Bland but nice. I could tell money had been spent to achieve the aesthetic. I followed the sensation into what I assumed was the closet, but as soon as I stepped inside, I knew I had made a mistake.

“Hello, mouthy girl.”

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Pulse clanging in my ears, I spun around, ready to run, but Dis Pater blocked the doorway.

Swallowing my panic, I searched for indicators I had tripped a silent alarm or bumped a ward, but I couldn't sense a thing that would have prompted him to teleport in almost on top of me.

“Looking for this?” He held up a cloche with a finger bone mounted on a stand under the glass dome. “I knew you would come running as soon as you pieced it together.” He curled his lip at me. “I don't know where your savior complex came from. Must be the Alcheyvaha in you.”

Gods really loved speaking in riddles. “What do you mean?”

“You're not Alcheyvaha, if that's what you were hoping.”

“How can I have Alcheyvaha in me but not be one of them?”

Anunit had imbued me with a portion of her power in order to protect them. Maybe that was what he meant, but I doubted it would be that straightforward based on the conversation I overheard between him and the smoky-voiced man. Not that I was about to confess to eavesdropping on them.

“You cost me a source of power when Anunit handed you the mantle and you stole the Alcheyvaha.” He tapped his thumbnail against the glass. “That means you owe me a new one.”

Trawling my memories, I pinpointed what Dis Pater told me while I was helping Kierce locate the missing Alcheyvaha bones after I questioned his intentions toward them.

“Some things are sacred even to gods.”

Apparently that was a big, ol’ honking lie. “You were feeding off the Alcheyvaha.”

There had been no reason for him to remove the bones and risk Anunit’s wrath. Their power had leeches into the soil over the centuries, creating magically infused earth. I had fed from it myself. So had Josie. It had potency like a drug, which, hmm.

I should have considered that soil, not the cemetery, was the problem. Good thing Josie was so dead set on me kicking my grave-dirt-upper habit. If this was any indication, I could become addicted to the unlimited power of the Alcheyvaha. And fast.

Just as I had told Kierce, I didn’t have to sweat getting too big for my britches. I had siblings ready and willing to cut me down to size whenever I needed it. And sometimes even when I didn’t.

“Everyone does it, and as long as no one gets caught, we all look the other way.”

How had I been so naïve as to believe the gods would leave a power source alone out of respect for the dead? Other gods had killed the Alcheyvaha. Of course those same gods had violated the burial grounds.

No wonder Dis Pater had been so strung out when the site near Savannah was discovered. As a vocal advocate for protecting their resting places, he knew it would place him under close scrutiny from his peers who would expect him to fix the problem.

His desire to kill everyone who learned of the burial grounds was starting to make more sense.

He wasn't protecting the dead. He was cleaning up after himself and the other death gods.

"And because that was taken from you, you decided to take my family from me?"

"Live long enough, and you'll discover how far you'll go to keep living. The rations we split aren't enough for anyone to live on. Do you realize how many death gods there are in the world? Every culture has at least one. Most have three or four. Ninety percent of them have been forgotten. Erased from history along with the religions that spawned them. But they cling to life by their grubby fingernails thanks to what amounts to digging through trash for leftovers."

"That's what you call a preexisting condition and not my fault."

Deflecting blame rather than embracing it? Go me! That might be a first.

"The transfer of power into a living guardian has reinforced the ancient wards protecting the burial grounds set by the last living guardian. No one can access the Alcheyvaha now. No one but you. The workaround that's kept the peace between death gods for millennia just quit working."

Put like that, I was even more confused as to why Ankou had dropped in to save the day. You would think his god would also be eager for my downfall. Though, I suppose, the payoff might be worth it in terms of the chaos this power shortage would create among those who lacked a secondary food source.

Dis Pater was admitting I had an entire pantheon of deities gunning for me.

“You control the tap, so to speak.” He continued his tirade. “As long as your heart beats, your very existence reinforces the protections. You are starving beings who are already ravenous.”

Well, that explained why Anunit had defaulted to the guardian position. I was willing to bet any living guardian was unliving the second they stood up to gods who wanted to feed on the burial grounds.

Would it have killed her to spell out the fine print before having me sign on the bottom line?

Or maybe it was the possibility it might kill me that had kept her twisting my arm that day until I agreed to her terms without full disclosure of how they might affect me.

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Time. I needed to buy time. I had to keep him distracted. “How did you get to my brother?”

“All I had to do was put a drink in the hand of a pretty girl, and he was mine.”

And all Dis Pater had to do was dunk the bone in a liquid to create the enchantment potion, meaning he could do it on the fly. To anyone. Anywhere.

Even Rollo, who couldn't have been dosed in the house, was an easy target while he was searching for answers in the city. Those nights he ate while he was out, which made tampering with his drinks simple.

The glass he remembered in his hand when I quizzed him in the parade hadn't been in his office. I knew. I looked. Maybe his memories got jumbled and what he meant was there had been something off with a drink he was served but hadn't realized until it was too late.

“Leyna helped you.”

“No idea if that was her name, but I like it. It's got love interest vibes. I'll write it down to use later.” He basked in my confusion, and I let him, knowing he couldn't resist an opening to hear his own voice. “He went on a date with a girl in a band. A sylph. She bought him a drink at the bar where they were playing to thank him for his help loading and unloading their equipment.”

I could picture it with ease. Matty was precisely the knight in shining armor type who would help a damsel in distress. Though usually it was just in and out of her pants...

“What do you expect me to do? I can’t break my word to Anunit.” She wasn’t the forgiving type. “I don’t know how to raise or lower the wards on the burial grounds.” I spread my hands. “I haven’t exactly been trained up yet.”

“You want me to hand over your brother on the hope that one day, eventually, maybe, you’ll grant me access? With your brother in hand, you have no reason not to offer the same deal to one of my rivals in exchange for their protection.” He laughed darkly. “You’ve got twenty-four hours, mouthy girl.”

To boost his power? To allow him to ascend to the top of the death god food chain? Both options sounded like all-around terrible ideas. “That’s not enough time?—”

“That’s all your brother has left.”

Panic stabbed me through the heart, and I couldn’t breathe through the soul crushing force of it.

“Deadlines suck, right? I hate them.” He clucked his tongue. “But they’re a part of life.”

“If he dies, even if it takes me the rest of my life, I will find a way to kill you.”

