



# Monsters of Midnight

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** The woman I love is dead, and I'll do anything to get her back.

I watched my beloved, Caroline, die before my very eyes. She was thrown into a fiery pit by Cade, the dark demigod who plans to release every monster and take over the earth. Not on my watch. I spent all my time trying to protect Caroline and instead I had led her straight into the clutches of the enemy, a merciless enemy who would stop at nothing to fulfill his evil wish. Well, I have a wish, too. I want Caroline back. They say you can't get people back from the dead but we live in a magic world so the question isn't, is it possible? The question is, What price are you willing to pay?

**Total Pages (Source):** 50

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## PART ONE

### Chapter 1

#### LANEY

Caroline was dead. My best friend in the entire world.

Gone.

I had seen her body disappear into the lava flow and burnt to a crisp. My best friend, my comrade, my sister in arms. We had lived most of our lives together since we'd met in high school. I knew every boyfriend she'd ever dated. I knew every issue she'd ever had with her parents. I knew her life almost as well as I knew my own.

She knew me just as well. She had been there for every break up, every interview, every cold, everything. Her number was my speed dial. I had gone to her for everything and she had stabilized me in the world, making me feel safe and secure when, in truth, I was alone. Caroline was my rock.

"How dare you!" I ran screaming towards Cade, the demigod of volcanoes who had destroyed one of the few loves of my life. I ran toward him with my nails out, but he laughed mercilessly and held me at arms-length with a single raised hand.

"Little firefly, you are divine," he murmured.

"Stay away from her," Magnus growled from his cage. The stump where his finger

used to be dripped blood onto the stone floor.

“You need to shut the fuck up,” I glared at him, anger welled in my chest, tightening my skin and causing it to emit a pale blue glow.

“She’s a feisty thing,” Cade said to Magnus, as if they were having a drink and talking about some woman in a bar.

“You killed my best friend!” I screamed the words out. “It was as if my whole being suddenly recognized the truth that Caroline was gone. My legs buckled beneath me and my padded bottom squished to the floor with a thud. I stared at the molten lava that had swallowed the largest part of my aching heart. Tears welled in my eyes as my body sagged.

She was impossibly gone.

“Do not be disheartened, little firefly,” Cade purred toward me. “You have a whole new world to discover. One that does not require the likes of a banshee.”

“She was all I had,” I insisted. “You don’t understand.”

“You had me,” Magnus said.

“I don’t want you! Traitor!” I screamed up at him. “I want her back!”

“Now, thanks to the sacrifice of your friend, the true monster can rise. The one, who as the elder, should be the God of Monsters,” Cade said, his lips peeling in a gleeful grin. “The child of Vulcan. He will need a bride when he comes to life. This will be you, Firefly.”

“Fuck you,” I said. “I’ll be no one’s bride. Not any of your stinking selves. Not his.” I

pointed at Magnus, who looked forlorn and full of chagrin in the dark shadows of his cage. “Not yours. Certainly not some fucker who’s going to be brought back to life through the death of my best friend. She was everything to me. Everything.”

“What the fuck was I?” Magnus cried.

“Shut the fuck up or I will climb up there and throttle you,” I spewed hatred at Magnus.

“No-no, little bug,” Cade admonished.

“What did you just call me?” I frowned at him, wiping the tears from my eyes.

“Relax,” Cade held his hands out, as if to soothe me. “You’re a firefly. It’s not much more to call you a little bug. It’s a compliment.”

“Leave her alone,” Magnus insisted.

“The only reason you’re still alive,” Cade looked up disdainfully, pointing at Magnus, “is because I need to keep you in order to manage your brother. Well, that and demigods are hard to kill, otherwise I would’ve done it. Right now, I don’t need you.” He waved a hand and Magnus’s cage began to rise into the dark chambers above the hall. When he disappeared into the shadows, Cade turned to me. “Come. We shall prepare you for your groom.”

The cave wall receded, showing a hallway leading further into the volcano.

“I’m not going anywhere with you, fucking asshole,” I spat at him.

“Oh, I think you will,” Cade grinned.

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“Why? What are you going to do, throw me in the pit of lava?” I swallowed hard. There’s a damn good chance he might.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Right now, my heart was so broken, I wasn’t sure I would even mind it. How could she be gone?

“Don’t be like that, Firefly,” Cade said. “There are much greater things to be in life than some banshee’s best friend. It’s time you stepped into your own and became the woman you were always meant to be.”

“What the fuck do you know about me?” I asked. “You don’t know shit about shit. Caroline was half of my identity. Being her best friend meant more to me than almost anything else in the world. We were BFFs. We were everything. I know it may sound stupid at my age, but best friends just get better as years go by. We just get closer and tighter and have more shared experiences. You just ripped all that away from me.”

Cade suddenly burst into molten lava again, heat pouring off his fiery skin. This is how he had been around Ryder. Monstrous. He reached toward me and I pulled back suddenly, terrified he would sear my skin and leave me with burnt flesh.

“You will go down the hallway.” His voice was gravelly. “Or so help me, I will strangle you right here.”

I retreated from him, knowing he was not bluffing. I had just watched him kill Caroline and he would do the same to me. Although I did not feel like living for my sake, I knew there was something more I had to do. He came towards me again and this time I cupped my hands like a small bowl, letting energy flow through me as I glowed a bright blue light. My stomach tightened, drawing energy to me and electricity started to roll across my skin. It flowed down my arms and pooled into my hands.

I was going to destroy him with a ball of electricity.

Throwing my hands up, I tossed the electric ball at him, but it did nothing. He just laughed as I watched it absorb into his body, his molten lava skin glowing more brightly.

“You have some powers, little firefly.” He conceded with a shrug.

“My name,” I seethed at him, “is Laney.”

He raised his hands, sending fire bursting out of them that struck me in the chest, knocking me to the ground and scorching my clothes. I gasped as I rose. My clothes hung in shreds over bare, burnt skin. My breath strangled in my throat as my flesh seared in pain.

“Don’t cross me,” Cade said. “I could destroy you, but I want to keep you for my brother. Now get down the hall.”

I glanced up at the roof where Magnus was caged in the shadows, and then I looked at the writhing pool of molten lava where Caroline had disappeared.

My heart fractured.

There was no way out of this. I glared at Cade. If he killed me, who would avenge Caroline? Who would help Ryder?

I took a deep breath, staggering unsteadily to my feet.

More importantly, who would destroy this monster that was being brought to life through the death of my friend? Caroline would not want me to give up or lay down and die.

She would want me to fight.

Because that's what we were. That's what we had always been. Fighters. People struggling against bad childhoods and crazy relationships to try to find a peace and calm and steadiness in the world. We had found that together and now, I would have to find it alone, but I would avenge Caroline's death.

"Fine." My breath caught in my throat and my chest tightened with anxiety. I was going to comply, but it went against every single fiber of my being. I had to get through this situation and find the opportunity to get free. "Let's see your brother, then. I hope he's not as ugly as you are."

Cade flared, but turned his grotesque hand toward the hallway. "You will wait in the bridal chamber until he attends you. The sacrifice of the rings has been made. Now it's just a matter of time before he rises from the rift. He will need a woman."

I swallowed hard. I wasn't prepared for this. A monster was telling me I would need to be taken by a resurrected monster. I was going to have to find a way to combat him. There was no way I was going to agree to this.

None whatsoever.

Still, I needed time to think and test my powers. I walked towards the shadowy hallway where Cade pointed. My steps shuffled slowly along the dirt floor. There was a dull light at the end of the hallway. I fantasized it was my escape route, but as I rounded the corner, I found myself in a small stone chamber with no windows or doors other than the one we came in through.

In the center of the glowing white cave was a large bed.

Cade held a large hourglass in his hand, where sand was quickly running from the top chamber to the bottom.

“When the moon is full and this hourglass runs out, he will be arisen,” Cade said, placing the hourglass on the side table. “Then he will feed on you and be reborn as a monster among men. We will overturn the Demigod Corporation and there will be new rulers of New Attica. The monsters shall dwell everywhere on the earth.”



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“Not if I have anything to say about it,” I muttered under my nervous breath.

### Chapter 2

#### RYDER

My body wasn't made for the humid air of the Hawaiian tropics. It would've been easier to tear through this jungle in my monster form, but the heat lay heavily against my skin and made it difficult to shift into my more powerful form. Instead, I was crashing through the dense foliage with a machete, focused on trying to find the entrance to Cade's lair, which had magically moved since we had been there the day before.

The day when Caroline had died.

I smash my fist into the trunk of a palm tree, ignoring the pain that shot up my arm.

The jungle gave me a powerful opposing force; something impossible to beat and to pit my wits against. There was no way you could just strike your way through the jungle. You had to know the dangers; where the ground was weak and where the ground was hard, where the vines were long and where the cliffs were high. I knew none of the terrain here. The landscape was a mystery to me. It was the perfect recipient of the rage that engulfed me and drove me to strike. I was pushing my way through the jungle as if I was a bulldozer set on destroying the rainforest itself.

Was it truly possible Caroline was gone?

Impossible to swallow the reality of that.

I had seen it with my own eyes; her hands slipping under the lava and disappearing into the burning flow of magma. I had seen her skin darken, then turn black as she screamed in agony.

That was how it ended.

My relationship with Caroline was always going to end like that; with Caroline dying. I had never expected it to be so horrific or so traumatizing. Now the only thing I wanted to do was die.

After I took out Cade and robbed him of his life, the way he had robbed me of my love. I was going to destroy him. He would be powerless against the crushing strength of my blows. Cade had taken from me the only thing I had ever truly loved.

Caroline.

I took care of my mother out of a sense of responsibility. I kept monsters off the earth out of a sense of honor; a way to right the wrongs of my father. The feeling that I should keep my own kind from doing their worst. I always struggled with the fact my father was a monster. He was the worst born of all of us, but I always tried to be his saving grace.

My efforts had failed me.

My love was dead.

Even Ratchet wasn't able to keep up with my speed through the jungles. He had fallen behind.

The barking of the hell hound grated on my nerves, and I turned to shout at the beast. “Quit making so much noise,” I insisted. “We’re trying to get to Cade’s domain without everybody necessarily knowing about it.”

I knew it wasn’t the way hell hounds worked. They liked to go in blazing and loud. I had to get him to think a little more strategically if he was going to stay on this team. Although we still had the Albright witches, this team was really a party of me and the hellhound. A hell hound who had somehow sworn its life to Caroline. With her gone, it had attached its brindle ass to me.

I hated dogs.

They always reminded me how I was one step away from being a beast myself. Inside, I was a loyal, growling asshole.

Evidenced by the way I treated Caroline. I had lied to her for years. I had locked her up. It wasn’t hard to see how that could damage a relationship and make it difficult to build trust.

I had made my mistakes.

I swung the oversized machete I carried, cutting off a vine that was swinging in my face. I had been hacking through the jungle since dawn. The witches had figured out the only other entrance to Cade’s lair now was through a little-known cave at the steepest side of the mountain. It was daybreak when we started at the bottom of the trail, but by early mid-morning, the trail head tapered out and we were just trying to get to the general area where we thought the cave would be.

Me and Bales, the hound from hell.

“There’s nothing over here.” Ratchet flew down and landed next to me. I glanced

over at him, narrowing my eyes. His gaze was unfocused; his eyes are bloodshot.

“Are you still eating those flowers?” I asked.

“They help with my anxiety,” Ratchet replied. “Clearly, bashing the hell out of the side of this mountain isn’t doing anything for yours. Come on.”

“I can’t fly.” Something happened when Cade pushed me out of the volcano. If my wings were out, anybody could see me. Not exactly the best look.

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“You don’t have to go far,” Ratchet pointed toward where the sun was setting. “Just go over the ridge and we’ll settle in for the night.”

I glanced down at Bales, wondering if he was in the mood to settle down. He looked like he would go a thousand more miles of his own free will. However, he also looked exhausted. His head hung low, hair askew, eyes bloodshot and weary. Something similar to what I probably looked like. “We’ll meet you by the fire,” I grumbled.

It took us longer to go across the front of the bluff than I had expected. We arrived in the evening dusk, just before it turned pitch black. It wasn’t hard to figure out where they were. This part of the mountain was steep and dark, but the fire burned bright. Fortunately, the witches would have placed wards to hide the fire from any eyes that may happen to be in the vicinity.

I took a deep breath and sighed as we entered the clearing. Cade had dealt us a terrible blow. In many ways, it was my death blow. Taking Caroline from me - the one true thing that made everything else make sense—was a blow I wouldn’t recover from. She had calmed the chaos inside of me. Her gentle presence had allowed me to see and understand the chaos better.

I had never understood the chaos before I met her.

I had lived a long, long time, and I had grown to know myself very well, but what I had not known was the effect one other person could have on me. The second I met Caroline in that café, I had felt it. Our happenstance meeting when I was passing through Boston and she was on a work break going to meet Laney.

I remembered every detail.

She was wearing a forest green sweater, black leggings, and deep green ankle boots with a little fringe on the back. I thought the fringe was really sassy. What was more surprising was that I was thinking about it at all. Since when had I started considering shoe fringe on a mortal woman's feet?

Since I first met Caroline.

And she hadn't even spoken yet.

I was drawn to her and caught up in her personality so quickly and so suddenly. It was like we had never been apart from the minute I said hello. I tried making up a reason why I was saying hello but none was needed. Standing in the line at the café, we had caught each other's eyes, and that had been the end of it. Caroline was mine. She could've told me anything about herself, and I wouldn't have turned away from her.

The coffee had turned into dinner. It had turned into a late night, a long talk about everything and nothing. She was a brilliant woman who understood science in a way I could never imagine. She made me feel like a blunt instrument. She was given not only great beauty, but great intelligence and experience. We had met when she was thirty-eight.

A mere babe.

For those of us who were the Legendi, it wasn't a very old age, even for witches, who tend to live longer lives using their magic spells. Caroline's maturity caught me off guard. How she could be present in the moment and kind to everybody and still touch everyone in the room with her amazed me. Her presence alone made a difference.

Now she was gone forever.

It couldn't be true. There were too many levels of existence. There was no way she could just be gone forever. I was going to deal with Cade. I was going to deal him a hard, swift blow. Once that was done and the monster threat was dealt with, I was going to Undirheim to find her. I didn't care what it cost me. Demigods could not go to Undirheim without being stripped of their powers, but I didn't care. She was worth it to me, even if it meant dying on the spot.

The fire was already burning by the time I arrived, and they had all settled down and clearly eaten before I had gotten there. Ratchet was off in the shadows eating flowers with his crazed, bloodshot eyes, and the witches were sipping tea by the remnants of the fire.

"We need a plan," I called out to Ratchet, waving him over to join us.

"Coming," he responded, as if we were an old married couple.

Ever since we had been to the frost giants, he hadn't quite been himself. I wanted to know what it was, but I also just wanted it to not be a problem. I wanted him to be one hundred percent present. I needed him.

Ratchet was required by law to do anything I asked. Though I only ever asked him to help me stop the monsters from attacking earth. I rarely asked him to do anything outside of that. He was his own person, or demon, and didn't need someone telling him what to do all the time.

Lately he hadn't been that present, though.

I didn't like to look in his eye much lately. Ever since we'd been to see the frost giants and he got his hand on the red flowers, they were all he wanted. He'd still

shown up for work. He hadn't missed a beat. There wasn't a single thing I'd asked him to do that he hadn't done, but it was always the bare minimum he could get away with. He never took into consideration the extra mile like he would normally take. There was definitely something wrong with Ratchet, and if I hadn't just lost the love of my life and if I wasn't facing a crisis of monstrous proportions, I would maybe have a little more time to deal with it.

Right now, all I knew was I needed him at whatever percentage he could show up for me at, whether it was eighty, sixty, or hell, I'd even take forty percent.

I needed all the help I could get as much as he could bring it.

Lady Albright and the witches were drinking up teas and potions. When I sat down by the fire, one of them immediately handed me a glass. I hadn't seen her before. "Where did you come from?" I asked.

"She's a distant relative of the Albright clan," Lady Albright smiled looking up from her drink. "Her name is Katrina."

"Technically I'm part of the Cougar Creek Coven," Katrina said, her angular features casting long shadows in the fire light. "I was out here on vacation, and I heard they had a problem, so I came to help out and well here I am." She shrugged her boney shoulders and smiling at the witches around our small fire, as if this was exactly where you would expect to find her while she was on vacation.

"Your coven is strong." I remembered how the Cougar Creek Coven had fought off an attack on their cemetery just recently. I'd been called in to help out with a monster they had discovered in a crypt. "We really appreciate any of your help here."

"You know you can't bring back the dead," Katrina peered at me sharply. She looked like a rather strict woman, but I also understood she was to the point and I didn't



mind that in a person.

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“Yes, once they go to Undirheim, there’s no way to bring them back,” Lady Albright affirmed.

“He wouldn’t be so stupid as to think he could bring her back,” Ratchet said as he sidled up and grabbed a cup of tea from one of the witches.

I wanted to correct him, but I also knew it wasn’t my place to treat him like a child. Even if he was acting like one, but fortunately, I didn’t have to.

“That was my tea. Thank you very much.” Katrina snatched her cup back from Ratchet.

“Right now, we’re just trying to find Cade,” I grumbled. “We need to stop the resurrection he’s planning.”

“I’m a demon,” Ratchet stated the obvious. “I’m going to Undirheim. It’s my native country and I’ll find out where Caroline is and what we can do about her. Going in there as a demigod means you’ll be stripped of your status. You’ll survive a little while, but not long.”

I bit my tongue. I didn’t tell them I didn’t care whether I was alive or dead. I didn’t care if I lived another minute, I just had to see Caroline again. I had to try to bring her back to life. She had so much good left to do in the world. She was a cancer research scientist for goodness sakes. She sure as hell wasn’t done with her life’s mission.

“So, Katrina,” I raised an eyebrow at the tall, angular witch, who was somehow related to the Albright Coven. Had she really just happened to be in the

neighborhood? Very convenient and suspicious.

“Lady Albright told me she was coming here,” Katrina said, as if she could read my thoughts. “I came because she mentioned it.”

“Well, what would your coven say to do?” I asked. “I heard your high priestess. Mae is pretty clever with magic.”

“The power of Cougar Creek Coven is becoming legendary,” Katrina said, with a slight smile, and a nod. “She would say to seal off the region, so nobody can get in or out, but the problem is, the region is so large you’d have to seal up the entire volcano. That would concentrate all of your power into a single force field.”

“And would leave just me to take on Cade,” I said. “I’m in for it.”

“You’re assuming the rest of us aren’t into it?” Katrina asked a rhetorical question. “I can’t speak for Lady Albright or her clan, but I’d rather be at the front lines with you than creating a force field in areas where we don’t need it. I don’t think there’s enough of us to do such massive operations. I think we need to delivered specifically targeted assaults. We know there’s only one entrance to Cade’s lair. We just need to find it.”

“What’s the spell?” I asked. I’d been hacking through the jungle all day, thinking I’d eventually find some grand entrance to the cave, but I hadn’t. Instead, I had just grown tired and weary and emotionally exhausted.

“There’s a finding spell we can use.” Katrina gave a nod to Lady Albright.

“The power of the coven, along with Katrina’s experience using this spell with Cougar Creek Coven, should make it powerful enough,” Lady Albright mused. “I must warn you, though, the minute we enact the spell, everyone is going to find out

exactly where we are and where we're headed. That's the weakness of it."