“I love drama. In novels. In real life, threats come across as pathetic.” He lifted the cloche once more. “Help me, and I won’t need this. I can set everyone free, and then you can pat yourself on the back for saving your brother and your friend and the rest of them from a fate worse than death.”

As he lowered his arm, a blur of motion smashed into his side and knocked him to the floor.

Finally.

Anunit slashed Harrow's blunt nails down Dis Pater's face, drawing blood, and bent down to hiss.

"You will pay for your sins with your life." She knocked the cloche from his hand. "How dare you?—"

Glass shattered, shaking me out of my stupor, and I lunged for the rolling finger bone.

"Get off." Dis Pater struck Anunit with bolts of electricity that sizzled across her skin, his strikes ten times more potent than Kierce's. "Who even are you?"

Anunit shouted in pain, the cry morphing into a vicious growl of determination, and Dis Pater's eyes shot wide in surprise that he wasn't slowing her down. Too bad it was Harrow's body paying the price.

On my hands and knees, I reached the small metal stand and pried the bone from its fastener.

"Kierce," Dis Pater yelled when he noticed what I was doing. "Kierce."

For a few precious seconds, I thought Anunit somehow prevented him from completing his summoning.

But when the front door smacked into a far wall, and distant footsteps pounded closer, I remembered Kierce always appeared on the beach. He had to physically cross the wards. Only that had slowed him.

"We need to go." I scrambled to my feet. "Anunit." I reached for her. "We have to get out of here."

As often as I told myself Kierce would never hurt me, I didn't want Dis Pater to

prove me wrong.

“Anunit?” Dis Pater recoiled, the color washing from his cheeks. “What are you?—?”

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Ozone filled the room when Kierce burst in, his gaze fixing on me. “Frankie?”

“Don’t just stand there,” Dis Pater snapped, kicking his legs harder. “Don’t let her get away.”

“No.” Kierce stumbled back, his nails digging into the doorframe to either side of him. “Master, please.”

“Don’t argue with me.” Dis Pater wrestled with Anunit. “Your girlfriend has my relic, and I want it back.”

Glancing from Dis Pater to me to the bone must have clicked the pieces together in Kierce’s mind.

“Frankie.” He planted his feet. “Go.” His nails lengthened into talons. “Now.”

“How dare you disobey me.” Dis Pater thrashed under Anunit. “Restrain her.”

“No,” Kierce rasped even as his claws slid off the wood, his feet dragging him closer to me.

“Anunit.” I fisted the back of her shirt. “We got what we came for.”

Harrow might be a witch, but he wasn’t strong enough to tussle with a god and win.

“He’s been feeding on our people.” Her eyes blazed up at me. “How can you suffer him to live?”

So, her omission during my recruitment hadn't been a tactic. She hadn't known the other gods were feasting on her kin. Which meant Dis Pater was in for a world of hurt now that he had let it slip.

We couldn't kill him on the spot. We didn't have the equipment. I wasn't even sure how you killed a god, but the Alcheyvaha were dead. Other gods killed them. That meant it was possible. But not here. Not with Kierce fighting to protect me at what I was certain would prove to be a great cost to himself.

"Anunit." I willed her to hear my resolve that he wouldn't get away with it. "This isn't the time."

With a disgusted noise in the back of her throat, she spat on Dis Pater's face then took my hand.

And if fish-shaped bits of dry cat food spattered his cheeks too, well, I pretended not to notice.

Seconds later, we stood in the guest bedroom at Vi's, and I had to block out how I left Kierce behind. I had to focus on destroying the bone, freeing the souls, and then...

Then I could figure out what to do about Kierce. About Dis Pater's hold over him.

"How do I do this?" I had to engage Anunit, keep her from jumping back into the fray and killing Harrow the next time a lightning bolt struck true. "Can I break it in half and call it a day? Do I grind it into powder? Does it need to be dissolved in acid?" Methods for destroying magical artifacts weren't pretty, but they were effective. "Anunit. Please. I'm not going to let Dis Pater get away with what he did to the Alcheyvaha, but your people are dead. Mine are still alive. Help me save them. Please."

“Grind the bone to dust, mix the powder in water, and drink it.”

Dumbstruck, I stared at the bone pinched between my fingers. “Do what now?”

“You must assert your dominance over the enchantment. To do that, you must devour the caster.”

That sounded like cat logic. Tremé hadn’t cast the enchantment. He was, at most, the anchor for it.

But maybe that was just me, splitting hairs because oh my god were things about to get disgusting.

“Okay.” I shoved out the door and bounced off Jean-Claude. “Don’t let Kierce in the house.”

“Did y’all have a fight?” He chased after me with a dripping paintbrush. “He disappeared in the middle of helping me roll on a new layer of that epoxy with the color chips. Vi will have a coronary if I don’t have it done when she wakes up after I promised it to her as a birthday present.”

“Her birthday was four months ago.”

“Hence the coronary.”

“Tell whichever Suarez is with Matty that I need him.” The closest mortar and pestle were in Vi’s room, so that was where I headed, and Jean-Claude stuck to me when he realized I had a bee in my bonnet. “Harrow got banged up, so he could use a once-over when you get a second.”

“What’s got you so worked up, cher?”

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Lifting the finger bone for him to see, I let it do the talking for me.

I mean, not literally. It was a finger. Fingers don't have mouths. And...yeah.

Twenty-four hours. Matty only had twenty-four hours. Twenty-four tiny little hours.

As much as I hated to bump Vi down the priority list, Matty had surged right back to the top.

Pulse racing in my ears, I shoved those worries out of my mind. I skidded into Vi's room, aiming for her apothecary table where she tinkered when inspiration struck but she didn't want to change out of her pajamas to test a theory.

Her mortar was carved from the remains of a relative's tombstone. I didn't hesitate as I dropped the finger bone in and removed her matching pestle from its drawer. I wasn't as careful as I normally would have been as I smashed it to bits, working out my frustration. I didn't get every lump out before stealing the glass on Vi's bedside table, tipping her pitcher to fill it, then dumping every speck of the mix into the water.

The grains hadn't hit bottom before I turned it up and gulped it down.

"You didn't just do what I think you did." Josie stumbled into the room. "That's disgusting."

As the gritty mixture slid down my throat, I had to agree with her, but I didn't have time to argue.

“What happened to we listen and we don’t judge,” Pascal asked, his voice blurry with exhaustion from clinging to Matty for longer than his usual shift. “You literally just lectured me on what my face says when my mouth isn’t moving.”

“I never said we watch and we don’t judge.” She gagged. “She swallowed a man’s crushed finger bone.”

“I thought that was headache powder.” He coughed into his fist. “That’s very, uh, necromancer-y of you.”

“Anunit,” I yelled, blocking out their bickering and how much it reminded me Matty ought to be here to rag on me instead of Pascal. “Nothing’s happening.”

No sooner had the words left my mouth than magic flooded my limbs, dripping from my fingertips.

“You okay over there?” Josie drifted closer. “You look weird.”

“Your hair is floating.” Pascal made a circular gesture with his finger. “Should it be doing that?”

Energy fizzled along my skin, crackling and popping. Pressure built behind my breastbone, shoving outward, and my feet lifted off the floor. I hovered between Vi on her bed and where Pascal, in Matty, stood. The moment I stepped between them, I felt it. A warm thread tying them to me, a slow trickle of heat that pooled in my stomach like a hot meal.

I was devouring souls. I was consuming victims’ life forces. I wanted to vomit.

This bond made me no different from Lyle, after he became a dybbuk. It made me a monster.

These people weren't dead. They wouldn't be dying if not for Dis Pater. A death god shouldn't be killing to feed himself. That wasn't his role. His domain was the afterlife. He had no right to impose his will on the living.

"You must focus on the individual souls within your grasp." Anunit cupped my jaw with Harrow's fingers. "You can feel them."

"I can." I tasted bile in the back of my throat. "There are so many of them."

"Do you remember how you used the skulls of my kin to locate each skeleton's missing bones?"

A memory of Kierce teaching me to do just that surfaced, and the queasiness intensified until the backs of my eyes prickled with the threat of tears. "Yes."

"Apply the same method to identifying your brother's soul among the threads."

Anxiety forced my head to shake in a denial that I could hope to isolate one person among so many.

"You fondle his soul twice a day, five days a week." Josie punched an arm in the air. "You got this."

"I don't fondle anyone," I played along with her, allowing her jibe to ease the dread balling in my gut.

She was right. I didn't handle his soul the same as I did the Suarez brothers', but that was because he slept while they animated his body. He was always in there. He never left. But I had that contact daily. Twice daily. And I had for years.

Allowing the familiarity of Matty to wash through me, I skimmed the bonds

humming between me and the victims trapped in the enchantment. I focused on the whole of him. His laugh. His eyes crinkling at their corners when he smiled. His sense of humor. His deep love for his family.

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As if a divine finger had plucked a string within my chest, an answering twang reverberated through me.

“I’ve got him.” I could have kissed Anunit for her guidance. “I can feel him.”

“Imagine the cord binding him to you as a knot coming undone. Then, and only then, allow the cord to slip through your fingers.”

“Okay.” I pushed through the visualization, and a sharp prick stung me. No wonder Dis Pater had felt it when I tugged Rollo free. “I don’t...” I shoved down my rising panic. “I don’t feel him anymore.”

A thud snapped my eyes open to find Pascal lying on the floor in a crumpled heap.

As I watched, blue light drifted from his still form, coalescing in the air above Matty’s body.

Pascal.

“What happened?” I lost my buoyancy and hit the floor, rolling my ankle from the unexpected force and ending up on my knees. “Pascal?”

“Pascal?” Josie dropped beside our brother’s body. “Matty?”

“H-he’s in there.” Pascal hovered above his host, rubbing his arms. “But he’s not right.”

I crawled to him and placed my palm on his forehead, searching for his soul and coming up against an oily sensation writhing under his skin. Maybe oily wasn't the right word. Goopy? Syrupy? Then it hit me.

Rollo had kind of, well, melted, the more I handled him, but he had started out as solid as a soul got. But Matty had been gone so long, he was already liquid. Almost like the enchantment was a web and Dis Pater was the spider.

That chain of logic meant whatever got caught in the web was hit with a paralyzing agent, explaining why no one except the newbies in the parade fought to leave. But, over time, as Dis Pater fed, the souls liquified. And, eventually, he sucked up every last drop.

"He was gone too long." I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans. "I'm going to have to do this manually."

"Manually?" Josie squeaked as she clutched his hand. "What does that mean?"

"Rollo had trouble reentering his body, and he was gone no time compared to Matty. Matty's soul is in there. I can feel it. But it's like when the last piece of a puzzle has a broken tab. You can put it in the right place, but it still won't fit."

Maybe Matty's soul sank in fast because his body was used to cohabitating with spirits. The act was a familiar one for him. But his own soul, unused to leaving his body, was either too weak or too confused to lock in place.

That, or Dis Pater had consumed so much of him that, as I explained to Josie, his soul wasn't the correct shape anymore. Altered beyond recognition. Not that souls had a form, exactly. But still.

"Can you fix it?" Josie laced her fingers through his. "Will he be okay?"

“We won’t give him a choice.” I exhaled through my teeth. “Give me some room.”

After Josie scrambled back, I sank into the core of my power. I entered that peculiar state of being in my body and out of my body, allowing my spectral hand to reach for Matty. I sank to the wrist in his chest, a tremor in my hand, but I coddled his frantic spirit and held it steady.

The edges of my memory glowed and wavered as I tried to recall what, exactly, I had done to Rollo.

What remained of Matty’s soul was weak, too fragile for me to fumble. I had to be careful. I had to get this right. Unlike with Rollo, I could tell there would be no second chances.

“Breathe,” Anunit soothed. “You can do this, Frankie Talbot.”

“You’ve got this, Mary.” Josie sounded close to tears. “Bring our brother back.”

Power flooded my palms, fusing his soul in place with the same ease as I had crushed others. Before I could retract my hands, his gasp filled the room, and his eyes flew open.

“Mary...?” His gaze spun a full circle before his lids snapped shut again. “I...”

Palm to his forehead, I could sense him now. His soul felt settled. Weak. So weak. But secure.

“Jean-Claude.” I screamed for him, even though he stood against the wall. “Physically, is he...?”

“We won’t know for sure until he wakes,” he said after a quick examination. “I’ll

carry him to his room and check him over again there.” He cut his eyes to Vi. “Will you go after her next?”

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“Yes.” I didn’t hesitate. “I don’t know how long I’ve got before...” Dis Pater sent Kierce. “I’ll start now.”

“What about me?” Pascal glowed on the edge of my vision. “How can I help?”