"Bring every devil in the land to me," I growled. I didn't care. I wanted people to fight. Nothing mattered now. Not with Caroline gone. Let all the demons of hell find us. I welcomed the battle.

### Chapter 3

#### LANEY

A dull glow came from the side of the cave, where Cade had chained me, leaving me vulnerable to whatever creature his brother was going to resurrect as. The bright hue in the room, I realized after a while, came from my skin. I was the firefly. I knew a little about what other supernaturals felt when they discovered they didn't have much magic power; you're in, but you're not cool.

I almost thought it was better to be without magic powers and just be the cool human tagging along with all the supernaturals.

As the night wore on, my limbs grew weary, having remained tense and stressed since Caroline had first disappeared from Boston. My ears strained. It sounded like the earth was rising and falling in light groans beneath me. It wasn't until a huge crack came in the side of my chamber wall that I realized Cade's brother had returned.

I wanted to close my eyes so desperately and not look at him in the slightest, but it was impossible. It wasn't my nature. I knew I had to see this wretched beast and look him in the face if he was going to attack me, or do whatever he had in mind.

Ryder was the only monster I knew, but he was a half monster. This creature would be a beast slain by Hercules himself.

The creature that stepped through the wall was more horrific than anything I could imagine. Its body was that of a lion, but a lion who hadn't eaten in a long time. Its claws looked like black ebony. The body of the creature itself was a misty motion of molecules, waiting to find density in the physical world.

I supposed that's where I came in.

The head of the creature was like one of those horrific Hindu masks of Kali with multiple eyes and fangs jutting out in various directions from its gaping maw. It walked on hind legs, its front arm stretching out like a human toward me. I closed my eyes and scrunched up into a little ball, feeling all my limbs shaking in fear as the creature lumbered toward me. I wasn't sure if it was going to fuck or kill me, but I knew it needed sustenance of some sort, and whatever it wanted I was supposed to be offering. Goosebumps crawled up my flesh and a cold tremor settled on my bones as the monster approached.

Suddenly, there was a popping sound inside my stomach and a bright flash blew up in the room. I opened my eyes and looked down. I was emanating a glow which was about 1000% brighter than what had come from me previously.

There was also something on my back. I reached my hands around and twisted my neck. I could just barely make out wings had appeared on my back. They were an incandescent green and purple hue, but what was most amazing was Cade's brother had disappeared. Something about my light had dispelled his darkness. I was sure he wouldn't be gone for long if Cade was dead set on bringing him back.

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I moved toward the main hall where Caroline had died, and I was shocked to find my wings naturally fluttered and lifted me off the ground, moving me quite quickly and smoothly just inches above the floor. As I went back toward the main entrance, not even sure how I was going to get it open, I paused and looked back up into the shadows of the ceiling. Magnus was up there, and no matter what it cost, he was still someone I had cared about. He was Ryder's brother.

I had to do something to try to help him.

I beat my wings, a little stronger, not even knowing exactly how I was doing it. I was just wanting them to move a little faster, and they did, propelling me up into the shadows. My eyes adjusted, but because of my glow, I could see more easily. It was when I heard a moaning I knew I had found Magnus.

As I moved toward his cage, a small shadow moved in the dark, creeping up behind me and calling out to me. "Fire fly, you were offered to me," the voice said. "You are mine."

"They forgot to get my permission," I retorted, moving to the side of the cage where Magnus huddled, looking miserable.

"You should've gotten out when you could," Magnus muttered at me. "You shouldn't have come back for me."

"You're absolutely right, I shouldn't." I agreed as I pulled a hair pin out of my hair and picked the lock to his cage door.

“How do you know how to pick locks?” He asked curiously.

“My life wasn’t always peaches and souffles,” I said with a wink as the latch opened and I pulled him out.

The surrounding shadows screamed in a riot, creating a whirlwind of dark energy that erupted around us.

“How are you going to get us out of this?” Magnus cried.

“The same thing I did before,” I yelled back.

“And that was?” Magnus looked around fearfully as the swirling mass of darkness grew.

“Glowed really bright!” I screwed my eyes shut and used all of my thoughts and powers to work toward one single goal, which was creating that popping sound and glowing so brightly that Cade’s brother disappeared.

It wasn’t working, though.

“Can’t you help?” I asked.

Magnus was weak, and he had done a makeshift bandage on his hand to stop the loss of blood when Cade cut off his finger. He still needed me to fly him down from up here. Clearly, he was a monster demigod like his brother, but he didn’t have the same attributes. He certainly didn’t have the wings. I wasn’t even sure if my wings would hold us up, but I was going to give it a try. It was the only chance we had if we were ever going to get out of this black mass of swirling shadows.

Claws were coming out of in the dark. I could feel their tips scraping against my skin,

making thin, small slices. I screamed in pain.

“Drop me,” Magnus cried.

“I can’t,” I grimaced, using all my energy to simply fight down words. The creature was trying to smash us into the ceiling, kill both of us and do whatever it needed to do to have a corporeal body. It was my job to make sure none of that happened.

“So, this thing is afraid of light?” Magnus asked.

“He was for a second at the magnitude I was shining at, yeah,” I returned. “Though maybe it just pissed him off. Right now, he seems really, really pissed off.”

A sudden, forceful flash of light erupted in the center between Magnus and I. It was so sudden and so bright, I dropped him. I could just see his body falling away from me, toward the ground below.

I pointed straight down and raced after him, grabbing him just before he cracked his head against the floor.

“What the hell was that?” I asked, looking down at his bloody bandage and the small stone he held between his thumb and the palm of his other hand.

“The sun rune,” he said. “It’s been a long time since I’ve used runes, but I seem to not have lost my touch.”

“He’s probably just going to come back more pissed than he already was,” I pointed out. “Come on, how do we get out of this place?” I took him past the lava pit where Caroline had died just hours ago and looked for the door where we had come through. It was marked out by a framework, but there was no actual door there.



“Do you have a rune for opening doors?” I asked.

“Yes, there’s a rune for that,” Magnus said, “but I don’t have it. It’s not like we all walk around with a ton of magic runes, and you just take your pick.”

“I don’t know exactly how this all works,” I said. “I do know if we don’t find a way to open the door soon, we’re going to be in a hell of a lot of trouble with the screaming demon ’s swirling around up there trying to find a body to inhabit.”

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“The breaker rune,” he said. “I can use the breaker rune on the area where the door is.”

“Could you do it fast?” I queried. “We need to get out of here.”

“I will,” His voice shook even as mine did.

I wasn't as worried as the demon in the shadows. It was the molten lava embers creating a ribbon of hot lava, glowing, orange and yellow in the floor. I wanted to believe it was just a portal to another dimension, and that going through it hadn't actually killed Caroline. It had just put her in another place where I could go and see her. I wanted to dive into the bed of molten lava and find out the truth.

Even if it killed me.

“Don't look at it,” Magnus admonished.

“How do you know what I'm looking at?” I asked.

“Portals like that always have a sheen to them,” he explained.

“She's not dead?” I gripped his arm in excitement.

“Yes, she's dead.” Magnus said without even so much as an apology. “Your best friend in the entire world is dead, but you're also right it is just another portal. It's just a one-way portal. There are portals that come into earth like the ones with the monsters are going through and then there are these portals, which only allow people

to leave earth...and not come back. She can never come back here. That's what they were trying to say."

"She's alive," I said, breathing a sigh of relief. I didn't care if she moved to another dimension or another planet.

"She's not the same, though either," Magnus said. "She'll have had some changes because, well, because she's in Undirheim. It changes the way they think, the way they talk."

"It can't change everything about her," I said. "Caroline was one of the most steadfast people I knew. She was always the same; consistent, reliable, and trustworthy. I can't imagine she is anything different in the underworld."

"Well, you will never find out," Magnus said. "You won't be going there."

A screaming from the rafters grabbed my attention as the black shadows came in, racing down toward us. This time I could see the reflection of the shiny talons coming straight toward my heart.

"You better hurry with the rune," I pressed Magnus.

"I'm trying," Magnus insisted, taking the stones out of his pouch one by one and flinging them at the door. Each time he would say a different word, until finally one of them exploded.

"Shit!" Magnus exclaimed.

He whipped around, grabbed my hand, and pulled me toward the gaping hole in the side of the mountain. We passed through just as the talons got to me and scraped along my hand as the wall closed behind us.

## Chapter 4

### RYDER

“Did you see that?” Katrina elbowed Ratchet, who had fallen asleep next to her sitting by the fire.

Ratchet stumbled to his feet as I roused myself from my negative pondering. “What? We’re home? What’s going on?” he muttered.

The younger two witches in the coven giggled, but nobody else was watching him. We were all looking up at the side of the mountain. An explosion had just rocked a hole in it.

“That’s got to be where she is,” Katrina stood up.

“Agreed,” Lady Albright moved next to her coven mate.

I rose a little more slowly.

“You can’t just assume it’s what you’re looking for just because it shows up where you’re looking,” I pointed out. “It could be anything making a hole in the side of the mountain. And it’s probably not Laney. She’s got a lot of talents, but blowing up the side of a mountain is probably not one of them.”

I glanced over at Lady Albright because I really didn’t know everything about witches that at this stage, it seemed like I should know, considering they seemed to be a large part of my life recently. “What powers does a firefly have?” I asked.

“None that I know of,” she shrugged, turning her peaked face towards the mountain. “Fire-flies are pretty rare creatures. I know they glow and I believe they can flash a

lot of bright light.”

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“Do you think that’s what we’ve seen?” I asked, pointing at the side of the mountain.

“Not unless her light can destroy part of the mountain,” I said. “And I don’t think that’s probably the case.”

Bales was yapping at my side and making a lot of noise. “All right, let’s get up there,” I glanced down at the slathering beast, “and let’s just hope it’s not a trap.”

We cut our way through the jungle, pushing forward. The location was a lot farther away than it had seemed when looking at it from below the mountainside. Normally small bugs didn’t bother me, but here they seem to be attacking us en masse with mosquitoes and some sort of biting fly, making the efforts to get up the side of the mountain even more uncomfortable.

I turned back to Katrina. “Shouldn’t you be back by the fire doing some magic spell to get rid of the bugs?”

“The cauldron magic already worked,” Katrina waved her hand back towards the vale, where the fire still burned brightly. “She is free.”

“We need to try to get her safely off the mountain. Can you tell where Cade is?” I asked.

Katrina shook her head, nodding toward Lady Albright. “Can you tell?”

“His energy’s not in the volcano,” she said. “He must’ve had something pretty urgent to do if he was called away during the resurrection of his brother.”

“Ratchet, can you fly up there and take a look?” I asked as I turned around, but Ratchet wasn’t with us.

I took a deep breath, but I kept my opinion to myself. The last thing anyone needed to see was me having an opinion on Ratchet, on his inability to show up and perform the one task I needed him to do. Fair enough; this wasn’t exactly a monster bash, so maybe he didn’t feel like he was necessary, but he was my right-hand man. If I was fighting the thing that killed my wife, it would seem he would show up at the party.

“Is there any way we can get elevated visibility?” I asked. As much fun as it was running around in the jungle with Bales, it wasn’t really going to solve the bigger problem we had, which was how to find Laney.

“Not unless you want to bust out those wings,” Katrina shrugged.

“I want to, but I can’t hide them from anyone,” I said.

“Don’t think there’s anyone out here looking?” Katrina motioned at the darkness that surrounded us. “And besides, even if Cade is watching, he’s going to know something’s going on. At least we can meet them out in the open.”

“Good point,” I said. Clearly, I hadn’t been thinking straight. I was suddenly grateful for the witches who were here to help. I certainly needed it.

I took a deep breath and channeled all my energy into my shoulder blades, which was a spot at the back where it would open up for the black wings of my beastly nature to come out. I felt the powerful darkness rising inside me as I unfurled my wings quickly and easily. In seconds, I was taking off even though I left Bales beneath me.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the vast darkness in front of me, but within minutes, I was able to see dark shadows moving below in a helter skelter pattern of

pure panic. I aimed for them. I could hear the yapping and barking of Bales as we went further up the mountain.

I flew down quickly, spotted and grabbed Laney. To my surprise, she had my brother. I landed a resounding blow on his jaw.

“I just saved him!” Laney exclaimed.

“You can’t seriously still like this guy?” I asked.

“Not liking him doesn’t make me want to kill him,” Laney argued. “Those are too like polar extremes.”

“He’s responsible for the death of Caroline!” I could barely control my anger, it thrummed explosively beneath my skin and I wanted to dismantle Magnus piece by piece.

“He’s your brother,” Laney said.

I glared at him, ready to rip his head off if Laney hadn’t been standing between the two of us. “Not anymore, he’s not. Come on, let’s get you off this mountain before Cade comes back and finds you escaped.”

Laney pulled herself out of my arms. “I have wings,” she said. “I don’t need your help.”

“No, I suppose you don’t,” I said. “You managed to escape from the clutches of Cade, rescue an undeserving fucker, and get off the mountain. I suppose you don’t need help to get through the jungle.”

Bales must’ve been on hyper drive because he burst into the clearing and hurled



himself onto Laney.

“It’s okay.” Laney seemed to know the dog needed comforting just as much as she did, and probably I did as well. “We’re going to get her back.”

“Don’t give them false hope,” I said. “No human gets out of Undirheim.”

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“She’s not human. She’s fae,” Laney corrected. “And she was put there by mistake.”

“There are no mistakes. There’s just when it’s your time to go, you go.” I grumbled, sadness welling up inside me. My emotions were on a roller coaster. I took a deep breath. I needed to get them under control.

“And there’s no coming back,” Magnus said.

“Right now, we have to concern ourselves with getting off the mountain and away from Cade.” I couldn’t bear thinking about Caroline trapped in Undirheim. I glared at Magnus. “We can leave him for all I care.”

“We’re not leaving your brother on the mountain at the mercy of another demigod,” Laney argued. “You carry him and I’ll fly next to you.”

I grumbled and groaned, but at the end, she was right. As much as I hated Magnus and couldn’t stand the thought of him, he was my brother.

“We may not make it anyway,” I said, staring back up the mountain as a loud boom filled the air. Dirt and rocks flew through the sky as an avalanche erupt from its side. Lava began to spurt down upon us. Cade must’ve returned, and he was hell-bent on finding us. There was no way I was going to let that happen, though.

I grabbed Laney’s hand, tugging at her as I flew faster and harder, practically dragging her through the air.

“Be careful, these wings are new,” Laney complained as she bounced in the wind

stream behind me.

“You don’t understand, we’ve got to get to Ratchet,” I said, “and we need to get him to make a portal. Otherwise, none of us are getting out of here alive.”

“You’ve got a pretty good chance of it, seeing as you’re a demigod and all,” Laney murmured.

“We aren’t immortal. We can be killed,” I insisted.

“Let’s not have that be tonight.” Laney shook her head, her gaze falling on Magnus. How deep were her feelings for him? Was she going to be able to stand by and watch the punishment which he was due for causing the death of a supernatural?

I felt nothing when I thought about my brother's suffering. There was no pain and suffering greater than what I was inundated with over the death of Caroline. My brother’s betrayal was but a small speed bump or dip next to the cavernous gaping canyon of my heart.

If nothing else, my brother would stand a trial, and for that to happen, we owed it to ourselves to get him through the portal, rather than having him be killed by Cade.

I gripped Magnus tighter in my arms and dove steadily to where I knew Ratchet had to be. I didn’t even bother glancing over my shoulder. I just hoped Laney could keep up. I couldn’t handle losing her as well. Right now, she seemed like my only link to Caroline.

“Keep up!” I called over my shoulder to Laney. Then I turned straight forward and dove with Magnus, grabbing Laney’s wrist at the last moment, when I realized there was no way she was going to make it on her own.

Ratchet looked up blearily watching us approach.

“Open a portal!” I cried, watching the glow from the volcano shine on his face. “Get us out of here!”

Ratchet squinted but then somehow seemed to understand. He turned and with a flick of his wrists he created a portal. The witches made their way through it disappearing into the hazy light emitted by the portal. I swung my arm forward, pulling Laney as fast and as hard as I could.

We weren’t going to make it!

I yanked her arm forward, throwing her towards the portal and with relief I saw her make it through. I glanced at Ratchet. We dove for the portal, smashing into each other seconds before it closed.

## Chapter 5

### LANEY

Fire balls of lava trail their way through the edges of the portal right before it closed, some of them even getting sliced in half as they dropped into Ryder’s command center. Perched on the top of Mount Diablo on the outskirts of the San Francisco Bay Area. It had a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view on the top lookout level with all the private accommodation one level below. They had everything here, even the healing room, which was apparently where I was at the moment. The witches were standing around me in a circle, candles burning and incense filling the air with heady scents.

We had come through the portal about an hour ago, and I had been brought immediately here. I was weak as all fuck. I felt like the energy had really been zapped

out of me, not by Cade and not by his brother, but with having to save Magnus. My heart ached over it.

I don't know why, but I thought he was the one. I was clearly mistaken. He was not the one, but it took a little of time for my heart to catch up with my head.

Ryder knew it, too. He had the same look on his face, like he would accept the proximity of this person because of their connection. In his case, blood, but in my case, I couldn't deny my heart. Not that I still wanted him, I didn't. I had at one point, though, and therefore he should be protected when I could.

At first, being in the healing center felt quite good. My body had relaxed, and I inhaled the essential oils misting in the air and the vibrational tones of the witches' songs entered into each part of my body. Now, though, after an hour of my body waking up again, I was ready to start talking to people and find out what was actually going on with Magnus. The creature in the cave had said something about Caroline still being alive.

I wanted to know about that.

I sat up, suddenly relieved, relaxed, and revived. “Thank you,” I said. “I’m so grateful for your help,”

“Based on what we could see during the healing,” Katrina said, “your power that makes you a firefly has a maximum vibration level, which you exceeded when you were under attack and in fear.”

“What does it mean in plain English?” I asked. “Human English.” I clarified. “Like am I going to die soon or am I going to lose my powers? What’s really going to happen?”

“Negative way to look at it,” Lady Albright said with a smile. “Why is it people never wonder if it’s going to make them more powerful or if it is going to enrich them? Why do they always think the worst?”

“I’m sorry,” I said with all my heart. I knew it wasn’t like me to be negative. “I’m still coming to terms with the loss of Caroline.” My heart was heavy, wounded, and drained all at the same time.

“It takes time,” murmured Katrina.

“Can we be done with this now?” I asked, motioning at the crystals and the incense. “Can I go?”

“It can be over whenever you say it should be over,” Lady Albright stepped back, the

glow of light and energy surrounding the circle of witches dimmed and faded into nothingness.

“So, I’m healed now?” I asked.

Lady Albright shook her head. “I know you’ve got other things you want to do.”

“True,” I nodded, sitting up and scooting off the table.

I ran quickly up the stairs when the doors opened to the main room. I saw Magnus standing there. I immediately flinched. I had been in love with this man. Well, as in love as you can be when you’ve only known each other for a few months, but people have built lifetimes with others, just knowing them a few days. So, who could tell?

Whatever we had, though? That was definitely over. What he did was unforgivable. What he was doing right now was really quite pathetic. Cringing away from Ryder as they sat in the corner talking.

I looked over at Ratchet, who was looking at the map of the rifts. It was hard for me to read it. I had to be honest about that. It wasn’t as easy as it was for everybody else, but Ratchet didn’t even seem like he was looking at it. His eyes were glazed over, and he was staring at it with some sort of curiosity.