“Go with Matty.” I would feel better if he had an extra set of eyes on him. Especially when, with any luck, the doctor was about to have his attention divided. “Tell Jean-Claude if there’s any change to his condition.”

“You know the steps,” Anunit reassured me as I struggled to sink into the right headspace.

The process with Vi wasn’t exactly the same. I had touched her soul, many times, while she was astral projecting to visit me or when she came to help with the Alcheyvaha. Her bold spirit and big heart were easy to find once I understood what I was looking for, and I held my breath as I allowed her knot to unravel from the rest and glide through my fingers like a silk ribbon.

Pressure behind my eyes caused me to wince as I traced the path her soul had gone.

Pinpricks of agony swept through me, tingling in my limbs, convincing me it had been a success.

A whistling inhale snapped my attention to the bed where Vi’s eyelids fluttered before cracking open.

“Frankie,” she rasped, her voice a dry whisper. “I knew...you...”

“Shhh.” I poured her a cup of water before remembering what I had used her glass for, but Josie was ahead of me. She ran into the kitchen, grabbed a fresh glass, and skidded to a stop beside me. “Jean-Claude is with Matty, but he’ll examine you next.” I leaned down and kissed her forehead. “Don’t move a muscle.”

“Don’t think...I...can.” She huffed a laugh, accepting the drink Josie poured her. “Go...to your...brother.”

“I have to do this a few more times before then.” I withdrew from her to focus on the remaining victims. “Anunit?” I skimmed the ball of threads, tangled and frayed, unable to tell one person from another, terrified one wrong move would result in mass casualties. “What do I do?”

“There is only one thing you can do.” Anunit’s grim tone curdled my gut. “You must set them free.”

Set them free carried an ominous undertone. “What about the ones like Matty?”

“You know the answer.”

“They’ll die.” I saw plain as day how it would happen. “Without help, they won’t make it.”

“Vi made it without you.” Josie attempted to raise my spirits. “Maybe the others will too.”

“Vi has years of experience with astral projection, and she wasn’t caught as long as Matty. Anyone in there longer than she was, anyone without that talent, won’t have the means to join their spirit to their body.” I heard the edge in my tone and tempered it. “I don’t want to kill these people.”

“Cher, you don’t...have a choice.” Vi took another sip of water. “Trust...me. Death is...kinder.”

“I need a minute.” I exited the room. Shut the door. Paced up and down the hall. “I can’t do this.”

Sliding my fingers through my hair, I tugged on my scalp until I worsened my stress headache.

I wanted Kierce. To tell me what to do. To explain how to fix this. To hold me when it was done.

I wanted him.

Full stop.

We hadn’t known each other for long, but he was already a critical pillar of support for me. I looked to him for answers on divinity as well as morality. He was a good person. Yes. He had done bad things. No. I couldn’t lay them all at Dis Pater’s feet. But he was so much more than met the eye. So much more than he knew. And if Dis Pater had his way, if Kierce ever figured himself out, I wouldn’t be there to see it unless I freed him.

“He’s asking for you,” Jean-Claude said from Matty’s doorway. “Two minutes. Tops. Hear me?”

With a curt nod, I all but ran to my brother. I sat beside him on his mattress and threw my arms around him as best I could. “I thought you... Damn it, Mary. I can’t lose you. I love you. I love you so much. You have to finish getting better, okay? You can’t leave me alone with Josie. I can’t handle her by myself.”

A rustling exhale that tried to be a laugh wheezed out, and then he moved his lips in silent words.

“I can’t hear you.” I leaned down. “Can you try again?”

“Set...them...free.”

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They might die. Some of them will die. You almost died.

I wanted to argue. I wanted to hesitate. I wanted there to be a different answer.

But he had been trapped longer than Vi. He knew better than anyone what the others endured night after night. The enchantment might muddle them until they weren't certain what was happening, which would be a kindness, or it might leave their minds intact, forcing them to act out a predetermined script.

How much worse would it be, for your body to move through automatic steps while your mind screamed at you to stop, to run, to break out?

“Okay.” I would make peace with my actions later. “I’ll do it.”

For courage, I laced our fingers, allowing me a small reminder that I had done what I set out to do. As convinced as I had been that would be enough, I was no longer certain that was the case. Guilt choked me, tightening around my throat like a noose.

Most were paras, so they were heartier than humans. That worked in their favor. They had accepted the risks of attending an auction too, which meant they had known their safety wasn't guaranteed. But still.

I had driven Dis Pater to this. Even if I knew—Iknew—that if it hadn't been him, it would have been someone else using the relic for their gain, I couldn't erase the knowledge that these people had been selected to suffer as punishment for their degrees of separation from me.

A faint twitch of Matty's fingers in mine gave me the courage to take the final steps.

Closing my eyes, reaching deep within myself, I chose threads at random. I allowed their knots to unfurl and their souls to glide through my hands and disappear from the edge of my consciousness. I hissed as the connections between us broke, each one a sharp sting that radiated through me.

As I fell into a rhythm, I lost count of the victims. Even though I hadn't fed off the souls for long, I grew exhausted from the toll of releasing their energy. Each one that left drained me further, as if they were reclaiming a portion of their unwilling donations on their way out.

The hope it might help them survive made it easier to keep going, ignoring the mounting pain.

I wasn't sure how long I sat with Matty, unraveling the tangled lives Dis Pater had knotted together with his use of the relic. But after setting the last one free, a wave of exhaustion crested within me, washing away the pain. And everything else too.

A sharp jerk snapped me out of the peaceful darkness to find Josie gripping me by the shoulders and shaking me like money might fall out if she tried hard enough. "Hmph?"

"We've got a problem." She quit rattling my brain when my head started lolling. "Kierce is outside."

"Kierce." I shot upright, wincing at the throb in the back of my skull. "In the street?"

"Yeah." She sank onto the mattress next to me. "Two guys are with him."

Suddenly wide awake, I scrambled for a plan. "Any idea if they're god bloods?"

“I don’t know what they are, but they’re not here for a tea party.”

“I can’t hurt Kierce.” I amended my statement. “I won’t hurt him.”

“You may not have a choice.” Jean-Claude entered the room. “They’re hammering the wards to get to you.”

“Then I’ll go speak to them. Anunit can come too.” I sounded braver than I felt. “Maybe I can negotiate a truce.” I climbed out of bed, ignored my wobble, and yanked my hair into a ponytail. “We’ll lead them away from the house then...”

“Yeah.” Josie snorted at my half-baked idea. “And then what, exactly?”

As if speaking her name had summoned her, Anunit prowled into the room in her spirit form, free of her poor, battered host. “Where’s Harrow?”

“Nice segue. Real smooth. I almost didn’t notice you ignoring my question.” Josie rolled her eyes. “Harrow is in bed, resting, so no worries there.”

“Your sister has been blessed with our strength.” Anunit rubbed her cheek along mine, which was much cuter than when she did it wearing my ex. “The three of us will face them.”

“Josie was never part of our bargain,” I growled at her, earning me an odd look from Josie until she put it together that Anunit must have returned. “I’m the guardian. She stays put. Rollo too.”

“I’m not letting you go down there alone, especially when Kierce is pitching for the other team.” Josie crimped her lips then waved her hand. “You know what I mean. He’s not on our side.”

Not on our side. The reminder stung. But she wasn't wrong. Even if it wasn't his choice.

“Wait for us on the balcony.” That was as far as I was willing to let her go. “Vi has all sorts of plants you can use. I'm sure you've made friends with most of them already.” Aware I was releasing a genie from its bottle, and there was no corking that knowledge again, I added, “There's a poison garden in the courtyard if you need more ammo than the vines out front.”

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“Poison garden.” Her expression turned dreamy. “So that’s what I’ve been sensing.”

Thank God she had been kept too busy to investigate, or she would have stumbled across it sooner.

“I asked Rollo to conceal it from you,” I confessed. “I didn’t want you bringing home any new roomies.”

“I would never—” She scowled at me. “This is because I brought home that air plant, isn’t it?”

The same plant that had snuck into her luggage and was, even as we spoke, hanging in her window.

“And the rhododendron, and the rosebush, and the calla lily, and the list goes on and on and on.”

“But a poison garden,” she said wistfully.

“Exactly.” I pitied Carter if Josie slipped any cuttings past us. “There are plants in there you don’t need to add to your collection.”

“Blasphemy.” She clutched the collar of her shirt. “How dare you.”

“Berate me later.” I kissed Matty’s forehead then gave her a quick hug. “Be safe now.”

“You’ve already died once.” She squeezed me back. “Stop being an overachiever.”

“Keep Harrow locked in his room. He doesn’t need to be a part of this. He’s done enough. More than enough.” I cut Anunit a warning look, but she only blinked at me. I half expected Josie to bite back too, like she always did where he was concerned, but she kept her mouth shut. “Jean-Claude, I’m going out the hatch. I’ll close the wards behind me.”

Thanks to my promises to Vi, I hadn’t shared all the secrets of her house with Kierce, and I was doubly glad for it now that I needed an escape route that wouldn’t endanger the others for the split-second it would cost me to cross the wards onto the street a block behind the house.

One of the reasons the Fontenots had purchased this property was because of its proximity to a network of underground tunnels built and magically enforced by a local witch coven who had since relocated to Metairie. To prevent flooding and collapse cost the family a fortune in reinforcement spells, but it was worth it for the access it gave high-profile clients to come and go in privacy. It also served as an escape route in the event of an emergency.

“These walls smell of death.” Anunit wrinkled her nose. “Many died here.”

“Bodies were stored here for weeks at a time while waiting for room to open up in crypts during the yellow fever outbreaks.” I trusted her senses to know the difference, even if I didn’t understand how it was possible after centuries. “It’s not much farther. The exit is around this next turn.”

A stinging prickle swept over me as I neared the secondary wards. These operated independently of the ones protecting the main house. That was the only way of ensuring it was safe to lower and raise them to accommodate visitors without compromising the entire property.

Using a lancet from my pocket, I pricked my finger and smeared blood on a piece of smooth bone protruding from the wall. I hummed a soft lullaby and, within seconds, the barrier dissipated, and we crossed it. I checked to ensure Anunit's tail was clear before pricking my finger a second time, touching a second bone, and raising it again.

As soon as they hummed into place, I breathed easier, grateful my family was safe behind it.

The process was similar for unlocking the hatch. Only those with Fontenot blood—plus Jean-Claude and me—could operate it. The spell was simple, requiring more blood to verify my identity before the dial on the center could be spun to the correct position.

After the latch gave way, I swung the hatch open onto a shadowy corner where the nearest lamppost was often targeted by vandals who broke the bulb but weirdly never caused any other damage.

And if the vandals often resembled Rollo or me, well, everyone has a twin, right?

“What is your plan, Frankie Talbot?”

As soon as I resecured the path behind us, I admitted, “I don't really have one.”

“I see.” She whipped her feathery tail, and her single wing twitched. “Do you mean to confront your consort?”

“He's more of a boyfriend, but yes. That's the plan. I don't think he'll hurt me but?—”

“His will is not his own. He will act as his god commands. That is the burden of his station.”

The reminder left me tasting copper and regret in the back of my throat.

“I’m more concerned about the two guys with him.” I sidestepped her worry. “Any idea who they are?”

“More god bloods. Whether they belong to Dis Pater or he borrowed them from another god, that is what they will be.”

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“Why would he borrow them?” I thought back to the smoky-voiced man. “Wouldn’t he have others at his disposal?”

“It is no small thing to control the Viduus. Dis Pater is not what he once was, and your consort’s loyalty to you will test their bonds. The wisest course of action would be to use others’ servants so that he can pour his strength into one vessel rather than splitting it among many.”

“That sounds like a good-news/bad-news situation.”

The good news was Kierce was the greatest threat. The bad news was...Kierce was the greatest threat.

“I do not know what that means.”

“Never mind.” Head on a swivel, I padded out into the street. “It’s not important.”

We jogged to the corner then crept through a side yard to check Kierce’s position. I crouched low to use the boxy hedges as cover, and Anunit pressed against a brick wall to conceal herself, dimming her glow in case one or both of the other god bloods could see spirits too.

Kierce stood with electricity coating his hands like gloves, his eyes as silver as the moon and just as distant.

The powers of the two men flanking him were harder to peg from a distance. One scented the air, giving shifter vibes. The other rolled a crystal wand the size of a

pencil between his palms. A witch maybe?

Warm lips brushed my ear as a low voice whispered, “What are we doing?”

Panic kicked my heart into overdrive as I whipped my head toward the voice to find Ankou leaning over my shoulder. “What are you doing here?”

“Saving the day, obviously.”

“You’re not the hero. You’re not even the villain.” I awarded Dis Pater that title. “You’re just an extra.”