I placed my hand on his shoulder, startling him to attention.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

His eyes sprang into focus for a brief moment as he stared at me, and then he turned back to staring at the rift. “Everything is just peachy cupcake.”

“Well, I’m glad you think so, because from where I’m sitting, it doesn’t really seem

quite like that.” I ran my hands through my hair and tugged on the ends of it, glancing covertly over at Magnus.

“Don’t worry. He won’t stick around long.” Ratchet nodded toward Magnus. “He never does.”

Ryder and Magnus’s voice were raised in anger as they debated something.

“Let’s just hope Magnus isn’t trying to convince Ryder to let him stay,” I said.

“Ryder wants to go into Undirheim and get Caroline back,” Ratchet said. “It’s a fool’s errand. Magnus is trying to stop him.”

“You’re impossible,” Magnus said to Ryder. “There’s no way you will get her out of there alive.”

I moved slowly over toward them, feeling like I was walking up to a pair of fighting dogs, but knowing they needed something other than testosterone in the middle of them to help smooth things out.

“Ryder is not going anywhere,” I said, looking at Ryder pointedly.

“Stay out of it, Laney,” Ryder growled.

“I’m not staying out of anything,” I said. “You guys can sit here and pretend you knew Caroline and yeah you were married to her and everything, but the reality is that you guys live in the shadows and she and I lived in the light. She was my best friend and there’s only one way we’re getting her back and that’s with me involved.”

“Oh, hell, no,” Magnus said, shaking his head. “That’s never going to happen.”



“You lost any opportunity. You had to make any claims or decisions on me the minute you stole their wedding rings and hightailed it to Cade,” I said. “So, please spare me the lines of bullshit. I am going to do what I want to do.”

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Magnus looked at me, his eyes wide and pleading.

“Don’t give me those big puppy eyes. They have no power over me anymore,” I admonished.

“I don’t suppose they do,” Magnus said sadly.

The worst thing was they didn’t. I loved the feeling of being in love. I loved the excitement and the thrill that there was somebody out there who was awesome and perfect and wonderful and who cares just about me.

That wasn’t Magnus. Magnus only cared about himself and his mother. He didn’t even care about his brother too much if he was willing to do what he did. No, he was classic narcissistic, full of himself and focused on himself. He was not the man for me. It made me sad. Not because I wanted him anymore, but it just made me sad to not have the energetic vibe of romance going on anymore. I didn’t have the feeling that there would be anything special in my day.

“I don’t expect that you would still want to see me,” Magnus said, “but—”

“That’s for sure,” I cut him off.

“I just want you to know that my feelings for you are real,” Magnus moaned.

“I hardly believe that,” I groaned, closing my eyes and honestly not even wanting to hear about it. It was like taking salt and rubbing it into a wound. “The only thing I want to know, and it’s not from you, it’s from Ryder,” I said, turning to the demigod

of monsters. “How do we at least talk to Caroline to know she’s okay?”

Ryder blew out a sigh. “It’s complicated. We need to have a plan in place.”

“You won’t even be able to find her in Undirheim,” Magnus said. “Without some level of sacrifice and you can’t get her out, so I don’t even know what you’re thinking of.”

I whirled on him. “I just want to make sure she’s okay.”

“She’s in Undirheim. She’s dead,” Magnus shrugged. “I don’t know what else you want to know other than that. She is out of this realm.”

“I agree with you, Caroline.” Ryder crossed his arms over his chest.

“So, what’s the first step?” I asked.

“Well, we probably need to learn a little more about Undirheim,” Ryder said, glancing into the room.

“We can start doing some research,” Katrina noted, moving to huddle with the witches. Magnus reached toward me, trying to approach, but I just turned away. “Don’t even try, Magnus. Even if you were able to bring Caroline back to life and place her right here in mint condition in front of me, I will never ever have the time of day for you. We are through.”

Ryder had assigned me the room Caroline, and I had shared before when we had stayed here. I went back to it now to have a long, hot shower. I was just trying to come to terms with everything and try not to lose my shit. My best friend dying was the worst thing ever. It changed my entire perspective on the world. How was I even supposed to go back to Boston now, forget the fire fly, forget the supernatural world,

forget everything? How was I supposed to live without my best friend? How was I supposed to just go about my business and pretend life was normal? She didn't have any parents. I didn't have a large family. We had been everything to each other and now here I was in my mid-forties with the rest of my life stretching out in front of me, and knowing I wouldn't have my best friend when I needed her.

I knew I should be helping them with the research on Undirheim. They were looking at doors and spells and how to get in there and who to talk to. I knew Ratchet could be more helpful than he was being, but for some reason he wasn't supporting this effort to find Caroline. I guess it was a testament to how dangerous it was for us to even go there. Ratchet seemed intent on the flowers he'd been consuming since we got here and it didn't look like he had any plans to let up.

I stared outside at the bright full moon, casting blue shade over everything. The views from up here on the top of Mount Diablo were amazing. I felt like I was in a fishbowl. It's not like there was anybody looking in, but I needed to breathe fresh air. I needed to go out and feel grounded. I'd gone from being inside of a volcano to now being inside something that felt like a tower, even though it wasn't.

I turned to Ryder. "Is it okay to get out of this place for a little bit and go for a walk?"

His eyebrows raised in surprise. "Yeah, of course I think they'd be fine."

"I don't think it's a good idea," Magnus said. "There could be anything out there looking for you."

"What was looking for me is in Hawaii," I said. "And besides, I don't think he really needs me anymore. There's plenty of other ways for that creature to come back to life fully."

"Yeah, I don't think they actually need Laney. I think she was just in the way and

made a good excuse. Though, you're probably right about not letting her outside. Could be dangerous, Laney," Ryder glanced at me cautiously.

"Please," I pleaded with every ounce in my body. "Just let me go outside for a little bit."

"I know exactly how you feel," Ryder said. "I feel it too. I understand you want to go outside and get some fresh air and ground yourself a little bit, but maybe it's just not the right time,"

"Why don't you come with me?" I asked.

"That's a really terrible idea," Magnus argued.

"It'll give her protection," Ratchet chimed in. "In case anything happens."

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“A lot of good protection, I am,” I complained, my heart still rubbed raw from having lost Caroline. If something came to attack us, I might just lie down and let it rip me to shreds.

### Chapter 6

#### RYDER

I noticed the look of disapproval from Magnus and the glance of glee from Ratchet. I didn't like either one of them. Ratchet's look made me think he thought there was something more going on between Laney and it might lead to mischief. Magnus was just clearly jealous that his former girlfriend was no longer his own. She obviously wasn't mine. The last thing I could bear to think about was another woman, but there was something really familiar about Laney that I really appreciated. It could be that she wore the same perfume as Caroline, or maybe that they had similar mannerisms. There was something about Laney that reminded me distinctly of Caroline, and made me comforted by her presence.

I closed the door quietly behind me as we left and walked down the spiral staircase toward the hillside. Mount Diablo was a beautiful barren mountain. It was full of golden grass and walking trails that made it a delight to spend time in. I hadn't built this place just to get out here in the open or to look at the scenery from behind the glass. I'd actually come out here because I enjoyed walking out into the woods. The freedom to try different things and to go to different places and to enjoy going on long hikes. The moon was so full in the sky it created enough light for us to walk by. Laney tripped at first so I reached back and grabbed her hand to steady her but quickly let it go. It was almost like a shock to touch her.

“Are you flowing some of your fire fly mojo?” I asked.

Laney looked at me and rolled her eyes. “I don’t even know what firefly mojo is, much less how I’m supposed to use it. I did some things when I was in the volcano. I really don’t have any defensive mechanisms against anything that comes at us.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of that,” I grumbled, “but I don’t really think we have anything to worry about. Ratchet wouldn’t have let us go if there was any danger of us being way laid. We would see it on the rift map or they will see it from the roof before we see it here.”

“What I should be doing is being at home and researching what I can do with my fire fly powers,” Laney responded.

“There’ll be plenty of time for that,” I said. “We’ve just been through a big shock and I’m still not quite sure how either one of us is actually going to deal with it. I know I for one am having trouble thinking about anything other than Caroline.”

“Me too,” Laney murmured. “I just get like the weirdest things, like a flash of the way she would eat ice cream.”

“Oh my gosh wasn’t that just the craziest thing ever?” I chuckled lightly at the thought of it. “The way she would get it in a cone and then bite the bottom of the cone and wait for it to drip out, then she would bite the top off really quickly, so it didn’t flow over the sides.”

Laney laughed. “Or the way she lined up all of her shoes so neatly and if one got out of place, she would quickly move it so it was back in line.”

“Nothing else was in line. It’s like you think the house would be all nice and neat and tidy like the shoes but no, there are piles of clothes and disorganization.” I smiled at

the memory.

We were walking along the mountain side, breathing in the fresh air. I reached out and let the long grass run against my hands. It felt good to be in touch with reality. The one overriding thought just kept coming to the foreground. “I just-I just want to know where she is,” I said. “Like where she is inside Undirheim and what she’s doing.”

I felt completely defeated.

Laney stayed silent as we walked along.

I felt the words bubbling out of me, momentary musings, dying to get out. “It’s no shock she died before I did that was to be expected. It was always going to happen, but I don’t know. I thought we’d at least have some life together. I didn’t realize something I was doing was going to get her killed.”

“It wasn’t what you did,” Laney insisted. “Magnus did that.”

“Magnus was just trying to help our mother,” I pointed out.

“You can’t seriously be letting him off the hook,” Laney insisted. “He’s the one who got the rings available to Cade. Even if you let it slide that he killed your wife, there’s still the little problem of oh, he tried to destroy all of humanity just so your mother could find some peace. I mean that’s a little narrow, don’t you think? Whatever happened to the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one?”

“I’m not letting him off the hook,” I insisted. “He’s going to have to face the Demigod Corporation no matter what.”

“Are they seriously going to do anything about it?” Laney asked.



“I should hope so,” I responded. “It’s part of their job to govern people and punish wrongdoers. If we can prove it”

“What do you mean? I saw them give him the rings!” Laney cried.

“It doesn’t mean they will find him at fault., I pointed out.

“He had my best friend killed,” I insisted.

“Cade killed Caroline,” I clarified.

“He had a hand in it!” My voice was getting shrill.

“It’ll take a long time to prove that,” I shrugged.

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“So, what you’re saying is they don’t care if some banshee gets killed?” Laney looked ready to rage.

“He took personal property and used it to bring forth a demigod who was banished by the Demigod Corporation,” I said. “It’s pretty straightforward. He can’t really get out of that, but Caroline’s death will be seen as an accident.”

“Collateral damage?” Laney scoffed.

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Laney said.

I turned to her, gripping her shoulders with my hands. “You have to understand. The DGC is the DGC. They follow rules and regulations and they’re not going to change that in a hurry at all. The only problem is if the DGC get any hints we’re trying to find Caroline an Undirheim, they’re not going to take too kindly to it either.”

I looked down and saw the tears welling in Laney’s eyes. My heart clenched. I felt exactly the same way like I was brokenhearted, and I would never be made whole again. There was something definitely wrong, but being around Laney made me feel good. I felt drawn to her. Drawn to the pain she was feeling, drawn to the angst in her expression, drawn to the suffering in her heart. I knew exactly what it was like because every inch of her experience was also mine. It might’ve been a very sad thing to share, but it was what we had in common, the two of us drawn together and bound together by our love for Caroline.

“We will find her.” I nodded with affirmation. We would most definitely find her. I leaned forward, not sure exactly what I was intending. My lips landed on Laney’s

forehead. Laney looked up at me, her eyes wide in surprise. She looked up at me, wiping tears from her eyes.

Startled, I took a step back. We stared at each other awkwardly unsure of what to do next.

“We’ll do it together,” Laney said. “You know she always loved you.”

“Yes,” I said. “Come on. We need to be going back,”

I was nervous being alone with Laney all of a sudden. It was as if we were too intimate and too close and too connected. I suddenly felt like there was something between us that shouldn’t be there, it was a combination of a memory of Caroline and attraction between us and I didn’t like it. I didn’t like it one bit.

“Come, let’s go back.” I insisted, turning my back and walking away from her.

## Chapter 7

### LANEY

I ran straight to my room when we got back to the command center. I shut the door and stood momentarily in the silence, leaning against it. Ryder and I had had a moment. My heart was racing. Even after the walk we had taken back, I could still feel the heat of his body next to mine and the touch of his hand. This guy was the love of Caroline’s life, my best friend’s true love, and I’d had a moment with him.

I hated myself for it. I closed my eyes. I ground my teeth together hard. It shouldn’t be like this. Caroline shouldn’t be dead and Ryder definitely should not be having a moment with me. The worst thing was is I wanted it so bad. I wanted a moment with him. It was like being close to Caroline again. It was like having her alive somehow.

It was hard to sort my thoughts out well enough to keep track of them, but being around Ryder was almost like being around Caroline. Still, it didn't mean I should start making out with him.

No. Never.

Thank God that had not happened.

I sucked in a deep breath. I had to keep this under control.

There must be some reason for it. Some sort of grief bonding thing where you start obsessing over your best friend's widower. I needed to look that up. It had to be a thing. It had to be what was happening between Ryder and me, because that walk was not just like any walk.

The fact he was Magnus' brother didn't help. It just complicated matters because what if I was on the rebound from Magnus, who turned out to be such a complete douche? I could never possibly ever be with him ever again? So now I was single and on the rebound. I took a deep breath and pushed myself off the front door, opening my eyes and heading straight to the bathroom. I splashed cold water on my face and washed my hands, inhaling the sweet, clean fresh scent of the soap. I looked in the mirror, my eyes wide.

"You are not going to screw this up," I said out loud to myself.

Not only was Ryder the closest thing I had to Caroline now, but in this new supernatural world, he was the closest thing I had to protection and figuring out what was going on. So, there was no way I could lose having him in my life right now and the best way to do that would be to sleep with him. I gritted my teeth harder.

I wasn't even going to think about it.

I was going to go and find a plan to get into Undirheim, and the other thing I needed to do was figure out how to tap into my fire fly powers.

That was it.

This is what I had to focus on.

I stare in the mirror and tear started welling in my eyes. I couldn't stop. I needed my friend. I needed Caroline. I needed Magnus. I needed my boyfriend. What I did not need was Ryder. I mean, I needed him but I just, I didn't know how to deal with the stress and the thoughts. My heart was such a churning mass of different flavors. I had no idea what to do. I had to do something. I had to help out. I had to be part of the team, and I had to try to find Caroline. I couldn't stop the tears from flowing down my face. And the sad reality was of all the people here in this command center, the only one I felt comfortable enough to show my tears to would be Ryder. And that wasn't going to happen. The last thing he needed was to see me this vulnerable.

I splashed more cold water on my face and patted my eyes dry. They were still bright red, but there was no shame in crying when your best friend had died, and you had just broken up with your boyfriend. I had to steel myself for stepping out of my room and going out to where everybody else was. As much as I wanted to sit in the corner and research fire flies or some sort of attachment theory on why I was having these crazy wicked heart palpitations for Ryder. I mean, I knew he was hot. He's always been hot. I'd always joked about bagging him, but not now.

Oh my God, not now.

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My stomach roiled. As much as I wanted him, I needed to sort my shit out. I was feeling crazy alone, though. I need to be around other people and not alone with Ryder, that was for sure.

I took the stairs from the lower level to the upper level two at a time. I inhaled deeply, bringing oxygen in as my heart thrummed and forced energy into my body. We had shit to do.

I had to be on top of it.

I'd fake it if I had to.

And I had to.

Magnus met me at the top of the stairs. "Laney, we need to talk."

I stopped in my tracks, loathing making me recoil. "No, we don't need to talk. Talking to you is the last thing I need to do right now. In fact, I still can't even figure out exactly what you're doing here."

"I made a mistake," Magnus apologized.

"You had my best friend killed. That's not a mistake, it's completely fucked up," I snarled at him.

"It wasn't my intention," he insisted.

I held my hand up toward him. “Magnus, you are here because your brother allows it. You have nothing to do with me. I want nothing to do with you. Please don’t speak to me. Please don’t look at me. Don’t even think about me. I think that’s probably the best thing. Pretend I’m the one who died.” I spun on my heel and walked off.

I heard a sharp intake of breath from him, and I glanced over to where Ryder and Ratchet were standing over the rift map. Ryder was staring at me, his brow furrowed, his eyes dark.

“I think Laney is right,” Ryder said. “You need to leave here.”

“I didn’t say he had to leave here,” I insisted.

“I see it would make it easier for you. If he wasn’t here,” Ryder shrugged.

“I don’t need you doing me any favors,” I said, a little tersely, as I made my way toward the kitchen area to where the witches were. The last thing I needed was Ryder getting rid of his brother to make me happy.

“I’m not doing anything,” Ryder said, his mouth down-turned, his eyes sharp.

I close my eyes briefly, wanting to just slam my head into a wall. Just because I was having some sort of bonding with him over Caroline’s death didn’t mean he was having that; he was probably just looking for some sort of emotional outlet and I was taking it all personally. Now I was thinking he was sending his brother away, and it was on my behalf. I was such an idiot. The reality was his brother stole from him and had his wife killed. He probably didn’t want his brother around anymore than I did. It was like having a rattlesnake in your bed.

“Ratchet, make a portal to my mother’s house,” Ryder said, not taking his eyes off his brother. “Magnus, I think it’s time you went home and visited Mom for a little. The

DGC will come and question you later when they're ready."

Magnus's eyes were full of sadness and exhaustion. I almost wanted to reach out and tell him I was sorry, but what the fuck? I hadn't done anything, and he was the one who screwed everything up and going home to Mom hardly sounded like much of a punishment to me, so it wasn't like he should be looking so morose.

"I've been doing some research on the firefly powers." Katrina got my attention and called me over.

"Really?" I asked, faintly surprised, but grateful they were taking an interest in helping me master my powers. Maybe they were hoping one day I would be useful around here rather than just a problem or a witch with weak powers.

"Yeah, fire-flies are rare and there isn't much knowledge about their skills, but I'm happy to go through with you what we found out and let me know." Katrina smiled warmly at me.

"I'd love to find out," I said. "I was coming up here to talk to you about that."

"Did you know the fire flies use their light for mating rituals?" Lady Albright asked.

My cheeks heated up. "I don't think that has any relevance to me. I was thinking about how I burst into bright light in front of the resurrected monster, and I just couldn't imagine that was relevant to me, trying to entice a sexual partner.

"The time my light was the brightest," I said, "was when I was in deep fear and thought I was about to die."

"It could be a warning or defense mechanism," Katrina suggested. "Essentially, the light is a form of communication and because you're a fire fly with light inside of



you, you're actually the most able to talk to the shadow creatures.”

“Shadow creatures?” I asked.

“Yeah, those are creatures like monsters and demons who tend to live in the dark shadows.” I glanced over at Ryder, but quickly shifted my gaze to Ratchet when I realized he was looking at me, also.

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This bullshit had to stop. I couldn't keep exchanging looks with Ryder.

"Is there anything in there in your research that tells you how I can implement it better?" I asked.

"Lady Albright is making a potion," Katrina said. "It should help you manage them a little better. It'll give you some control of the light. The biggest problem is you have to learn the language, because although you can communicate with the shadow creatures, you need to know what you're saying and if you're communicating in light waves that you don't know how to control, then you won't even know what you're saying."