“First of all, I didn’t know you were casting a superhero movie. Secondly, I am solid villain material. I’ve got that dark and sexy thing happening. And thirdly, that hurts my feelings, Bijou. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m the guy standing beside you and asking how I can help.”

“Help stab me in the back? Do you want me to draw you a diagram to make it easier since you missed the mark last time?”

“I will kill him,” Anunit decided, curling her lip over her very sharp teeth.

“We’re on the same side.” Ankou spread his hands, proving he understood her fine. “Team Frankie, if you will.”

“Prove it.” I smiled inwardly. “Provide a distraction so I can get to Kierce and talk sense into him.”

“That sounds like a terrible idea with zero chance of success.” He grinned, pumped for the chance to start trouble. “Let’s do it.”

Straightening to his full height, he swaggered out into the street in clear view of the god bloods. “Hello, boys.”

A bolt of lightning as thick as my torso struck him in the skull, and pavement exploded at his feet, leaving him standing in a crater the morning rush wouldn’t appreciate.

“You have no business here,” Kierce thundered, his voice low and terrible. “Leave.”

“Frankie is what you call a passion project for my boss,” Ankou countered. “I can’t let you spoil his fun.”

“A passion project?” That...did not sound good. For my past or my future. “What does that mean?”

Ankou made it sound like his god was invested in me, but gods hadn’t been a problem for me until Kierce showed up in Bonaventure. Even my god parent, whoever they were, couldn’t have been all that concerned about my welfare since they let me grow up at St. Mary’s, preyed upon by the children-eating Perchten who had disguised themselves as nuns and acted as our caretakers.

“Perhaps we can ask him if he survives.” She appeared thoughtful. “And then I will kill him.”

With a death god for a patron, Ankou didn’t tend to stay dead, but I was willing to let her try. “Okay.”

Her eyes flashed with delight at me endorsing her murderous tendencies.

“You.”

The single word snapped across the distance, stunning everyone into silence as my sister locked on her target.

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“Well, shit.” I flinched at the swear word after just thinking of the Perchten, but seriously. “One mega distraction coming right up, whether we want it to or not.”

Before I could settle on a plan of attack, Josie enacted hers, unleashing her pent-up hurt and rage.

Thorny vines shot from the house, snapping at Ankou like whips, drawing blood where they landed hits. She sent one length to wrap his ankle, snatching him into the air, dangling him upside down over Kierce.

“Josie, baby, you’ve got it all wrong.” Ankou morphed into Armie before our eyes. “I’m on your side.”

“You’re on your own side.” She used another vine, lengthening its thorns until they stretched longer than my palm, and whipped his ass with them. “How dare you show your ugly face around here?”

“You liked my face just fine when you were sitting on it,” he yelled, his voice high-pitched as he writhed to escape. “Fucking hell, woman. Quit spanking me. You know that’s not my kink.”

“Keep talking, and I’ll show you the true meaning of kink.” Her voice dripped with malicious glee. “Tentacle porn ring any bells for you? How would you like to experience it for yourself?”

While Josie did a bang-up job of distracting everyone, I hatched a plan to get my one-on-one with Kierce.

Using a fresh lancet from my bag, I pricked my finger and smeared blood up my forearm, over the likeness of Badb. The summoning token hadn't worked for a while, but Kierce was recovered now.

"Come on," I chanted under my breath, massaging in the blood. "Work."

Almost a full minute later, after my heart already accepted defeat, Kierce appeared a foot in front of me.

"You have to get out of here." He balled his fists, concentrating his powers, but he refused to unleash the blow that would no doubt ring my bell. "I don't know how long I can control myself."

"What will it take to end this?" I surged to my feet. "What can I do?—?"

"You stole from him." His eyes gleamed brighter, almost manic. "You violated the sanctity of his home."

Fury kindling in my chest, I growled at him, "He almost killed my brother."

"He can't afford to be seen as weak. Now more than ever. He won't let this go. He won't let you go."

As much as I didn't want to believe Kierce would ever hurt me, the way he fought every step closer, his muscles straining, told me he was losing the battle. And the magic wreathing his hands had only grown.

"Good work." The shifter, probably, loped up behind Kierce. "You found her."

Too focused on me, he failed to notice Anunit manifest her physical form. Her smile was beatific when she lunged at him.

A beast tore out of his skin the second her paws touched his chest, some fantastical melding of tiger and lion, and then there were two massive creatures wrestling for dominance.

Those poor ornamental shrubs behind me would never be the same after this.

“It’s harder to control myself this close to you.” Kierce gritted out the warning, his eyes holding a plea for me to run far away from here. From him. “I don’t know how long I can hold myself back.”

Though I meant to ask him how to fix this, all that came out was his name. “Kierce?—”

“You really do like living dangerously.” Pencil Wand strolled up next to Kierce, magic a hum in the air, looking me over like he couldn’t see the appeal. “His god’s got him by the balls. He can’t deny a direct order, and he was ordered to kill you. You’re wasting your breath—and the time you have left to live—by standing there staring at him.”

“This isn’t your fault, Kierce.” I swallowed a lump in my throat. “I don’t blame you.”

“Still not running? Bold choice.” Pencil Wand laughed. “I didn’t think the Alcheyvaha guardian would be quite this stupid, but they’re extinct for a reason, I suppose.”

“Watch your mouth,” Kierce rumbled, and lightning struck an inch from Pencil Wand’s foot.

“The old gods are starving, Viduus. They’re withering away. You know this. Now she’s cut them off from the one source that’s kept them from an all-out war with one another.” He slid his gaze toward me. “His god set him in your path for a reason,

whether he knew his purpose at the time or not. Don't romanticize him. He's an empty shell to be filled with his god's will. That's it. That's all any of us are."

"You're wrong."

"You don't know how much I wish that was the case."

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The wand glowed an eerie green, and a burst of light erupted from the tip, grazing my side as I dove out of its path. Burnt skin and fabric left a bitter scent on the air, and bright pain knifed through me. I gritted my teeth, gasping through it, and hit the grass. I spun the jarring impact into a controlled tumble (more like a geriatric starfish cartwheeling at maximum velocity) and put the battling shifters between us.

Their fight was winding down. The liger couldn't keep up with Anunit. Had she been at full strength, able to manifest her solid form for longer periods of time, it would have ended before it began.