"Here's the potion," Lady Albright said, handing me a mixture of some brew that smelled like wet dirt and an oil slick. The top of it moved in purple and green swirls.

"You're kidding me, right?" I asked. "Is this like the hazing of the newbie?"

"No," Katrina said seriously, shaking her head. "We really want you to drink the potion."

I took the glass nervously, trying to act like it was no big deal, but I wasn't really sure I should be drinking some weird looking potion that smelt like dirt look like oil and was supposed to give me power over my light. I stared at the liquid.

"It's safe to drink." Ryder's voice made me jump, almost spilling the liquid, as I glanced over my shoulder and found he was right behind me.

Touching distance away.

“Of course, it is. I know it’s perfectly safe,” I said defensively, not wanting to offend the witches by having them think I wasn’t trusting them to drink their brew.

“I was just trying to reassure you,” he said.

“I don’t need your reassurance. How about you drink it,” I rebuffed.

“I hardly think a fire fly potion is going to do anything for a monster,” Ryder responded.

“Well, I’m not afraid to drink it. Anyhow,” I said, raising the glass in toast and throwing it back, emptying the contents into my mouth. It tasted worse than it smelled and looked. I jolted it down, feeling it bubble all of the way down to my stomach and hoping I didn’t throw up. Whatever this potion was going to do to me, the truth was, I was not reassured at all it was going to be good for me.

## Chapter 8

### RYDER

“It isn’t going to happen in minutes,” Lady Albright said as we all stayed in the circle, staring at Laney as if she was about to sprout a second head.

“How are you feeling?” I asked, reaching out to place my hand on her shoulder before I actually realized what I was doing. I quickly withdrew my hand. Why was I suddenly always trying to touch Laney? It made my stomach unsettled.

She looked up at me, her big brown eyes flat. Worried; with a sheen of unshed tears. I hated that look on her because I knew why it was there. It was there because Caroline

was dead. I probably had the same look on my face.

“Feels like it’s going to spew out of both ends,” she deadpanned to the witches.

“Why don’t you go lay down,” Magnus said, his tone full of concern.

“Don’t ever, ever tell me what to do,” Laney growled at him.

Ratchet stepped in between the two. “Magnus, I don’t think she’s interested in you ever talking to her again.”

“What, now you’re going to be her watch dog?” Magnus asked.

“Whatever I am,” Ratchet said. “You lost any ability to talk about it. In fact, weren’t you supposed to be going to your mother’s? I’d be happy to escort you.”

Ratchet held up his hand to the side and pushed energy out of it, creating a portal in a ring of fire burning in the corner of the room. He strode forward, grabbing Magnus by the elbow. Magnus ripped his hand out of Ratchet’s. Regardless of what Magnus had done, he wasn’t going to take any crap from Ratchet. The two had always had a bit of an issue with each other. I’d often had a sneaking suspicion Magnus was a little jealous of my relationship with Ratchet, even though he always could’ve had that type of relationship with me, but he had chosen our mother instead.

Not that there was a problem between me and our mother. I loved her and cared for her deeply, but I put the needs of the earth ahead of the needs of just one woman. Whereas Magnus did the opposite. The needs of my mother outweighed the needs of anybody else on the face of the planet, including himself I sometimes thought. She was like the child who never grew up, even after all these hundreds, and hundreds of years, he still took care of. He was loyal to a fault to the wrong thing.

To the wrong person.

I agreed with Ratchet it was time he returned to her. I stared at Magnus. “You need to go.”

Magnus gave me a momentary look of defiance, as if he wouldn’t do what he was told, but then he turned and began walking toward the portal. Just then the alarm sounded on the rift map. I glanced over at Ratchet. He flew across the room, staring down at it.

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“Where is it?” I asked.

“Machu Picchu,” Ratchet said.

“Let’s go,” I said.

Magnus shrank back into the room. I squinted at him. He would take the opportunity to not take the portal to our mother.

“Oh no, you don’t,” I said. “You go through the portal.”

There was no way I was leaving him here with Laney and the witches. And there was no way they were coming with us. It wasn’t until I saw Magnus disappear through the portal to our mother’s house, that I turned to Ratchet and nodded.

“Are you up to this?” I asked, looking at his bloodshot eyes and sagging shoulders. He certainly wasn’t the demon I’d always known. There’d been so much going on. I hadn’t given him proper support, but I moved toward him now.

“You know you need help, right?” I asked.

His eyes shifted self-consciously toward Laney, who turned away to not embarrass him.

“Can we talk about this somewhere else?” he asked.

“We don’t have time to talk about it at all, but we’re going to have to at some point.”

Ratchet nodded, looking down at the ground, but then he pushed energy out of his hand again and a portal appeared. “This one’s to Machu Picchu.”

“Let’s do it,” I said.

“I want to come with you,” Laney stepped forward.

Ratchet and I turned toward her at exactly the same time. “No,” we both said.

I glanced at Ratchet. He was developing a thing for Laney, if he had not always had one.

“Well, you just took that medicine,” Ratchet explained, and I could hear the care and concern in his voice. “We don’t know what it’s going to do to you. You need to stay here with the witches, and let them monitor you.”

“I agree,” I said roughly, heading toward the portal. I was drawn to Laney too, but there was no way I could give that even a moment of my thoughts.

I glanced over at Ratchet. “Come on, let’s go,” I said, preparing to step through the portal. With my emotions being the way, they’d been the last few days, some space from Laney was going to be a good thing, even if it was fighting monsters.

Ratchet moved over toward Laney, and I looked over curiously. “We’re going to go fight some monsters, and then we’re going to come back. Magnus is gone, so you should be okay.” He was calm and sincere, leaning into her.

Clearly, his feelings for her were greater than I had imagined so far.

I saw the way she looked up at him and it was pretty clear. She wasn’t so clear on her own feelings for him.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, glancing over at me. “Just make sure you bring him back.”

I felt a pain in my heart. Laney shouldn’t be wanting me to come back. I shouldn’t be wanting to come back. My heart was being ripped in two, and I had no idea what was going on. Caroline hadn’t been dead more than 24 hours and here I was attaching myself to her best friend like a lost child.

“Ratchet, come on,” I groaned. “Let’s go.”

I stepped through the portal with a sure foot and a confident gait I didn’t feel. For hundreds and hundreds of years we had fought against the monsters. There had been losses in battle and moments of near defeat. We had always come out on top. We had always been triumphant in the war that was being waged and kept the monsters at bay.

I stepped through the portal and found myself at the highest peak of Machu Picchu, looking down upon the top of what was once a thriving town, then ruins, and then a tourist attraction, gathering people from all over the world to look at how ancient peoples might have built a city of stone on top of a mountain in the middle of a jungle. Today all that was gone.

Today there were no tourists.

Today there were no ruins.

You couldn’t see the small walls that marked the grid of the city of Machu Picchu as I stepped through the portal and stood there aghast. All I could see was a thriving mass of dark monsters, all bowing, low to one creature who stood on the throne in the center, the sun rising behind his head.



Cade had managed to successfully bring his brother back to life.

### Chapter 9

LANEY

I sat curled up on the side of the couch, my feet tucked underneath me and my arms hugging a pillow. My stomach was still upset, still dancing in tiny little circles that I couldn't quite get a handle on, and calm down. Katrina sat with me and was watching me closely, I assumed to make sure nothing went wrong with the potion.

"Do we even know what it's supposed to do?" I asked.

"It'll help you control your powers. Better," Katrina said. "I use it a lot up in Cougar Creek. We had a lot of brand-new witches come in. They couldn't control their power so I made a potion to help them learn how to do it better."

"How many women are in Cougar Creek Coven?" I asked.

"There's a high priestess and two long-term members of the coven, which is me and Hilda. Then there are my children. They both go to the Crown Academy, but they're in the coven too. Boy and girl. It's not just females in covens. In the last year we had five new women join the coven, each one representing a point on the pentacle and their combined strength is what helps protect the portal there.

"Where does that portal go to?" I asked. "Is it permanent?"

“It’s one of the portals to Undirheim,” Katrina said, “but it’s very dangerous,” she added, as she saw my ears perk up when she told me where the portal went to.

“So, you can get us in!” I exclaimed.

“Negative. The Cougar Creek portal is a sealed one,” she said. “You can’t open the rift at Cougar Creek to get into Undirheim. You need to follow proper channels. There are ways about it. I don’t know exactly what they are, but if you try to get into Undirheim through Cougar Creek, you’re going to come up against a coven of witches who don’t want you to. At the end of the day they all work for the Demigod Corporation so you’re better off figuring out how Ryder wants to deal with this.”

I gave up and threw myself back against the couch. I felt a little bit petulant, but the truth was Ryder was off fighting monsters for the DCC. Doing the same shit he’d always done, which was go off and take care of his work rather than taking care of things that might need attention on the home front, in this case rescuing Caroline from Undirheim.

“If Cade’s brother comes back, that’s who Caroline was sacrificed for, isn’t it?” I asked, deciding to take a different approach when I saw how terse Katrina was. The Cougar Creek Coven portal was off-limits. I knew how to bide my time.

“Yes, if Cade’s brother has materialized into the physical realm, then he’s done that on the value of Caroline’s sacrifice,” Katrina said.

“So, it makes sense that all we have to do is kill Cade’s brother and Caroline will come back?” I asked.

Katrina shook her head. “Doesn’t work like that. Once you die, you die. For Caroline to come back to life, there would need to be a new sacrifice.”

A shudder ran through me. I knew I'd be willing to sacrifice myself for Caroline to come back, but it didn't sound like that would solve the problem of well, me wanting to be with my best friend and hang out with her rather than in different parallel universes.

I knew I couldn't justify killing someone to bring her back. That was never going to be an option. Even though there are people on the planet I'd like to murder, specifically thinking of Magnus, but there was no way I could put anybody else through what it felt like having Caroline dead.

A sharp pain ran through my temple. I put my fingers against my brow.

"Are you okay?" Katrina asked.

"I think so," I said, breathing in sharply as another pain scorched through my head. It felt like an electric voltage charging my brain, leaving a dull pain in its wake."

"It's probably the medicine working. Maybe you should lay down," Lady Albright suggested.

"I don't really feel like being alone down in my room right now," I said, my mouth suddenly dry.

"Well, you're already practically lying down on the couch," Katrina smiled, standing up. "How's your stomach feeling?"

"It'll calm down, but my aching head is too much," I muttered.

"I have another potion for that if you'd like," Katrina offered.

"Not if I have to drink it," I shook my head gently, waving my hand at her as she

moved toward the kitchen.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “This one you just have to smell, it’s like an oil.”

“I guess I can give it a try,” I stared out the window. We were so high up you could see the birds flying. I watched them as I heard Katrina open her box of potions and start to mess around with the glass bottles.

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The birds rode the wind, letting it lift them. They were beautiful and free and soared without a care in the world.

Suddenly an eagle hawk flew into view, sweeping down by the window and getting so close to the glass I could see the green intelligence in its eyes. It looked straight at me before it swooped away again. I looked around in the sky, but I couldn't see where it went.

The hawk came back, and this time I could see around its ankle was a small golden chain. Just as I was about to say something to the ladies, three small blackbirds came and began attacking the hawk, shoeing it away.

Katrina came up just then with a small bottle of essential oils. "You're going to want to rub this on your temples and on your wrists and on your neck," she said. "The acupressure points. Not all of them, of course. I mean, there's so many across the entire body. It would take a long time and require you to get naked."

I looked up at her, holding up my hand for a second to get her to calm down on the speech. "Did you see that?" I asked, pointing out the window.

She glanced out, but now the sky was clear. The hawk and the black birds were gone. "Nothing is there."

"There was a hawk being attacked by black birds." I stepped closer to the window, peering around.

"A hawk?" she moved up next to me.

“Yes, and it had a gold chain on it,” I said.

Lady Albright came closer to us. “You saw a hawk with a gold chain on its ankle?”

“I thought the gold ankles were invisible,” Katrina commented, glancing over Lady Albright.

“They are,” Lady Albright mused. “It must be her fire fly powers coming into her body and into her eyes. She’s able to see things that are cloaked.”

“What are you guys talking about?” I asked.

“It seems like you have one of the rare forms of fire fly power, which is being able to see things others can’t see or that are purposely trying to be hidden.” Lady Albright peered at me.

“So, it’s almost like x-ray vision?” I asked.

“Yes, it’ll help you a lot. You’ll turn into a very powerful witch,” Lady Albright said.

“Was the hawk spying on us?” I asked, still trying to figure out exactly what level of danger the hawk represented.

“Yes. Hawks are part of the DGC’s spy network,” Katrina said.

“It’s not really a spy thing,” Lady Albright said. “It’s more like what they do to take care of the people on the ground. Make sure they know exactly what’s going on.”

“Yeah, but why would they be sending people out here to look at us? Surely they can just ask Ryder?” I asked.

“Ryder’s brother just killed a fae, or had a fae killed and stole from the DGC. So, they are not going to be too solid on just letting Ryder wander around with no checks and balances,” Katrina said.

“What you may not realize,” Lady Albright commented as she took a bottle of oil from Katrina and brought it over to me. “Ryder is the only thing standing between this world and the world of the monsters. The monsters can take over our place and earth anytime they’d like to, if they were smart enough and powerful enough. Ryder creates a barrier between our world and their world, and through Ryder’s efforts, this world stays safe. So, he’s very, very important to the DGC. Magnus was always their back up but clearly Magnus isn’t such a good option anymore.”

“Speaking of which we’re going to need to tell them about her and her powers,” Katrina said, nodding toward me. “We can’t be seen to be hiding her and they’re going to know she was exposed to Cade, so they’re going to want to debrief her.”

Great. Seems like the DGC was coming. This wasn’t my jam at all.

## Chapter 10

### RYDER

“How are we going to get these, boss?” Ratchet asked.

“Well, we can’t do what we did last time,” I responded. Ratchet almost died when I’d had him burst into flames to convince the monsters I was their god. We definitely couldn’t do that again. There had to be another way to make them leave.

“I’m willing to try it again,” Ratchet said. “The only problem is Cade’s here and Cade’s got his brother and Cade’s brothers is the god of these monsters.”

“Not only that, but I don’t see a rift in sight,” I muttered. “How the hell did they get here?”



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“Rumor has it there’s an ancient well in Machu Picchu,” Ratchet said.

“The top of a mountain is an odd place to have a well,” I murmured. “You think it’d be more rainfall that they would capture.”

“We just came from a volcano,” Ratchet said, “and there were plenty of monsters there.”

“The strongest group seems to be over there.” I pointed toward the highest peak on the other side of the mountain. Which rose steeply, almost like the forgotten remnants of a volcanic core.

“Well, we can’t exactly just go waltzing over there,” Ratchet grumbled.

“We need to defeat Cade,” I said. And the joy and chaos that rippled beneath my skin at the thought of it made me smile with a thousand sharpened teeth.

I know I wasn’t supposed to be quite that joyful about the idea of killing someone. It wasn’t truly in my nature, but this man had taken Caroline from me, and at some point, he was going to pay for it. If that day was today, then all the better.

“Do you think you’re really going to get past his legion of demons?” Ratchet asked, motioning toward the monsters covering the hillside. The place was abandoned by tourists. Even though the humans wouldn’t be able to see the monsters, their energy would’ve been so great it would’ve stopped anyone from coming. They must think it was some sort of natural disaster up here.

“No, I don’t have any intention of getting past legions of monsters.”

“What are you going to do, try to get him to come to you?” Ratchet asked.

“No, I don’t intend for that at all,” I said. “I think we take him by surprise. Give me a portal just to the side of him.”

“You take the brother. He’s the newest, so he’ll still be the weakest. And I’ll take Cade.”

“Didn’t you already lose to Cade?” Ratchet argued.

I glared at him for a moment. Irritated even more because the last time I came across Cade, Caroline died.

I was hovering in my monster form over the mountains, and Ratchet hovered next to me in his demon form.

“Just put me next to him,” I growled.

Ratchet created a burning portal and without hesitation, I leapt through it, trusting completely that Ratchet had put the portal in the safe place like he always did. Someplace easy to navigate. However, when I jumped out of the portal, I found myself on a narrow ledge surrounded by monsters, nowhere near Cade.

I looked up the hillside and saw a second portal next to Cade. He was looking down at me, laughter in his face as we both realized I was surrounded by his monsters in a no-win situation. Only he didn’t see the portal appear behind him. Suddenly Ratchet came through the portal, and I saw him attacking Cade from behind, just before I felt a sharp clip to the side of my head.

The monsters were attacking me.

One was using my head like a punching bag. Another was biting at my legs. I had to fight them off. It was a blur of teeth and fists and fury. And I was grossly outnumbered, with them holding my arms and punching at me; their maniacal laughter overwhelmed me.

I could feel their grip strengthen on me, and there was nothing I could do. I was being held down by more monsters. Had Ratchet done this to me on purpose? With every punch in the face I was taking, I couldn't help but think he was in league with my brother for some reason I would never guess, some old wound I had placed there in a moment of chaos and not even realized it. Maybe this was his opportunity to challenge me. I could feel the light coming out of me, even though I was a demigod. I could take a punch, but there would come some point where they would have bled me dry. I would be drained and I would have the right to go to Undirheim.

I would have the right to die.

If I just did not fight them if I just let the monsters take over, let Cade and his brother be the gods of monsters. I could let it all go and have it not be what it was now...living in misery. I couldn't imagine spending century after century without Caroline. It sounded so miserable. Going to Undirheim was a better option.

I lowered my head, loosened my muscles and gave into the attacks.

The incessant beating, the stabbing, the bleeding. All of it.

I gave into it. I was ready for it to consume me, and to end a miserable life I had found myself in.

"Let go of my brother," Ratchet shouted, burning the monsters around me to a crisp,

looking like the most magnificent demon from hell I'd ever seen. His fists were aimed like rocket ships and directed punches of fiery fuel, setting the monsters alight as he landed in their midst.

"There's too many," I groaned, my body limp, my blood puddled all around the pathway.

"I don't have any intention of fighting them," Ratchet said, grabbing me by the shoulder and yanking me through a burning portal until I fell forward, lying flat on the ground in the command center on top of Mount Diablo.

"What's wrong with him!" I heard Laney cry as she came rushing toward me. Worry soaked into every part of her voice.

“Ryder had a run-in with the monsters,” Ratchet explained.

My eyes were closed, but I wanted to see Ratchet’s face when he said that. I wanted to see if he had intended for me to have that run in or not. I needed to know if he was on my side. The betrayal of my brother had been shocking, betrayal by Ratchet would be devastating, but I was too weak to even open my eyes. Instead, I lay with them closed as the witches hovered around me, waving all sorts of oils under my nose, and rubbing it into my limbs while they chanted spells and the warm energy, covered my entire body.

“What happened?” Laney asked. “I mean, really. You guys have run ins with monsters all the time you’ve been having them for hundreds and hundreds of years. What happened?”

“There were too many monsters,” Ratchet said. “I got him out as quickly as I could, but I made a mistake.”

I took a deep sigh of relief. He had made a mistake. I saw it. I’d known it. I just hadn’t believed it because of all the millennia that I had known him and all the battles we had gotten into and gotten through Ratchet had almost never made a mistake. Then, in a flash of insight, I realized I opened one eye, and I looked at him. He had a petal in his hand, and he was lifting it up to his mouth. His eyes were bloodshot. Whatever effects the flowers were having on him, they were impacting his capability of doing his job. They were making him dangerous.

LANEY

“Oh, my God,” I exclaimed, as Ratchet and Ryder came through the portal or should I say, stumbling. Ratchet fell over Ryder, who was clearly weak and fell to his knees. I came rushing over, dropping to my knees to hold Ryder’s head in my hands.

“What happened?” I asked.

“We fought some monsters,” Ratchet said nonchalantly, shrugging his shoulders. He was covered in bleeding wounds and gashes where the monsters had been ripping him apart.

“I need some help here,” I said, shouting to the witches. Ratchet was over in the corner, looking in a bag of flowers. “This is not the time for that right now.”

Ratchet just looked up at me, his eyes blurry, shaking his head.

“You really care about him, don’t you?” Ratchet asked.

“It would help if you showed that you cared a little bit too,” I insisted.

“Oh, I care,” Ratchet said, as the witches gathered around me, and began holding their hands over the wounds that covered Ryder’s body.

“Get some cloth,” Katrina instructed me as I stepped out of their way.

I was grateful to have something practical to do, and I ran into the kitchen to grab some dish cloths.

“Is there a first aid kit here?” I asked Ratchet.

He looked up at me, his eyes narrow. “Yeah, it’s in the downstairs bathroom.”

“Well, will you run down there and get it?” I insisted, irritation floating in my voice.

“It’s all sweet words for Ryder and just shit for Ratchet, right?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “We need some help here, and I’m guessing this is all because of something you did.”

“Right, of course it’s always my fault. When things go well, Ryder gets the benefit of the doubt, of being the hero. When things go wrong, it’s all my fault,” Ratchet grumbled.

“Why are you acting like such a baby?” I asked.

“Great, now insult me,” Ratchet said, barely looking at me as he dug through his bag.

I stormed over to him and ripped the bag out of his hands.

“Give that back!” Ratchet insisted, grasping for the flowers, but I held them back, jumping out of his way. Having a little bit of faith that, even though he was a demon, he wasn’t going to attack me. He got this malicious look in his eye, and all of a sudden, I wasn’t so sure it’d been a good decision on my part.

He ripped it out of my hand so fast. I heard Ryder groan and struggle against the witches, but he wasn’t in a capacity to do much else. I took a step back from Ratchet. And I watched his face fall. The anger was gone in seconds.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered, grabbing the bag and getting the last of the petals out of it.

“They aren’t any good for you, Ratchet,” I insisted. “They’re making you do crazy

things.”



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“Don’t worry about my business,” Ratchet said coldly.

“Shouldn’t you be doing something to help Ryder?” I asked.

“Since when is all you care about Ryder?” Ratchet asked. “You realize he’s your dead girlfriend’s ex-husband, right? There’s all sorts of wrong around that.”

“Ratchet!” Katrina called from where she was nursing Ryder. “There’s no need to talk like that.”

“I’m just stating the truth,” Ratchet growled.

“You’re under the influence of the flowers,” Katrina said. “You need to knock that shit off.”

“Everyone calm down. There’s a call coming in,” Lady Albright said, nodding toward where the row of crystals on the table was emitting a screen to shimmer up from them.

The room got suddenly silent, as if everybody except me knew exactly who the call would be coming from.

“Ratchet, you’re going to have to explain yourself,” Katrina said.

“There’s nothing to explain,” Ratchet said, but he went silent as he turned toward the screen.

“What happened in Perú.” The tan-skinned, beautiful woman on the screen was cold, imperious, and left no doubt of who was in charge.

Ratchet swallowed and composed himself. “Madame President.” He gave a brief nod to the screen.

She glared at him. “Call me Vina, demon. What happened to Ryder?”

“He got injured by monsters,” Ratchet explained.

“That’s never happened before,” Vina said.

“Well, it happened this time,” Ratchet said. “Maybe he’s just getting old.”

“He’s a demigod,” Vina responded, her eyes flashing a warning Ratchet shouldn’t become insubordinate.

“That’s right. He’s a demigod and I’m a demon. You expect just the two of us to stop the flood of monsters coming into this place. Well, I’ll tell you it’s going to be really hard to do without any more resources from the DGC,” Ratchet explained.

I couldn’t help but support his idea. After what I had seen in Hawaii with Cade, the DGC seemed to need to take a much more active role than they were doing so far.

“Well, maybe if we would get timely reports, we would have a better understanding of what was required,” the president explained.

“Well, your demigod Cade has made some crazy changes to how he wants to do business,” Ratchet outlined. “If you watch what he’s doing now, you’ll see he’s resurrected his brother.”

“Demetrious?” Vina asked. “He was slain by Hercules. He can’t be resurrected.”

“Well, maybe you want to explain this to Cade, because he most certainly did that,” I said, moving to stand next to Ratchet. “I saw it with my own eyes. He was chasing me and trying to inhabit my body.”

“So, he’s not fully formed yet in his body?” Vina asked.

“He wasn’t the last time I saw him,” I said.

“He looked pretty real when we were in Peru,” Ratchet shrugged nonchalantly.

Vina’s face formed tight lines as she stared at Ratchet. “You weren’t able to defeat him?”

Ratchet looked down at his hand before slightly shaking his head. “No,” he said. Then to my shock, he reached his hand down and grasped mine. It was lower than they could see on camera, but he was holding it tightly as if looking for reassurance. I shifted my eyes quickly to him, and I could see the pain he was in.

“Ryder’s been injured,” I said to Vina. “We need some back up and some support here. I don’t think they can do it with just Ryder and Ratchet.”

“Who are you?” Vina asked. There was a tone of condescension in her voice.

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“She’s a witch,” Lady Albright said stepping onto the camera. She made a slight bow. “Madam President, she is a human who has just discovered she’s a witch. She is with the Albright clan at the moment, although we are not her final home, she is not one of our lineages.”

“What is her lineage?” Vina asked.

“It’s unclear as of yet. We are still trying to find time to look into that,” Lady Albright explained.

“We’ve had a few other things on our mind,” I muttered.

I could feel Ratchet’s hand shaking in mine. Could he be having withdrawals so quickly? Did he need more flowers? Surely there should be a way to detox from them. Did they not have something at the DGC to handle this or was it something they shouldn’t be told about?

“We’ll find her lineage as soon as we get the monster sorted,” Lady Albright assured Vina.

“Cade brought his brother back to life, using the rings of Typhon,” Ratchet gritted the words out. “They killed Ryder’s wife, Caroline.”

“Cade killed a human?” Vina asked.

“Fae banshee,” Ratchet clarified.

“She wasn’t just a fae. She was my best friend,” I insisted.

“Vina is not going to care about that,” Ratchet said under his breath. “She’s going to worry about the politics of it.”

“A fae was killed on DGC land?” Vina mused. “That’s not going to go over well with the fae.”

“We’ve got to find a way to stop Cade and his brother,” Lady Albright pointed out, trying to redirect the conversation toward getting help for Ryder.

“Well, that’s Ryder’s responsibility,” Vina said.

I stepped forward. “Aren’t you going to help him at all?”

“Well, if Cade killed a Fae, we’re going to have to do something about that,” Vina chewed her lower lip. “The fae are going to demand an explanation so I need all the facts.”

“I want her back,” I blurted the words out. “Caroline. I want to get Caroline out of Undirheim.”

Vina looked sharply at me, her gaze narrowing. “Can someone please explain to the newbie the rules?”

“We have,” Ratchet said, his hand shaking even worse in mine.

“I know she can’t come out of Undirheim,” I said. “I’d like permission to go there to see her.”

“The only way to go to Undirheim is to die,” Vina said, brushing me off and

changing the subject. “Where is Cade now?”

“According to our radar, Cade is still down in Perú.” Ratchet muttered.

“He’s probably getting energy from the sun temple there,” Lady Albright explained.

“If those monsters get loose, this entire planet’s done for,” Ratchet insisted.

“Well, maybe we should be worried about that a little more than about what the fae think of Caroline’s death,” Vina directed.

“Are you going to send help?” Ratchet asked.

“I’ll put some people together from here,” Vina said. “We will send an inquisition group to Magnus. Get Ryder to call me back when he’s feeling better. Make it soon.”

The screen went blank and Ratchet collapsed, his hand falling loose from mine as he fell to the ground.

“We need to get him to a room.” I glanced over Ryder, but he was still laying prone on the ground.

“Don’t worry,” Katrina said. “We can use a little magic and move both these big guys down to their rooms. The question is, how are we going to heal them fast enough to stop the monsters?”

### Chapter 12

#### RYDER

It hurt when they moved me downstairs, but I knew it was necessary. I needed to recover. The attack of the monsters had been much harsher than I imagined. I hadn't felt such pain in centuries. The gashes from the monsters weren't just deep; they were poisoned as well. They prompted a weakness within me I could feel from the very depths of my cells all the way through to the bone. I groaned as I rotated my body enough so I could glance out the window.

The moon was going on full.

There were things other people didn't realize about the monsters. When a monster was brought back to life they had a certain amount of time to become fully fledged in their bodies. If Cade played his cards right, he was going to get Caseous into a full body, and then there would be a true battle for supremacy between the demigods of monsters.

Magnus was gone now, but I knew I had to talk to Vina. I knew she had to know what happened and she needed to take care of him. She would be required to do whatever it was the DGC did when somebody really fucked up, but I couldn't help but want her to go easy on him. He was my brother, after all.

Ratchet was in his room healing, but how much he could heal from an addiction to the flower, I didn't know. Not without some sort of help.

I longed for Caroline, but she wasn't anywhere I could get to. It was impossible, but I needed somebody I could trust in right now. Ratchet wasn't capable and Magnus was not trustworthy. My mind drifted to Laney. She was the one keeping it all together. I didn't know how it had happened. I had seen how Ratchet had grabbed her hand when he had the shakes, and she had held strongly to him, and supported him as he struggled to keep himself under control in front of the DGC, collapsing just seconds after they had gone.

"Caroline," I muttered, the word dry on my lips, wondering where she was, and what she was doing. My heart ached for her.

There was a knock on the door and it was so eerily close to the moment when I had said her name for a second my heart skipped a beat. Could it be she was coming to join us?

The door slid open, and it was Laney standing there. My heart thrummed in panic at the side of her. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't help it. She represented comfort among the chaos. She was peaceful and calm and even in her grief, I felt completely connected to her.

"Laney."

In her hand she had a glass of water.

"I know witchcraft is good and all, but I thought you might need something simple like a glass of water," she said, with a gentle smile. "That's the kind of thing I can deliver like nobody's business."

A dry chuckle lifted from my lips. "You have a way of knowing what I need," I said.

"Well, I think we both need the same thing," Laney said quietly. I gazed up at her



eyes. There was so much pain there. I was sure it was reflected in mine as I sat there thinking about Caroline.

“Forget the DGC,” I said. “There’s a way to get into Undirheim, but it’s not without its troubles. You can get in, but then getting out is a whole different story, and there’s no guarantee even if you go in you’ll find Caroline.”

“I have to try,” Laney said, and I could tell by the intensity in her voice she meant every word of it. There was something about her seeing Caroline that would be the only thing to bring her peace. I knew Undirheim well enough to know it was not a place I should go.

“What do I have to do,” Laney asked me. “Like I’ve got to sacrifice a goat under the full moon or something like that?”

“You’d think so,” I said with a light smile “but you can’t wait until the full moon. You have to go now.”

“Why?” She asked. “What is it? Ryder?”

“If you wait till the full moon, it’ll be too late. Cade has already brought his brother back in the corporeal form. If he makes it to the full moon, he’ll be permanent, and then there’ll be a battle between him and I to find out who’s going to reign supreme on earth.”

“You’re in no condition to go into battle,” she said. “No, not after that.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” I smiled wanly at her.

“Oh, I’m sure you can kick ass with the best of them,” she said. “It’s just, you know, you’ve had a bit of a hard time lately,” Her smile was gentle and sweet as she leaned

over me. A bit of her hair fell over mine, making me lightheaded with the smell of Jasmine.

“You smell like her,” I said, in shock, reaching up and grabbing some of her hair, and wrapping it around my finger.

“No,” she said. “No, don’t. I just-”

“You used her perfume,” I murmured.

“I did,” she said, tears filling her eyes as she mopped my brow with a cool cloth. “I couldn’t help it. I had to.”

I inhaled deeply the scent of Laney’s hair, pulling it closer to my nose. She turned toward me and just in that moment, there was an energy between us I couldn’t resist, no matter how hard I tried. My hand went up and grasped the back of her head and pulled her face toward mine. Her lips pressed against mine, and it wasn’t just a pressing of the lips. It was a kiss. It was a full-on kiss I couldn’t control my tongue, exploring her mouth, seeking some level of respite from the pain I constantly dwelled in.

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Laney ripped her head away from me, pulling herself up sharp and staring down at me. "I'm not Caroline," she said firmly, her eyes full of pain and anger. She stood up, her breathing heavy.

"What the hell are you two doing?" Ratchet said from the doorway.

"Nothing," Laney exclaimed. "Absolutely nothing." She rushed toward the door and left the room.

"Maybe I should ask what the hell were you doing." Ratchet glared at me.

My heart was racing as I stared at him, my skin flushed. "I made a mistake."

"You're damn right, you did," Ratchet said. "Haven't you put her through enough lately? You and your brother. Both using her for her own advantages."

"It wasn't like that," I retorted. "I told you I made a mistake."

"No, I made a mistake when I had you almost killed when we were down in Perú," Ratchet said. "You didn't make a mistake just now. You knew exactly what you were doing."

"She was wearing her perfume," I explained.

"You can't control yourself based on a smell?" Ratchet asked. "Sounds a lot like a monster to me."

“Maybe it’s time you step out of the room,” I said. I was trying to be kind and I was trying to be generous. The reality was, I hadn’t been able to control myself with Laney, but that was different than the problem Ratchet was going through. There was something in those flowers he was addicted to, and it was causing him to make poor decisions. My grief would pass, but would his addiction?

“I’ll go and check on Laney,” Ratchet muttered he turned and walked out the door.

I watched him go, my heart aching to heal him.

## Chapter 13

### LANEY

I was in my room sobbing when I heard the door open. It was so quiet I almost didn’t hear it over the sound of my tears.

“Are you okay?” Ratchet’s voice came to me.

“No, I’m not okay,” I said. “Why would you even think I was okay.”

“I guess it’s just the way I like to pretend things are all the time,” Ratchet murmured.

He entered my room and sat down in the chair, facing the bed, his legs out in front of him, his hands curled around the armrests. He just sat there, staring at me to the point where I became a bit self-conscious.

“I just miss her,” I said hopelessly.

“I know what you mean,” Ratchet said.

“Your best friend is in the next room over,” I grumbled. “You hardly have to experience what I’m going through.”

“We all miss some things in different ways,” Ratchet said.

“When are you going to get your addiction under control?” I asked.

“I thought it was,” he said. “Until recently. Now I don’t know what to think.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“Just seeing how you’re doing,” Ratchet said kindly. “You’ve been through a lot in the last few days.”

“You’re telling me?” I wanted to lash out at someone but I stopped myself from taking it out on Ratchet. He had enough issues as it was. “I found out I was a witch of all things. My best friend died. Her true love tried to kiss me.”

“It didn’t look like he was trying. It looked like he was doing.”

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I glared at him. “Thanks for the clarification. All I want to do is go home and go back to my world, go back to Boston, but what I really loved about Boston isn’t there anymore. Caroline’s gone and she’s gone forever. All I have left is you guys and I don’t even know you that well. You’ve got issues and it’s pretty obvious they’re starting to unravel. And I don’t know what’s going on with you and Ryder.”

“Don’t worry about me and Ryder,” Ratchet admonished. “We’ve got things to sort out, but that’s our business.”

“I can’t just ignore it,” I said. “That’s not how friendships work. It’s not helping people work together.”

“This is a different world for you,” Ratchet explained. “Don’t start judging this world based on what you think it is on your side of the fence. It’s not. The world of the Legendi is something totally different and you need to just let some of it go.”

“Don’t come in here telling me what I have and have not to do,” I argued.

“If I don’t tell you, who is going to? The witches?” Ratchet shrugged.

“At least they seem to have my best interests at heart,” I pointed out.

“What do you think I have?” Ratchet asked.

The truth was I didn’t know. Ratchet was an enigma to me. He was always with Ryder, his right-hand guy, ready to talk to me, but we’d never really gotten close and I always figured it was because that was the way Ryder and Caroline wanted it.

Ratchet was totally hot and a fantastic friend up until recently. I had thought he was practically flawless, but now I saw his, I realized there was much more to him that needed to be fixed than I had originally thought. I closed my eyes. The last thing I wanted to be around right this second was somebody who needed to be fixed.

In fact, I was so broken myself right now, it seemed like all I could do to keep myself from being a mess.

“I think it’s best if you just go,” I said to Ratchet.

He was an addict. He was having withdrawals. He needed more help than I did right now, and I had none to give him.

It was as if the witches knew exactly what I needed at the right time. Katrina and Lady Albright entered. They carried with them incense, and a steaming cup of potion was in Katrina’s hands.

“I’m not having that again,” I said. “If ’s going to do weird things to me, like the last one did, I’m not having it.”

“This is just to settle your nerves,” Katrina explained.

“Was I that loud?” I asked.

“We could hear you over the entire command center,” Katrina said. “It’s okay. Grief takes a long time to fix and we understand. This potion will just help you settle down and calm down so you’re prepared for the next step.”

I closed my eyes. The next step. What was the next step? The next step was going to Undirheim. My mind suddenly shifted. Ryder had kissed me, but he hadn’t kissed me because he wanted me. He had kissed me... He had been distracting me, because he

had let slip a piece of information I wanted, he knew a way for me to get to Undirheim that stepped past what the DGC would allow.

Ratchet stood by the doorway and the witches hovered around me. How was I going to get past any of them and get over to Ryder? Could I face Ryder again? Would he understand? Would he say anything? What I wanted to know was had he gone so far as to kiss me just to avoid me finding out how to get to Undirheim?

“What’s going on in that brain of yours?” Katrina tilted her head curiously at me.

“Nothing.” I kept a tight lip.

“She’s probably still trying to figure out how to get home,” Lady Albright said.

“Is that true?” Katrina asked. “Do you realize you can’t bring her back? And going to Undirheim will trap you?”

“I know it’s a dumb idea,” I said. “It’s something I should never do.”

“And yet you want to do it anyway.”

“What if Caroline knows something about defeating Cade?” I asked. “What if she knows something about stopping the monsters?”

“How would she know about any of that?” Katrina queried.

“Well, she may have learned something. We haven’t really discussed those options yet.” I shrugged.

“She has a point,” Lady Albright said.



“You can’t agree to her going down there!” Katrina exclaimed.

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“I can agree all I like,” Lady Albright said, “but the reality is, unless she figures out a way to get there, then she still can’t get there.”

“I just want to rest right now,” I lied. Ratchet took a deep breath by the doorway.

“I’m going to stand outside her doorway,” he said. “No matter what happens. There won’t be any way of her getting to Undirheim.”

“It doesn’t matter what Caroline might know. There’s no way to get to her.” The ladies handed me the potion. “Take this. It’ll help you sleep.”