Head spinning, I got back on my feet, hoping I didn't resemble someone who spent Fat Tuesday at the bottom of a hurricane glass on Bourbon Street.

"You're spry." Pencil Wand eyed me up and down. "Are you a runner?"

Seriously?

The first person in my life to look at me and make the connection, and he was trying to kill me.

Sheesh.

"Thanks for noticing." Weirdly enough, I meant it.

A shock stole my breath as a tendril of Kierce's power sizzled along my cheek, and I backed away as he advanced on me, shoving Pencil Wand out of his way. A distortion rippled across his face, revealing his crow god aspect. Round eyes

gleaming like obsidian, a hard beak in place of supple lips, his expression was impossible to read.

Maybe that was why he did it, raising a final barrier between us.

Before he slammed three bolts of lightning through my skull in rapid succession.

I cracked my knees when I hit the pavement. I knelt there, ears ringing, skin pink, and coughed smoke.

He did it.

He actually did it.

He struck me.

So much for hoping I was different or special or whatever the hell had been running through my mind up to this point. I had been so convinced our feelings could overcome the will of an ancient god. That Kierce and I would break his chains and skip off into the sunset to braid flowers into one another's hair.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

A loud crack rent the air, and for a second, I thought Kierce had attacked again.

Until the screaming began. Then I pieced together that Ankou was done playing with Josie—or the other way around—and noticed I was in trouble. While I was busy with an existential crisis, steam curling from my nostrils, he had used his osteokinetic ability to straighten Pencil Wand's ribs, thrusting the bones through the skin down his sides. A thicker, louder crack bent him backward as Ankou snapped his spine.

“Get away from her, Kierce,” Ankou panted, limping toward me, blood smearing a trail behind him.

Slowly, Kierce pivoted toward him, but he angled his chin in my direction. “You have to kill me, Frankie.”

“No,” I rasped, wishing I had the sense God gave a rock.

“This won’t end until you’re dead...or I am.” His voice broke. “Don’t make me live with that, please.”

“Bijou,” Ankou said, ripping my attention to him. “This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.”

Wet, crunching noises filled my ears as Pencil Wand’s bones continued twisting him into a pretzel.

“Not that part,” Ankou clarified. “I don’t know that guy. I couldn’t care less what happens to him. I mean this part.” He quit yapping and ripped a skeleton up through the soil under my feet and flung it at Kierce. “We’ve been here before, haven’t we?” He twisted the spine, lengthening the ribs and manipulating the spokes into the cage I used to see in my nightmares. “It feels familiar, you know?”

“Don’t,” I whispered, unsure if I was pleading with Ankou or Kierce. God. Anyone. “Please.”

“He’s got his orders, and I’ve got mine.” Ankou spread his fingers, and the elongated bones pierced Kierce from throat to groin, cinching around him until he cried out and hit his knees. “You might not want to see this part.” He yanked again, and a second skeleton ripped from the earth and shot to him. “It’s going to get ugly.”

“Stop.” I advanced on Ankou. “You’re going to kill him.”

“That’s the idea.” He stabbed Kierce from hip to ankle with bone and wrenched, contorting his body. “We need him to go bye-bye for a little while.”

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Warmth encircled my wrist. Anunit. She had taken my arm in her mouth and was holding me back.

“Let me go.” I thrashed in her grip, shredding my skin on her teeth. “I won’t just stand here and?—”

“I’ll speed this along then.” Ankou took a femur, commanded it sharpen into a point, and thrust it through Kierce’s heart. “There.” He dusted his hands. “All done.”

Kierce fell back, the skeletons writhing around him like giant maggots on a corpse. I broke free of Anunit, leaving a chunk of meat in her teeth, and ran to him. I hit my knees at his side and fluttered my hands over his myriad wounds, unsure what to do or how to help him.

“Hold on.” I cupped his face, the only undamaged part of him. “I’ll get Jean-Claude. He’ll know what to do. He can fix this.”

“Let me go,” he breathed. “I’m not worth...your tears.”

That would explain why I couldn’t fucking see anything. I was sobbing, unable to catch my breath. Tears curtailed my vision. I couldn’t stop his bleeding. I couldn’t heal him. Not without graveyard soil.

But...wait...

Skeletons had been buried here. That counted, right? He could use this earth.

Tearing my nails to the quick, I dug a hole and stuck his hand in it. “Heal yourself.”

“No.”

“Kierce.” I clutched at him despite his wounds. “You have to try.”

“I’ll never forgive...myself...” a single tear cut through the blood smearing his cheek, “...for hurting you.”

“I’ll never forgive you for giving up,” I yelled, yanking on the bones, trying to free him. “Fight for me.”

“I...am.” His smile gentled as he grew too weak to move, allowing him to relax into the knowledge he was no longer a threat. His graveyard-mist eyes shone up at me, soft and tender. “You were...worth it. Worth everything. Always.”

“No.” I gave up and pounded his chest. “You don’t get to say that and then shut your eyes. You told me you wouldn’t leave me. That I would have to send you away. Well, I’m not stamping your passport, pal.”

Strong hands gripped my shoulders, but I shrugged them off, not caring who had crept up on me.

“Kierce.” I shook him until his head lolled on the ground. “Kierce.”

His skin burst into black motes, whirling away on the stale breeze, blowing him where I couldn’t follow.

“I’ve got you.” Harrow hauled me onto my feet. “It’s okay.” He scooped my legs out from under me, cradling me in his arms. “You’re okay.”

“No,” I whispered, tucking my face into his chest as the tears soaked his shirt. “I’m not.”

And I wasn’t sure I ever would be again.

“Leave her alone.”

“No. You leave her alone. I was here first. And I brought food.”

“No. I was here first. I only left to use the bathroom.”

“Sucks to suck.”

“Be thankful I didn’t blow up her en suite. What have the Suarezes been feeding me?”

“Both of you get out,” a stern voice rumbled to my left. “Leave the food. I’ll make sure she eats.”

The shock of my siblings obeying an order from Harrow convinced me I was still dreaming.

“They’re gone,” he said softly after the door shut behind them. “You can quit pretending.”

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Slowly lifting my eyelids, I found him sitting in a chair beside my bed holding a bowl of gumbo.

“Everyone is safe.” He waited until I pushed myself upright, bracing my back against the headboard, then shoved a spoonful of food into my mouth. “The house is secure.” He watched me swallow then resumed his update. “Rollo called in a favor. The bodies have been disposed of. The rear neighbor, Mr. Cranston, says he’ll bill Vi for the damages to his lawn and shrubs. He also wants the skeletons back. Apparently, they’re related to him.”