I stared at them, but there was no way they were moving until I actually drank it. That seemed to be their modus operandum now. I looked around to try to figure out some way I could put it in my mouth and then spit it in a container, but they weren’t having that either. Finally, I downed the medicine to calm my nerves and stood there, falling into a drowsy, fitful sleep as Ratchet, Katrina, and Lady Albright all stared at me.

## Chapter 14

### RYDER

My dreams that night were dark and disastrous.

I dreamt I was having sex with Laney, and that Caroline had walked in on us.

I dreamt I was having sex with Caroline and she turned into a corpse.

I dreamt monsters were over running the Earth.

Every time I open my eyes and close them, I would have a nightmare. While I didn't need sleep that much in general, with the recent traumas of Caroline's death, I knew I needed to rest. But rest was not possible. I tossed and turned, trying to push the thoughts of Laney from my head. Trying to keep Caroline close, but not in a tortuous way.

I stared out through the floor to ceiling glass windows bleakly watching the sunrise. The view that used to thrill me held no pleasure for me anymore.

I had made so many mistakes.

I had strived to have a human relationship while I was a demigod. I had attempted that with someone who I thought was human.

Clearly that was a poor judgment as well.

If I had been more open with her in the beginning, perhaps we wouldn't have been in this situation. We may have discovered earlier on she was a banshee. We could've gotten the right dispensation from the DGC and the fae. She would've known more about the world of the Legendi, which I had always been trying to hide from her. She wouldn't have made the mistake of getting the rings from the DGC. She wouldn't have been a victim of Cade.

She would have known more about what we were up against. Instead, she had been innocent, completely unaware of the entire world I lived in. I had done the exact opposite of having a real relationship with someone. I had manipulated her and straight up lied to her on various occasions.

I buried my head in my pillow.

How could I have been so stupid?

I had wasted every opportunity of having intimacy of having closeness.

And then, when it was all over when the opportunity to love her and be with her was gone and I had been completely alone. I had immediately turned to somebody else.

Her. Best. Friend.

What was wrong with me?

It was one thing to be a monster. It was another thing to Want to make good choices, and then make poor ones. If I had been fully a monster, I wouldn't have wanted to make good choices at all.

I wasn't a monster not like that. I had a human side that was in love with Caroline. It was that human side that had mistreated her and made poor choices.

Now I was just left with the memory.

Laney.

What had I done?

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How was I going to face her this morning after what it happened last night?

Caroline's best friend, who is going through her own shit. She was dealing with the loss of her best friend and the betrayal of the man she was dating.

I was supposed to be there to comfort her, but instead I had made unwanted physical advances towards her.

I rolled over on my back, slapping my hands against my forehead and squeezing my eyes shut.

I had really screwed up. My stomach was in knots

I needed Laney.

As. A. Friend.

I didn't deserve, but I needed, her support.

For some reason I had been confused on that, but I wasn't anymore. The kiss last night had changed all that.

I had felt absolutely nothing.

Except that it was wrong.

It had been bland and inappropriate. It had felt like a big mistake even as it had been

happening.

I guess it was exactly what I had needed to shake me out of this forlorn slump I was in since Caroline had died. I stood up from the bed, glaring at the sunrise.

I might have been making mistakes, but I wasn't going to do that anymore. My head was clear and focused.

I needed to find Caroline.

## PART TWO

### Chapter 15

#### CAROLINE

The room was dark and quiet, as I stirred fitfully with slightly open eyes. My head was throbbing and feeling completely overwhelmed with pain I couldn't hide. My hands cramped, turning over and over again, balling into fists and then opening. The motion seemed to create a rhythm that I began to blink to.

My whole body was burnt, with small, stinging sensations on every nerve ending.

The last thing I remembered was falling into the lava pit and feeling the lava burn me alive. It was something I had never imagined I would feel. The truth was, it was painful as all fuck. Now it felt like I had tiny cuts all over my skin, giving me a tingling, searing sensation. It touched my skin and sent waves of pain moving through my body. When I blinked, my eyelids hurt.

I wanted to see what had happened to my body. Was my skin black and charred? I didn't even feel like I should be alive right now. I felt sunken and hollow, blackened

and in deep pain.

The sound near me made my body shudder and a ripple of pain moved through me from the top of my head down to the tip of my toes.

The sound came again, as if something was scraping along the floor. I drew in a rasping breath and slowly twisted my head to the left to see who or what was near me. The place was so quiet it was clear the only sound was this thing. I blinked my eyes into the darkness, seeing two glowing, yellow eyes blinking back at me.

It took me a moment more for my eyes to become accustomed to the darkness but as I did, I could just make out the outline of a creature who stood in the dark near me.

“Don’t move, your body is still pretty badly burned,” the thing in the corner said. Right now, it was just a dark shadow with two yellow glowing eyes. As my eyes grew used to the dark, I saw it was actually a man. Well, sort of a man, a man with flames in his eyes and horns on his head, and something dark and ominous behind him, but in general, it was still a man.

It all came flooding back to me how Ryder was a monster and Ratchet was a demon, and then I suddenly realized those eyes were the demon eyes I had seen before in Ratchet. This was no man standing next to me. It was a demon.

“Where am I?” I croaked. My voice was cracked and tired.

“You’re in Undirheim,” the demon said. “I am Thrain, Lord of the Underworld.”

“The Lord of the Underworld,” I murmured. “What have I done to deserve such attention?”

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“It’s not often we get a monster’s wife down here,” he said. “As a matter of fact, we’ve never had a monster’s wife down here because monsters don’t tend to marry.”

“Am I dead?” I asked.

The demon nodded. “Yes. For the most part you were dead. You can no longer return to earth. You’re stuck in Undirheim, and with a bit of luck, we might be able to pass you on to one of the other afterlives. Right now, though, you’re in the landing station. Typically, you would stay here and we would cleanse you and prepare you to go into the afterworld, depending on which direction you’re headed.”

“I don’t want to go to the afterworld,” I muttered. “I want to go back to earth.”

“That’s impossible,” he said. “Your physical life ended when you passed through the lava portal. They only move in one direction. “

“So, I’m going to live as a charred husk here in the afterworld?” I asked.

“No, you will heal,” he said.

“How long will it take me to heal?” I queried. “And to what end. I’m just going to be dead.”

“I can help your body to heal faster,” the demon lord explained. “Though, it’s going to take a moment.”

“Can you please just stop the pain?” I asked. “I thought death meant the end of all



pain and suffering.”

“I don’t remember ever hearing that,” Thrain said.

“Then you haven’t hung out on Earth very much at all,” I muttered. “You have magic right? Ratchet had magic. You can do something about this pain.”

“Every demon, like every witch, has their own special brand of magic,” Thrain said. “I mean, we can all do the normal things like create portals, but no, I don’t have the magic to heal your pain.” He crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at me. “It’s most unusual a fae would be in pain in the underworld.”

“I’m a banshee,” I said.

“Well, that might have something to do with it. Banshees are sensitive to death, and Undirheim is steeped in death and decay.”

“Can you get me out of here?” I asked.

“I already told you, you can’t go back to earth,” Thrain said.

“I can’t stay here, forever,” I murmured. And then, suddenly, I looked at him fear tightening my throat. “Can I?”

“No, only demons and Valkyries stay in Undirheim forever,” he said. “This is our home. Everybody else is just passing through.”

“Passing through to where?” A shiver ran up my spine at the thought of what else might be in store for me in this unexpected afterlife.

“Well, you aren’t a Viking, so you won’t be going to Valhalla,” Thrain explained.

“You’ll have to have your spirits weighed, and then they’ll determine if you’ll go to the world of the fae or return back to earth.”

“I thought you said I couldn’t return to earth,” I argued. “Wasn’t that the whole point?”

“You can’t go back as you are,” Thrain shrugged. “We can wipe your memory and return your spirit. You can return to earth that way...in another body.”

“Reincarnation,” I frowned, shaking my head. The last thing in the world I wanted was to go back to earth again and deal with what went on there. Especially with no knowledge of what was truly happening on the planet. I had spent my entire life, forty some odd years of it, not even realizing there was magic in the world. I couldn’t imagine going back and being in ignorant again and maybe this time never finding out the truth.

“I don’t want to go back there,” I said. “Not like that.”

My heart ached at the thought of Ryder, but I knew he was stuck on the earth plane. He was a monster.

“I’ll wait for Ryder.” I closed my eyes.

“Even if he dies, which is unusual for a demigod and takes a long time, he wouldn’t come to Undirheim. He wouldn’t go this path. He will return to the monster void.” Thrain explained.

I looked at him solemnly, my neck aching as I craned to see him. “I want to move on,” I said. “I need the pain to stop.”

Thrain looked at me seriously with a nod. His nostrils flared end slightly. “I don’t

understand why you're still in pain," he said. "I will send a healer. You may think that in the underworld we are heathens, but we do know being in constant pain is not the way to live, even in this realm."

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I rested my head back on the slab, closing my eyes and feeling the tingling steam sensation of my charred skin. I only hoped he sent the healer quickly.

### Chapter 16

#### RYDER

I had screwed up.

I had lost the woman of my dreams, and in so doing, had lost the entire purpose of my being. Even though it seemed like I lived my life to keep the monsters off of the planet, that wasn't it. I had known for centuries I was missing something.

I had watched humans have these interactions that were surreal. My mother had loved my father with such intensity...she couldn't live without him. And while my father was truly a monster, and something not compatible with humanity, he had been compatible with her or at least she had been compatible to him. I had always wanted that loving connection with another creature.

When I met Caroline, I had known she was the one. She would love me constantly and consistently. It was only after I learned the fragility of the human heart that I realized love was not a given. Falling in love was not permanent. I had never paid much attention to all the miserable humans on earth who had loved and lost.

I had only focused on true love.

There was this capacity for true love that I had wanted it. I had won it with Caroline,

and for a moment we had been happy, but I had no idea that for a human a day could seem like forever. and the times I was gone for weeks had been a lifetime for her while for me, they were only a momentary blip in a very, very long live.

Now my entire life was bearing down on me, weighing on my soul.

I woke in the middle of the night, the moon pouring into my room. It was waxing, becoming a full moon. I stared up at it forlornly, feeling my guts, stir.

The place was dead quiet. There wasn't a sound anywhere.

I couldn't sleep. It felt like days since I had really paid attention to anything around me, since I had taken a shower, since I had done anything that was the right thing.

My thoughts turned to Laney, but I shook my head. It was the wrong approach, leaning on somebody who had challenges of their own. Laney was a friend of mine, and anything else was just inappropriate and wrong. I might be a monster, but I wasn't that much of one.

Caroline was the only one for me. I needed to apologize to Laney and let her know I wouldn't be inappropriate with her again.

I glanced out at the moon. It was going to be full soon, and Caroline would move on from Undirheim to whatever afterworld they deemed worthy of her.

My heart clenched.

I needed to move.

I made my way down the dark hallway and I was about to head up the stairs when I noticed the door to Laney's room was open. The hairs on the back of my neck

prickled. Something had changed. I pushed open the door and looked inside. There wasn't anything wrong in the room. There wasn't a thing out of place.

Laney was gone.

A sigh escaped me. I wasn't sure if it was in relief or in sadness or a bit of both. Most likely it was the latter. Knowing Laney could take care of herself, I suddenly felt relieved to not have her in my proximity. We were growing closer than I wanted to. It was never a good idea. Without her around I felt very clear, direct energy leading toward Ratchet. Ratchet had a problem with the flowers and needed to be cured of the petals' poison.

That I could do.

I rushed up the stairs and found Ratchet sitting by the fire, staring at it, his skin a white, clammy glow.

"Are you okay?" I asked, even though the answer was obvious.

"Not really," he said.

"Is it bad?" I watched his fist as it clenched and unclenched against the armrest of the leather sofa.

It had to be bad if a demon was clenching his fists in pain. Demons, from what I understood, liked pain.

"It's a pity the firefly left," Christine's words were soft in the glowing light as she came up the stairs from the bedrooms below. "The firefly could have a calming effect on anxiety, regardless of how it was produced."

“Maybe there’s some kind of a potion you could make him?” I asked, going to the sink and getting a wet washcloth, creating a cold compress for my friend.

“Oh yeah, I got you,” Katrina said, going to the fridge and pulling out a chilled glass of pale pink liquid.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Hibiscus tea.” She smiled as she poured the pale liquid in to the hibiscus tea. “There is some normal stuff in there like ginger and turmeric and then there are a couple other things you probably don’t want to know about.”

“Did anyone die in the making of this potion?” I questioned, trying to pretend I cared, but the truth was right now I didn’t really care about anything other than getting Ratchet back. If that meant somebody had to die, well, I knew it wasn’t right, but I wasn’t sure I cared. Still, it was a relief and Christina shook her head.

“Not even an animal,” she said. “Pure, vegan potion.”

“Fine. I don’t want to know anything beyond that,” I said. “Well, I suppose I want to know if it’s going to work.” I amended my comment.

“We won’t know until we try,” Christina said.

“I’ll try anything,” Ratchet groaned. He looked up at me, his nostrils flaring, his eyes wide. “I feel like every nerve ending in my body is on fire.”

“Can you hold steady enough to drink it?” I placed the drink in his hand and held my hands around his long enough to make sure he had a good grip on the glass.

He gave me a sideways smirk. “I’ve never met a glass I couldn’t hold.” He raised the cup in the air, using both hands to steady it before lifting it to his lips and draining the liquid until the glass was completely empty.



“Now what’s going to happen?” I queried Christina.

“He’s going to go into a sleep.”

I refrained from rolling my eyes, even though that’s what I felt like doing. This was just what I needed. My right-hand man to disappear, my wife’s right-hand woman to disappear, and me to be left.

Alone.

I needed to go to the DGC and talk to them. I had to try and see Caroline one last time before she disappeared forever out of my reach. I watched as Ratchet lay back.

He needed rest.

Now was the perfect time to petition the DGC.

## Chapter 17

### CAROLINE

The pulsating glow of the horizon was a constant reminder I was in a maze of shadows, and there was nothing that could get me out except for Thrain. The entire world I had known before was gone. There was nothing to connect me back to Ryder, to give me access to the world I had once known, but I still wasn’t ready to say goodbye to all of it. Here in Undirheim, it seemed so much less realistic, so much farther away, as if I was looking at it through a dark tinted window on a screen.

It didn’t seem real.

The next time I started to consciousness, my skin was healed. There was no mirror,

no way of seeing what I actually looked like, but when I looked down at my hands, they were healthy and covered in peach flesh. I moved my fingers in a wave, rubbing my thumb over them.

Wherever I was, I was definitely alive. And where I was from, I could no longer go back to. A curiosity whirled within me to explore this place the portal had brought me.

I stood up and looked around the cell I was in. Dark, windowless walls were no more than an arm's reach away on either side. A small doorway was at the far end of the tiny room. When I stepped through it, I found myself on what seemed to be a side street in a gothic, dark town.

Spires skewered the skyline, cobblestone streets weaved in all directions and fires burned everywhere. There was a slickness about the stones, but it didn't seem like a typical rain one would expect, it was a sticky and thick moisture that gathered on the stones. Somehow it didn't bother me, though. There was something that made me feel right at home here.

A large, whooshing sound overhead made me scream as I jumped back. A creature landed just beyond me. She was all in white with large white wings, and for a moment, I thought she was an angel till she opened her mouth and I saw she had fangs.

"About time you rose from your bed." Her voice was lyrical and harmonious.

"What the fuck are you?" I asked.

"I'm here to bring you to the next world," She said. "My name is Oren."

"What world is that?" I pushed my hair out of my eyes, so I could better get a better

look at her. At first glance she would've been what a human would call an angel. She had very pale skin and white hair and white wings. There was also something sharp about her. The white in her eyes was almost too clear, the white of her teeth too white. Not to mention the sharpness of them was too harsh. There was something visceral about her that put a chill in my bones.

"I'm a Valkyrie," she said. "Normally I take people to Valhalla. I think it goes without saying, though, you're not a Viking." She twisted slightly on her heel, and I got a side glance at her wings. They were sharp, just like the rest of her. If she were ever caught in battle, it would not surprise me if these wings could be used as weapons.

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“That doesn’t surprise me,” I said. “I’m fae. I don’t know anything about where the fae go when they die.”

“Well,” she said, looping her arm through mine and pulling me down the street a bit. I didn’t know what happened, but the minute she touched me it was like my perception changed. I could suddenly see creatures in the dark, that I hadn’t been able to see when I was alone, it had been just me until she had shown me who she was. And now I could see the demons walking through the night and the Valkyries floating up above.

“Now you can see Undirheim,” Oren said. “It’ll be easier to understand it if you can see all of it.”

“I think I have an understanding that this is where people go in between their final destination, and being on human territory.”

“Yeah, it’s kind of like a halfway house,” Oren grinned.

There was something cold and ominous about her grin, but I decided I wasn’t going to take it too personal. “If you’re a Valkyrie, why were you assigned to me?” I asked.

“That’s exactly what I was wondering,” she said, folding her arms across her chest. “I did some digging, and I found out who you are.”

I looked at her, pain shooting through my heart. “I’m no one.”

“You’re a demigod’s wife,” Oren acknowledged. “We don’t see those around here

very often, so when we do, it gets special attention. It's why you're getting a Valkyrie escort."

"You still haven't told me where I'm going."

"First we're going to grab a coffee," she said, steering me into a doorway that at first glance looked like it was just part of the regular stone and gray mortar walls, which seem to make up the buildings of Undirheim.

We stepped inside, and there were tables everywhere. The place was much bigger than it appeared from the small front piece. There was a collection of demons and Valkyrie lounging and chatting at the table interspersed with a third species, which mostly looked human.

"Who are all the others?" I asked.

"People like you," Oren said. "People in transition. Moving from one world to the next."

"Do you always take them to coffee with you," I asked incredulously.

"Sometimes it takes a little while to get direction on some people more than others," Oren said.

"You have direction on me," I asked. "Right?"

Even though the thought of leaving Ryder was a dull pain, it felt like I was being called somewhere else, like I was being led forward to my next adventure, and maybe I would have to go.

"To be honest you're the first banshee we've seen in here for ages," Oren explained.

“Fae don’t die very often and when they do, they usually streamline their way through this place, but a fae who’s forty and died so suddenly, one who is married to a demigod, well, you’re a whole different kettle of fish.”

She leaned back, eyeing me up. I suddenly felt somehow seen as one of those people who never quite fit in, just like I’d already always felt studied in science by all the geek guys.

“Do people ever get stuck here?” I asked as she waved her hand, and someone came forward with two drinks, both steaming hot. Strangely, when I went to touch them, the cup didn’t burn me at all.

“How can I not feel the heat?” I asked. I looked deep inside the mug, trying to figure out if it was dry ice making it smoke.

“This is Undirheim,” the Valkyrie said. “You don’t feel a lot of pain or a lot of pleasure. That’s why the demons and the Valkyrie are always going to earth to find special sensation. You get something there you don’t get quite anywhere else. It’s something you will never ever experience again.”

The way she said that suddenly made a deep, stabbing pain score through my body at the idea of never feeling the gift of pleasure or the truth of pain ever again.

## Chapter 18

### RYDER

This time, I didn’t want to meet me at the DGC in New York. I wanted to meet her not on the screen here either; I wanted to meet her on neutral territory, someplace where I wasn’t just showing up for work or she wasn’t coming into a monster dominated area. I knew there were a lot of risks meeting Vina. I could draw attention

to myself. She could see a problem with my brother Magnus. I mean, I saw a problem, but it wasn't necessarily something I wanted the DGC to deal with. I still needed to think about my mother.

With Ratchet out of commission, I didn't have a lot of options on portals. So, I agreed to meet Vina back in Alameda. She said she had some business there to cover with the satyrs. I wasn't surprised. As rebellious as Furlan was, when he needed help from the DGC, he would go and get it, and use them to his advantage. Undoubtedly, he would want to file some sort of a grievance with Vina.

We met at a very elite French restaurant run by some of the original French witches, who had passed down their culinary skills through the ages after the war between the fae and the demigods split the world in two. The Perdeux family had kept the spelling of their name and their culinary secrets to deliver one of the finest French restaurants in the world right here in Alameda.

The ambience of the fireplace in the small exquisite Victorian house, where people were greeted as if they were beloved guests. I knew some of these witches were pretty old and using some of their powers to keep their youthful good looks and build some longevity in their lives.

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This time it was Ghislaine who greeted me at the front door. A tall, statuesque brunette with pursed lips and a twinkle in her eye. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you in here, Ryder,” Ghislaine said, looking carefully past me to see if there was anybody with me on a presumed date.

I shook my head to her questioning look. “I’m meeting Vina,” I muttered, scanning the room’s dark crevices to see if I could see the DGC President anywhere.

Ghislaine raised her eyebrows. “Madam President is not here yet. She said she had an important rendezvous. I did not realize it was with you.”

My head snapped back and my eyes glared at her. “It’s just business.”

“That’s what they all say, but sometimes when it’s been a while, it’s not just business. Is it?”

“I don’t know what it’s like for most people,” I said. “All I can tell you is what I know for me it’s true. It’s just business.”

“Well, I’ll take you to her table,” Ghislaine said, shrugging her shoulders and taking a couple of old fashion menus up from the table next to her, and leading me back into the farthest regions of the Victorian house, where, in a small private room, with wine racks, all along one wall, was set a table for two. Clearly this was where I was having dinner with Vina.

I almost wanted to roll my eyes. Basically, I had one thing to ask her, and I didn’t need all the rest of this, but this was the way demigods operated. They had a lot of



time on their hands, a lot of time to hang out and do nothing and eat long leisurely meals before finally getting about their business.

I didn't have that. The moon was waxing, and time was running out.

I paced inside the small room, not even willing to sit down at the table.

"Shall I bring out your food, Master Ryder?" The waiter had clearly been briefed on who I was.

"I'm not hungry," I growled.

I glanced at my watch. She was ten minutes late. I was sure there were plenty of reasons why Vina would be late. None of them which seemed any good to me.

I turned sharply as she entered the room. My patience was already stretched too thin.

"I don't need dinner," I said, motioning my hand around the room at all of the ornate details. None of this made sense.

"Yes, you do," Vina said.

"What do you mean? Yes, I do," I asked.

"You are a monster, Ryder. It doesn't mean you have to act like one. I understand you have chaos in your veins and it is driving you to move in getting results, but sometimes things just take time."

"I don't have time for this," I said. "This isn't because I'm a monster, I am impatient," I said. "This is because she's probably already with the transporter who will take her to wherever it is she's going." I spat the words out, knowing, even if

Vina knew where Caroline was going, she wouldn't want to tell me. She would just keep it to herself.

"You will make time if you want the information I can give you," Vina murmured, nodding her head toward her chair, and waiting for the waiter to come over and pull it out, so I could sit down.

"Come," she said, her long fingers stretched out and motioning toward the table across from her. "There's nothing wrong with civilized conversation. This is how we socialize and become human. This is part of who you are. We all talk about being demigods. You are part monster and you are also half human, just like I am. And these parts of us also need to be socialized and enjoyed and listened to. They require the social instinct of coming together and getting to know one another. Ryder, you have lived most of your life only in close contact with Ratchet, your mother and brother. And none of those seem to be doing too well at the moment."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You don't have to play stupid with me," Vina said. "I know exactly what's going on. There's not a thing that goes on in the world of the Legendi that I don't find out about. Most of the smaller things I don't pay any attention to, but when the larger things happen, then those are things I want to know about. So, for example, when your brother had your wife killed, that's the kind of stuff I need to know about."

"He didn't have her killed," I said, not really knowing what else to say, even though it sounded like a blatant falsity even to my ears.

"However, you justify it to yourself, it's your business," Vina said. "We're going to deal with it in our own way, and there's nothing you can say that will influence us."

"That's not why I'm here," I said, sitting down and staring her in the eye. "I'm here

because I want you to do something for me. I don't think you're going to want to do it and I think you're going to try to find a million reasons why you don't have to do it and you shouldn't do it. I'm going to tell you though, if you don't do it, I won't do anything for the DGC anymore."

"I think your witch friends already have a pretty good handle on what to do for Ratchet," Vina said.

"I'm not here asking about Ratchet. He'll make peace or find his own way out. I'm here to let you know that unless you help me get access into Undirheim to see Caroline before she moves on, I will never do another thing for the DGC ever again."

"You can't be serious," Vina said, her eyes widening as her voice caught in her throat.

"Deadly," I said.

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“Going into Undirheim will kill you,” Vina said. “There’s nothing I can do about that. It’s a one-way ticket. Even if I can get you in, you can’t come back.”

“I don’t want to come back,” I said.

“There’s two problems with your logic. If you don’t want to come back then we lose you anyhow, even if we give you this wish, so either way it’s a lose lose proposition for the DGC.”

“Unless...” I cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Unless I traded in a favor with Thrain to get you permission to leave and return to earth.”

I nodded at her. “Precisely.”

“And why exactly am I going to do this for you?”

“Because I’m not going to stand in your way of taking down my brother. I think he has been a danger, and somebody needs to take responsibility for the death of a fae, or else they will come asking questions.”

“There is that,” Vina said.

“Also, if you don’t get me into Undirheim, I’ll retire.” I leaned back in my chair.

“You’ll what?” Vina asked in shock.

“Retire,” I repeated. “I won’t do anything to stop the monsters overrunning the earth.”

“I find it very difficult to believe you would actually do that,” Vina said.

“Watch me,” I insisted.

She eyed me up quietly for a moment. “Okay,” she finally said.

I wasn’t sure how to take it.

“Okay? You want me to stand by and do nothing about these monsters?” I asked.

“No,” she said to my relief. “I’ll get you access into Undirheim for one day. There’s no guarantee what shape you’ll come out of there in. I’ll have to ask him questions.”

The wave of relief that fell over me was amazing. It was as if my entire being was uplifted and settling in on a pink cloud.

I grinned at her like a child.

Now I just needed to get Ratchet and go with him to Undirheim together. We would come up with a way to get Caroline out of there and safely back to Earth.

## Chapter 19

### CAROLINE

The sun never rose, nor set an Undirheim. It was just a pale gray most of the time. The only thing I could tell of the passing of time was the moon. The moon hung low in the sky, as if we were so close you could almost reach out and touch it.

Oren told me we had a bit longer in Undirheim, but when the moon was full, that's when I would make my transition to wherever it was banshees who had been married to demigod monsters went when they died. I only hoped there weren't a whole lot of monsters in there. I would love nothing more than to see Ryder, without the protection of Ryder, monsters weren't something I wanted to experience.

Instead, I felt lulled into the calming tone of Undirheim, enjoying the company of Oren. She made a point of coming by each day to the cell where I stayed and taking me around Undirheim to show me some other things that were going on besides the café. There was, of all things, a bookstore and some other gathering areas much like bars where they watched sports on projected screens. I didn't recognize any of the sports they were playing, but I could tell by the chanting when they were losing or when they were winning.

It was clear after a while, that the Valkyries and the demons had a fairly odd relationship.

It wasn't that they hung out together. They certainly didn't. Valkyries moved in groups, and the demons moved alone, sometimes recognizing each other and giving a slight nod. There was an undeniable energy about the two of them. It was obvious in the way they each took up space around each other as if each one of them wasn't there, then the other one would also cease to exist. Completely separate entities, yet completely reliant on each other.

Just thinking about it now gave me pause. It made me think of things that I could barely remember. A dim shadow of a memory made me feel and think as if a piece of me was missing, as if something was left in the shadows of my life.

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Even as I had this thought I knew what it was. It was Ryder.

There was a sense that I had of knowing when I had lost what was missing. This journey through death was one taken alone. There was no way I would experience it with Ryder, even though I couldn't remember anything part of my life without him. Even though I only met him in my late thirties and been with him in my early forties, it was as if being with Ryder had shifted and changed every memory I had my entire life. He was such a part of me that even now, through the fog of death and the changes that were made I still had a sense of him.

A knock came on my cell door.

With no idea of day or night, I assumed it was Oren come to fetch me to go to the café. I had realized in our daily trips to the café, having a dead human with you was a way the Valkyries avoided each other. Although they liked to move in packs, by having any human with them they automatically stood alone. They could see and be seen, but they were not required to interact or engage with either of the Valkyries. Or the demons. Their job at that time was to take care of us.

Somehow, I did not mind.

The opportunity to see the supernatural creatures up close and personal was astounding. I couldn't remember what I had heard about Valkyries in my human life. It was already just a memory, but I knew they were magical creatures who helped the fallen Vikings on the battlefield to bring them to Valhalla. Even though I felt like there was more, that was all I could remember at the moment. And so, it felt pretty special that a Valkyrie was paying attention to me.

When I open the door to my cell, though, I was not greeted by Oren's sharp, white wings and features. Instead Thrain stood there.

The metal of his demon armor blended into the darkness around us, making him an even darker vision in my doorway.

"You have visitors," Thrain said, grumbling, and I was pretty sure from his stance he didn't like the idea that I had visitors.

I felt the startling realization that if he didn't like it, I didn't really like it. I wasn't sure exactly why, but maybe because he was my benefactor here in Undirheim. I knew that in a place full of demons and Valkyries, I wanted to keep the lowest profile possible and not get any negative attention. Having the demon lord upset with me was definitely getting negative attention. Definitely not the type of attention I wanted. I didn't want any attention whatsoever, except maybe for the one on one attention I was getting from Oren. It was the type of attention that made me feel safe and comfortable. I felt like I could ask her a question if I ever had any. I glanced over at Thrain, and it was not quite the same with the demon lord.

"I will have you meet with him in the clearing," Thrain said. "It'll be private enough, so not everybody will know your business, but it won't be so quiet that no one will hear you scream."

My body shuddered as he rounded out the word scream. Why would I scream in Ryder's presence? I didn't dare ask the question, though instead, I just nodded along with Thrain and joined him out in the street.

The thought of meeting Ryder was making me uncomfortable and unhappy, as I followed the cobblestone, dark streets toward the woods surrounding the village.

In the outskirts as we moved toward the trees, I could see Oren hovering. She was



floating off of the ground just a little bit, her wings beating every so often just to keep her afloat as she followed along behind us. It wasn't until we were moving in the direction of the forest I really started to see it, how the branches of the trees stretched against a gun smoke grey sky. And somewhere in the middle of it was the clearing where I would meet with Ryder and the only memory I had left of my human life I had been married to this demigod, but even that was just a dim memory in the crisp shadows of Undirheim.

The instant I saw his hulking dark shadow in the clearing, and I felt a sharp pain pierce my body. As if Thrain expected it, he reached out with one hand to catch me as I stumbled.

"What was that?" I asked. My eyes not leaving the dark shadow that stood hulking in the clearing amidst the skeletons of the trees.

"It's called a memory," Thrain said. "Humans are stripped of their memories when they come in to Undirheim. It makes it easier to move on if you aren't tied to all your human emotions, which are accessed through memory."

"You mean love?" I set my hand against my chest, as I felt it rise and fall.

Thrain visibly jerked at this. He understood exactly what I was talking about.

"You're in love with someone," I said.

Thrain's gaze shifted quickly to Oren before returning back to me. If my days in Undirheim were anything to understand, it was probably they didn't talk about these types of things here. And there was something in the way he looked at Oren...but I pressed my lips shut. If he didn't want to talk about it, I wasn't going to be the one to pressure him. I saw the flames in his eyes as he turned back to look at me and gave me a single nod of his head.

“Yes,” he confirmed.

“You know I have to say, I never would’ve guessed demons would have lovers,” I murmured. “Though, who am I to talk?” I continued. “My husband is a monster, and a demigod at that.”

“Demons are capable of love,” Thrain said. “It’s a very special kind of magic. It’s a magic of all possibilities. And it brings souls together in a way more powerful than any other force on earth, or Undirheim, or in the other realms.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” I murmured. “Everyone was right. Love will find a way. Love has the greatest power...” All the clichés were running back to my mind.

Thrain shrugged. “If you don’t want to like it, you don’t have to, but it’s the truth.”

“If it’s the truth, then why does this memory hurt?” I asked, pressing my hand even harder against my chest, trying to breathe into the pain that was still piercing through my body.

“It’s not really pain,” Thrain said. “It’s just a different vibration than Undirheim. Undirheim is not built on attachment. The problem with attachment is that if we get attached to people here, then we would never let them go. And our whole purpose is to transition souls from being a human, which is a very complex state of passion and love, and help you transition to the more objective world that is not earth. There are numerous worlds out there to explore and live in.”

“So, you’re here to numb the experience of human lives,” I asked.

“Not exactly how I would put it,” Thrain said, “but I can see why you would say that.”

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I took a deep breath. “Is talking to him going to make the pain worse or better?” I asked. I was staring at the shadows the last thing on my mind being the desire for greater pain. I wanted to remove the pain, not have it get any worse by getting closer to it.

“I don’t know exactly what’s going to happen,” Thrain sad. “We don’t get a lot of visitors here. We only get transitory guests. Ryder is here by permission of the president of the DGC. In order for him to have rights to come in and go out, he must’ve gotten a pretty high-level permission from both sides of the divide. He must have people.”

“I don’t have people,” I muttered.

“Indeed, you do,” Thrain said. “You’re fae. In fact, that’s where you’ll be going when your time here is up. When the moon passes, we will go to Faente A’tun.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“The home of the fae.”

“From everything I have read,” I pointed out, “the land of the fae was a dying land, where they were all trying to get away from. That was how they ended up on earth.

“The stories can be an inaccurate. They’ve been on earth a long, long time. There is a place where Fae still dwell. That’s where their departed go to. They typically don’t go through here, unless they are half human or have some other dispensation,” Oren explained.

“Like being the ex-wife of a demigod?” I asked.

“You’re a double winner.” Thrain gave me a smile. “Do you want me to stay with you?”

I watched as Ryder stepped out of the shadows and approached us. I felt the pain in my heart lessen as if something was settling back in there. Moving in slowly and surely, curling up on the couch inside my heart, as if it always been there, but I only just noticed.

“No,” I said. “I’m going to be all right.”

I glanced over to Oren, who was moving up from the shadows. Clearly, she was going to keep Thrain occupied while I was talking to Ryder. I glanced at them for a moment, wondering if Oren was the one Thrain was in love with, but the two of them stood together, talking quietly in the fog. They didn’t have that vibe about them. They were definitely just a friend’s vibe.

Not how I was feeling with Ryder. Harsh shadows moved across his face as he stepped through the gray light.

“Caroline,” the word came out from him, raspy and deep, as if he was taking a long sip of water through a parched mouth.

I looked up at him, seeing the chiseled line of his jaw as he stared down at me, his body leaning toward me, as if he would scoop me up and hold me close. I wasn’t ready for that. I stood with my arms encircling my waist and hunched forward. The pain was slowly returning but now it felt more like an awkward, displaced uncomfortable feeling.

It wasn’t so painful as it was crowded in there.

All the feelings I had for Ryder had no place in this world, in Undirheim. They had no place where I was going to live with the fae. As I stared at him, I also had the feeling I couldn't imagine any type of a future without him. It had been like that from the moment I had met him, even though the actual details of the meeting were a dead memory I couldn't quite obtain.

"Ryder," I responded, but my voice was cool and withdrawn. A tone that did not go unnoticed by the crestfallen expression that slid across Ryder's face.

## Chapter 20

### RYDER

It didn't matter how gray and dismal Undirheim was, Caroline would always be a shining light in whatever world I found myself in. Her presence in Undirheim brought me out of the dismal forest and into a soft clearing.

I could sense every part of her.

Her heart was muted. This was what I had heard of as being the transition phase. A moment every soul went through as they were cleansed of the human emotions and sent off into another experience.

Undirheim was the place where one could access all worlds.

It was the place where the demons ruled, and the Valkyrie submitted only with the assurance it was their choice to submit, and you did not actually win the right to rule over them. For a Valkyrie was truly the ruler of all they beheld. They were the purveyors of death. In fact, they were very similar to banshees and maybe that was why Caroline felt so comfortable here.

Or maybe it was the dark magic of Undirheim that made her feel so comfortable. Whatever it was, I could tell just by her relaxed nature that she was at peace here. And I wasn't sure I wanted to interrupt that.

How could I not?

Just standing here staring at her, I wanted to wrap her in my arms and pull her close to me. I knew this was not allowed. My eyes shifted to Thrain. Ratchet was a hulk and demon, but Thrain, the demon lord, made Ratchet look almost like a teenage kid.

The last thing in the world I wanted was a fight with Thrain.

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I wanted Caroline, though. It didn't matter what I would have to face in order to get her.

"Come back with me," I said, my voice was, deep, trapping all of the emotions, and all the desires I had for this woman. My heart was crumbling as I stood there, looking at her, knowing I would need to break every promise I had made in order to have her, yet she was worth every broken promise.

She looked confused by my words, her head cock to the side as she looked up at me. "They told me I can't come back."

I tried hard to read her expression to see if it was actually something she wanted or didn't want, but it was almost as if her brain didn't want to compute any of those ideas and just wanted to move onto the idea that it wasn't a logical request.

"There's always a way around the rules," I said.

"Rules are here for a reason," she said. "I think there's got to be some sensibility around the plan. And me returning to a world where I die instantly doesn't sound like a very good plan to me."

"That's not the plan," I said gruffly. "The plan is you come back and we go back to the way things were."

"The way things were?" Caroline asked, a frown flooding across the fine lines of her face.

“The way things were recently,” I clarified.

“Once you’ve been to Undirheim, you can’t really return,” she said. Lines of confusion flitted across her face.

“I’m telling you there’s a way to make anything work,” I insisted, leaning forward, even as Thrain moved closer toward us.

“She can’t come with you,” Thrain said ominously.

“You’re not the only demigod in the room,” I pointed out.

Thrain glowered at me, his nostrils flaring. “Do you think I answer to the demigods?”

“Maybe not,” I said. “The only reason why you’re letting me in here today is because of the demigods.”

“So maybe you better rethink your stance on the demigods,” Thrain responded. “If they’re the ones that got you in here, they’re probably the ones who can get you back out.”

“I don’t see why they can’t get us both out,” I said.

“Undoubtedly they could,” Thrain said with a nod, turning the staff he held his hand so the orb glowed toward me. “If I would allow it.”

“Why would you not allow it?” I asked, slowing my palms to calm the irritation and chaos. I could feel chaos beneath my skin. The last thing I needed was to have an all-out battle with Thrain. They would remove Ratchet from me, and even though Ratchet wasn’t the most helpful demon at the moment, he was still my best friend, and not someone I could afford to lose, not after everything that had happened.



Though if battling Thrain could get Caroline out of Undirheim, I would do it in a heartbeat.