The words trickled in and out of my ears, none of them sticking. “He’s gone.”

Silence stretched between us as Harrow stirred the bowl.

“He came back once.” He crammed a second spoonful into my mouth. “He can do it again, right?”

That was before he rebelled against his god. Dis Pater wouldn’t forgive him for his disobedience anytime soon.

Throat burning, and not from the spices, I rasped, “He tried to kill me.”

“I know.”

“I didn’t think he would actually do it.” Heat in my cheeks, I sniffled just once. “Pretty dumb, huh?”

“I won’t pretend to understand what you’ve gone through. I know you’re still figuring the god stuff out, but you have to know Kierce would never hurt you if he had a choice. Even I can see that.”

“But he doesn’t get one.” A hot tear slid down my cheek to drip off my chin, just when I thought I had run out of them. “He’s never had one.” I wiped my face dry. “I don’t even know if he was only with me to spy for Dis Pater or if he really cares about me.”

“It can be both.”

“How?”

“The way I heard it, he begged for death to protect you. He wouldn’t have done that if he didn’t care.”

You were...worth it. Worth everything. Always.

Those last words kept circling around and around my head until I grew dizzy from them.

“I want to free him. Let him make his own choices. Whether that’s me or not.”

“Okay.” He took the opportunity to force another spoonful into my mouth. “So, what’s our plan?”

“Ourplan?” I dribbled gumbo down my chin. “I’m not dragging you deeper into this mess.”

“That’s what friends do for each other, right?”

“You’re not obligated to me. Not anymore. Not after what Anunit did to you.”

“Friendship isn’t an obligation. It’s a privilege. And I’ve got other reasons.”

A door slammed deeper in the house, and I quirked an eyebrow. “What’s that about?”

“Carter’s here.” A smile crept up on him. “She came to check on me, make sure I’m still alive.” He twirled the spoon in the bowl. “That was her excuse anyway. She banged on the door until Jean-Claude let her in then hunted down Josie. They were holed up in her room arguing for hours before she came to check on you. Based on that slam, it sounds like they’re about to kick off round two.”

“I’m glad I’m not the only one with a complicated relationship.” I hesitated. “What other reasons?”

“Ankou is back.”

Ankou, who had turned Lyle into a dybbuk.

Ankou, who had twisted Lyle into a monster.

Ankou, who had forced Harrow to kill his own uncle.

“I respect that you might need him as an ally, for now, but the second you don’t...” Harrow looked me in the eye, “...I’m going to kill him.”

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“I respect that, and I’m not going to stop you.” I had my own grudges to nurse against him. “He did me a good turn because it suited him. I have no loyalty to him. Not after everything he’s done to my family.” I was half afraid I would find him sitting in a chair in the corner of my room, since he seemed to be popping up everywhere these days. “Where is he, anyway?”

“He saw Josie and me coming for you, yelled ‘not today, Satan’ at her, then vanished before we reached him. He was hurt badly from whatever Josie did to him. He probably went somewhere to heal.”

“I’m sure he’ll be back when we least expect—or want—him. He can’t be done with me yet. He wouldn’t have protected me otherwise.” I exhaled. “His god must have plans for me. Plans that involve exploiting the Alcheyvaha for his benefit.” I laughed softly. “I feel like such an idiot. Dis Pater told me no gods used them for personal gain. That some things are sacred.” I made a halfhearted gesture. “Obviously, that was a lie. And I have nothing but my gut to tell me whether Kierce knew it all along.”

Death gods were dying out. Graveyard tithes weren’t enough anymore. They required additional sources of power to stay alive. Or, being both dead and gods, maybeexistwas a better designation. They dipped a hand into the Alcheyvaha cookie jar whenever they got hungry, consuming their power for themselves by presenting a united front against any other gods who might come sniffing around for crumbs.

“I can’t point out anyone else’s failings.” He reached for my hand, squeezed my fingers. “I fucked up too, Frankie. In so many ways. More than I can count.” He released me. “You found it in your heart to forgive me, so you’ll figure out this thing with Kierce.”

“You put in the work.” I cringed inwardly. “And it was my fault you got possessed by an ancient god.”

“All I’m saying is maybe don’t give up on him yet.”

“I don’t plan on it.”

I had made myself a promise, back when Matty fell ill, and I intended to keep it.

Whether or not what we had was real, I was going to free Kierce from Dis Pater’s service. He was a good person. At least he tried to be. That had to count for something. However he felt about me afterward, well, I was a big girl. I could handle the truth.

Probably.

With enough of Josie and Matty’s bathtub gin.

Atap-tap-tapdrew my attention to the window and a black smudge flapping against the glass.

“Badb.” I was halfway to standing when Harrow pushed me down and went to let her in. “I wondered where you went.” I hadn’t seen her since Anunit took me to Dis Pater’s house. “I was getting worried about you.”

The crow perched on the tips of my toes, rustled her feathers, and a clear voice rang out behind her.

“I couldn’t help but overhear, Bijou, that you’re planning a trip to Abaddon.” Ankou hung from a thorny vine as thick as his wrist Josie must have missed while pruning after their skirmish. He dangled just outside the wards but close enough he could have used his keen senses to eavesdrop. “Let me be the first to offer my services as

your guide to the underworld.”

Trusting Ankou to get me in and out—with Kierce—promised to be a terrible idea.

Especially when, if he heard that much, he knew that Harrow had drawn a target on his back.

“No,” Harrow barked at him, about to slam the window shut. “Absolutely not.”

“Sure.” I told myself I was making the smart choice and not just following my stupid heart, which had a sense of direction as accurate as a compass with no needle. “What have I got to lose?”

Dis Pater had made it plain by sending god bloods after me that he wasn’t going to stop until he killed me, and I couldn’t think of a better person than Kierce to help me return the favor before Dis Pater got any bright ideas about coming after my family again.

To do that, I needed Kierce back.

And here was the one person who could help me save him.

“Don’t give up on me.”

The memory of Kierce saying those words galvanized my resolve.

Dis Pater better hope Buttons could gift his owner one of his nine lives because I was coming for him, and I wasn’t going to stop until he was a footnote in the history books. I might only be a demigoddess, but I had a stronger motivator to survive than his selfish greed.

My family.

May God have mercy on his soul.

Because I won't.