“The same rules apply to Caroline as apply to anybody else in Undirheim.”

“And what are those?” I queried.

Thrain narrowed his gaze at me. “Anyone in Undirheim can leave and return to earth. If somebody comes to get them.”

“Check.” I waved a quick hand toward myself in a brief motion.

Thrain tilted his head. “And they have to want to go.”

“No problem,” I said confidently.

“Might be a bigger problem than you think.” Thrain shook his head.

“With no help from your magic,” I said.

“My magic has no impact on those in this part of the omega verse,” Thrain said. “Undirheim is a magical town. It lifts the pain and suffering of anyone’s experience on earth away from them. Not only does she not feel the love and desire for you that she once did, but she also doesn’t feel all the pain of all those nights, where she didn’t know where you were, what you were doing. Here they can just experience life with no attachment.”

“She is attached,” I insisted. “She is attached to me. And nothing you or the gods do or say is going to change that. It doesn’t matter if we die a thousand times, we will always return to each other.”

I said the words confidently, but as I glanced over at Caroline, my heart sank. She wasn't looking at me with the same sense of a longing, of homecoming, that I know I felt around her. She was looking at me with the casual interest of an almost stranger.

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“I feel good here,” Caroline said to me, her eyes wide and open with nothing being hidden from me.

“Do you really want to interrupt her peacefulness?” Thrain asked me.

And I hated the instantaneous response that rose quietly within me because the truth was, no, I didn’t. I did not want to change the way she was feeling at the moment. I could tell by the look on her face she was feeling at peace. Who was it for me to change that and bring her back to the pain and suffering of earth. It was selfish of me to want that.

Yet I did.

I wanted it more than I wanted life itself. More than I wanted my brother to be innocent. More than I wanted my mother to be free. More than I wanted anything. I wanted Caroline to come home with me.

I spun quickly on my toe and turned away from Caroline. My body felt as if it was being severed in two. The truth was, I needed to be away from her. To be close to her and not be able to have her made me want to rip out my own heart.

Thrain and I looked at each other, eye to eye, demon to demigod. “I’m going to return.”

“You know there’s nothing I can do,” Thrain admonished.

“If there’s anything to be done, I will find a way to do it,” I insisted.

“You haven’t got much time.” Thrain gazed up to the moon, which hung low and heavy on the horizon. In human terms, we both knew that meant a couple of days at most. Three, probably.

I couldn’t think about that. I couldn’t think about the truth she may walk away from me forever in the matter of a few short days. My heart contracted. I sighed.

“Don’t lock the door,” I said to Thrain before slipping back into the shadows that would bring me back to earth through the portal.

## Chapter 21

### CAROLINE

When Ryder departed, I was left in confusion, even though I knew I should not be. I knew it was a very simple path forward. I was going to live out the rest of my days as a half fae in a fae afterworld. That was the path for me. It was one of those moments in my life that became so clear and obvious that it was the next right step.

I felt as if this step was always waiting for me in this particular place, and I only had to get to this point in time where I would see exactly which way to go. They were set up before me like clear, stepping stones across a raging river. They steadied and calmed my nerves and made it obvious to me.

At least mostly obvious.

There were, at the back of my mind, questions.

Was there any business left undone with Ryder? Was there something that still needed to happen? I didn’t know how to discern the answer to this question yet and I knew asking Thrain would only give me one answer, which was to continue on my

path. I had heard his conversation with Ryder, and there was one thing he wasn't telling Ryder that was really obvious to me because he told me.

For me to return to earth, somebody on earth must die.

The worlds had to be kept in balance. At least that was the way Oren had explained it to me when I had told her I was having doubts about going into the next world. She made it clear everything came at a cost, including me, returning to my life with Ryder and wondering what that might've been like.

Instead, just as we had become open to each other, just as we had chosen honesty and truthfulness the opportunity to love each other fully and wholly had been cut short. I had passed into Undirheim and now this was where we were waiting to see what future awaited me in the land of the fae.

My heart clenched at the thought. An image of Ryder's dark eyes looking forlornly at me flashed before me. Could I really walk away from him?

Yes.

Absolutely.

If being with him meant the death of somebody else. I absolutely was not okay with that. I needed to move on.

"I guess as these are the last couple of days in Undirheim, you might as well show me around a bit more," I murmured to Oren.

"I will leave you to it," Thrain said, giving me a brief nod before he disappeared into the shadows.

“I will take you to the market today,” Oren suggested. “The market has goods from all the worlds in it. It’s really quite the place to be.”

We made our way down the cobblestone streets in silence. Or at least I was silent. Oren was chattering on in her sharp, clipped way and I was mostly ignoring her. My heart and mind were full of thoughts of Ryder.

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We made our way back to the café, but it was as if more of Undirheim had become open to me. I didn't know if it was because I had seen Ryder or if it was because of the waxing moon, but the café was suddenly larger with rows of books on shelves rising up into the sky.

"Did that just happen?" I asked.

Oren shook her head. "Everything is as it is. Your ability to see it expands and retracts, depending upon your own perspective."

"Well, I suppose my perspective has just been expanded," I murmured.

"Allow me to help expand is a little bit more," Oren said. "All the books you see, those are true stories."

"Really?" I asked, trying to recognize some of the titles on the sides of the books, but they were just empty spines.

"How do you know what story you're grabbing?" I asked.

"You don't," Oren said. "Now that you can see the book, you might be able to read one of them."

"Have you ever read one of them?" I asked.

"I've read a lot of them," Oren said with a smile. "Valkyries live a long time. I've had a fair bit of time to spend in here."

“Who is that?” I pointed at a middle-aged woman passing by.

“I don’t know,” Oren said.

“I liked her hair,” I said, noting her curly hair. “There was something about her that felt so familiar.”

“They’re probably just memories,” Oren said. “The thing is you won’t be able to remember clearly. From what I understand, you get a sense of *déjà vu*.”

“My best friend,” I murmured. “Laney.” Her name on my ears suddenly made her feel so concrete. As if I had seen her here, but when I looked again, the woman who had been passing by was gone.

I whirled on Oren. “Is Laney dead?”

Oren frowned. “It’s not like I have a Rolodex of all the dead people in my mind. I’d have to look into it for you, but it’s not typical two friends die like that. Typically, deaths in a small friend group happen years apart. Except for very unusual cases. It’s a huge shock for a small friend group to take. So, I can’t imagine Laney’s gone now.

“Oren, you make it sound like these things are preordained,” I frowned.

Oren shrugged. “I don’t make the rules.”

“You just follow them,” I grumbled, secretly wondering if I was making my own choices or just following the rules.

“I do know if you were getting images of Laney, then she’s thinking of you,” Oren said.



“Well, I should hope she’s thinking of me. I just died.” I retorted.

“No, I didn’t mean that simply,” Oren said. “When somebody dies there’s a typical vibration of more people thinking about that person but when it goes on, it’s more like there’s a reason you came up in their mind or a different reason, not just grief.”

“Is there any way to find out why she’s thinking about me?” I queried.

“Not if you want to stay out of trouble,” Oren took a sip of her drink.

I shook my head. “Well, if Thrain the demon lord is here, I definitely want to stay out of trouble. Being in trouble in his eyes is not something I would look forward to.”

“Then you might as well just forget anything happened on Earth,” Oren advised.

I stared down at my drink, taking a small sip of it and staring up at her. “What if I can’t? What if I have too much trouble forgetting my past?”

“Those are the guys who haunt the dreams of the living,” Oren said. “It means you will go onto the life of the fae, but in your dreams, you will travel to Earth and they will be haunted by you.”

“Haunted like in a bad way?” I asked her.

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“It will feel good for a moment,” Oren said. “Then eventually, it changes, doesn’t it? Because the realization dawns that the very thing making you feel good right now is the thought of something you can never have. When you realize this, the pain and suffering is completely overwhelming. Because you were attached to something that has passed away in time.”

“So, what you’re saying is there is no such thing as a good haunting,” I said, shaking my head and closing my eyes briefly.

“Precisely,” Oren said. “You are better off, for everyone’s sake, of just letting go and moving on.”

## Chapter 22

### RYDER

In typical Vina style, the portal from Undirheim did not drop me back at the top of Mount Diablo. Instead, it dropped me back in Alameda, close to where I had taken the portal Vina had made. Once she had decided on something, she wasn’t going to hold it up. She decided it would be okay for me to go to Undirheim to see Caroline, and she had sent me immediately. Now I was back in the living room of my Victorian house in Alameda and I wasn’t sure my request had been such a good idea. And my heart ached with the loss of Caroline. Seeing her in the hands of the demons and the Valkyries was more than I wanted to stomach.

I was sure that seeing me would’ve triggered her desire to return to Earth, and to join me again, but the argument had been strong for staying in a blissful, peaceful world

where feelings were numbed. She didn't have to have such a hard time with the waves of human emotions and the way they moved her. The way they moved all humans, or those of us who are half human. I had the same feelings she did. It was just over a period of hundreds of years I had learned to stamp them down and let a lot of feelings go in the river of time. Inevitably, it swallowed up most of the events that seemed so monumental.

A light whimpering filled the air. I turned around and to my shock and surprise there was Bales, grinning from spiky tooth to spiky tooth, his face mostly absorbed by his gaping maw.

I had noticed the hell hound had been missing since Hawaii. I don't know how he found his way back, but far be it from me to tell a hell hound where he should be and where he shouldn't be. I was just grateful he wasn't blaming me for the death of Caroline.

"I saw Caroline," I said, rubbing my hand over the massive forehead of the beast.

A shining light in the far corner of the room warned me a portal was opening. I could tell by the red and gold light it was a demon portal. My heart skipped a beat, hoping upon hope it was Thrain delivering Caroline to me. The portal had hardly been fully formed once Ratchet stepped through it, stumbling into the room.

"Ratchet." I moved forward to steady my friend.

"The potion worked pretty good," he said, without needing to be asked.

"Did it take the edge off?" I asked.

"It did better than that," he smiled wanly. "It stopped my cravings."

“I have another DGC assignment.” I looked him up and down, not sure if he was up to the task.

“Is there ever anything but DGC assignments?” Ratchet asked with a sideways grin that looked a lot like a smirk.

“I suppose not,” I said, with a shrug. It had been that way for so long now, I hardly even noticed. Even now, as I was receiving the instructions, or hearing about the infractions of monsters on Earth, the desire to protect and serve was gone. I was completely devoid of the feeling of needing to stop the monsters from destroying all of humanity. I still had the feeling to protect, but without my wife, it had lost power. It was no longer as compelling as it used to be.

Still, it was a job to do, and someone had to do it. At least now I knew I wasn’t fighting my own brother.

“Where is Cade now?” Ratchet asked.

“Yellowstone.” I passed on the information Vina had been giving me earlier.

“What’s he doing in Yellowstone of all places?” Ratchet asked.

“One of the largest volcanoes in the continental United States,” I said. “Seems like a pretty good place for the son of Vulcan to be.”

“One portal to Yellowstone, coming up,” Ratchet shrugged.

The corner of the living room was taken up by a red and yellow, flame-encrusted demon portal. I gave a sharp whistle and Bales came running toward me. I didn’t want to get the little guy hurt at all, but I felt pretty confident the hell hound could take care of its own ass in a fight. At least that was the assumption I had made for

everything I'd seen so far.

We stepped through the portal and landed on a broad glen, surrounded by a forest of trees. At the center of it was a steaming cistern of water.

"A geyser," Ratchet said, pointing at the sulfur infused turquoise water in front of us.

"Better stay back," I said. "The last thing we need is boiled demon or monster bones."

"We can send the monsters through it," Ratchet said.

"There's only one problem with that idea," I said, raising my thumb and pointing it behind us. "The monsters are on our side of the geyser."

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A thriving mass of blackened, shadow creatures moved behind us every now, and then one would dart out toward us, and we would press back. Every time they darted forward, it moved us closer to the geyser and the steaming water.

“I think they have the advantage of the situation,” Ratchet said.

“Except for one thing,” I said. “The best superpower of all time.” I transformed into my monster self, complete with wings and horns and everything. I flapped my wings, and with one massive swipe, pulling myself into the air and blowing back the monsters’ hair.

“I don’t see Vulcan’s son anywhere,” Ratchet said, hovering next to me in his demon form.

“He’s probably creating these as a distraction,” I mused.

“That would make sense,” Ratchet nodded.

“He’s doing that so the hotspots will get Vina’s attention, like Machu Picchu and Yellowstone, because she won’t want to have any bad press on these magical places. She’s going to push to have them solved immediately,” I explained.

“This one might take more than you and me to solve,” Ratchet said.

“There is no one else,” I said.

I couldn’t agree with Ratchet more than I looked down at this monstrous sea. They

were shadow creatures. They were not going to give into the idea we'd had when we battled against the masses in Greenland and convinced them to do as they were told. The shadow creatures would also naturally avoid the heat of the geyser. Without even trying to, they would save themselves. Even now, they were backing up and moving toward the forest and away from us, and away from the geyser.

"Well, if we're going to find Cade, we're going to have to play his game," Ratchet said. I flew higher in the air as Ratchet set the forest on fire. "Let's see how they like having heat on all sides of them."

"We can get rid of them faster with light," I said. "These are shadow creatures. They won't like the heat, but the light will destroy them."

"You should've just said light them up," Ratchet said with a grin. The flame on his outer skin exploded into a large realm of flame and light. A high-pitched wheezing sound came up from the shadow creatures before us as the light seared at the essence of the shadow monsters and made them evaporate into the monster homeland.

This time I needed to watch Ratchet for signs of exhaustion. I moved in closer to him and watched him closely, and as I saw the shadow monsters disappearing, I pulled them back. The light had gotten the majority of them, and the dredges that remained could easily be picked up by the heat from the fire or the geyser.

"Not this time, buddy," I said, reaching out to Ratchet and getting him to stand down on his demonic fire form.

"Did we get them?" Ratchet asked, looking around.

"Got enough of them," I responded.

"Where the hell did he get shadow monsters from?" Ratchet asked.

“Oh, that’s the \$20 million question, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Shadow monsters only exist in two places. Australia, which is locked down by the shifters and Greenland, where we just were and it was locked down by us.” Ratchet mused. “Unless there’s some place we haven’t looked at yet.”

“Where is that going to be?” I asked, my mind still distracted by Caroline.

“If he’s going to attack humans with his monsters, he’s not going to be attacking in these remote places where there aren’t any people. He’s going to try to find a rift in a major city. And if he’s engaging you, it’s probably going to be a major city in fae territory where you can’t go.”

I nodded. “Good points. He’s going to do something a little more daring than that. Maybe someplace in Europe. I don’t have any jurisdiction over there.”

“Exactly,” Ratchet agreed.

“The biggest monster rift in Europe is under the Vatican in Rome,” I commented.

“Technically in the Vatican,” Ratchet said. “I get your point,”

“We’re never going to get jurisdiction. Authority to fight a crime in Europe that hasn’t even taken place yet,” I said.

“We’re going to have to,” Ratchet said. “Because if monsters run loose in the Vatican, and are all around, they’re going to kill a lot of humans.”

I looked at him, but the longer I looked at him and sat in the silence, the more I could hear Caroline’s voice, the voice of humanity. There was no way if she were here I would stand by and take the risk of monsters attacking humans. There was no way I



was going to allow it even if she was gone and lost to me.

I had seen her.

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That was all I had asked for and I knew she was well. The truth be told, she might even be better than she had been when she had been alive. A stab of pain went through my heart. I didn't quite believe the latter. There was still no greater experience than love, and no greater aspiration than to spend your life with the person you loved the most.

Even though I had failed and I would spend the rest of my life with nothing more than the memories I had with Caroline, I would still have to honor her spirit and her desires and fight against the powers of evil that were closing in on Earth.

"We'll have to fight them," I said to Ratchet. "I don't know if we have what it takes to stop them, but we're going to have to give it a try."

I stopped myself short of saying 'That's what Caroline would've wanted.' Ratchet knew her well enough. He knew me well enough. Those words went without saying.

### Chapter 23

#### CAROLINE

In all my impressions of Undirheim, comfort was not one of them. The cells we were assigned to reminded me of cells I went to see in an ashram in India, where meditators would go to get in touch with nirvana. Had I ever had any expectations of Undirheim, they would've been about this. Small individualize cells where people were kept. It wasn't meant to be extravagant or lush. It was meant to be just passing through.

For some reason, whatever mind numbing, relaxing potion was in the air down here, it certainly made it so you didn't mind the conditions. Sometimes there was screaming in the rooms, but again, it was hardly noticeable.

Until it was noticeable.

The sky hadn't changed at all from the dismal gray it typically was when my eyes snapped open.

A human was screaming.

It wasn't just someone in transition. It was somebody who was actually alive, like Earth-alive.

I sat up, feeling a shrill tone rising up from deep inside me. A keening sound I had made right before the satyr died. It rose up from within my stomach and through my chest, until finally it came out my mouth, and I could feel it traveling around Undirheim, searching for the human who had come here, but was not quite dead.

Someone was alive in Undirheim.

I slipped out of my cell, standing closely in tune with the vibration that was flowing inside my chest. It was driving me back out to the woods where I had seen Ryder, back to the clearing where he had appeared. There must be some type of a portal available there that the living could pass through. I moved stealthily as possible. It reminded me of racing through the streets of Alameda trying not to be discovered by the satyrs.

I didn't know who here exactly would get me in trouble. I had gone along with everything they had said to do, including agreeing to go to the fae afterlife. This new dimension of fae existence was something I wasn't sure I was even looking forward

to, but it was something I was committed and willing to do.

I could see the clearing up ahead, and two shadowy figures, and at a distance, it looked like Ryder, but I couldn't be sure. His arm was raised. The other creature was human, female, and not putting up a fight against the large, hulking creature who stood above her with dagger raised.

I let out a long scream that merged with the song I was singing, and became one shrill, elongated note. It got the attention of both people inside the clearing, and they looked over suddenly. It was Magnus and the woman must be his mother.

"Stop!" I screamed as I ran into the clearing.

"My girl," the woman said. "Finally, we meet. Under very strange circumstances, but we meet nonetheless."

"You're Ryder's mother," I said.

She smiled warmly. "That's right. Now I will have you return to my son through my sacrifice."

"You can't do this," I said. "Two wrongs don't make a right."

"It's okay," Ryder's mother said. "I want for this to happen."

"You want to die?"

"I've asked for this," she said.

I stared at her forlornly. "Why would you do that?"

“Because my son needs you,” Ryder’s mother said. “And I am done with life.”

“Stop!” Thrain’s voice rang out across the clearing as he and Oren burst onto the scene.

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“You brought them with you?” Magnus was incensed.

“I didn’t bring anyone with me,” I insisted. “I didn’t even know where I was going, but now I’m here it’s not such a bad thing they are too. They might be able to help talk some sense into your mom. The last thing you need is the blood of two people on your hands.”

“She isn’t done living yet,” Thrain said, stepping forward between Magnus and his mother.

“I feel done living,” Ryder’s mother said. “I have felt this way for years.”

“You can’t put your blood on his hands,” Oren said, stepping forward. “I’m sorry I brought him along,” she said to me. “I figured this would require a little more than my jurisdiction with the living human.”

“You took in the portal Vina made yesterday?” Thrain asked.

“They must have,” Oren agreed. “It came to the same place. It would’ve stayed open longer if Vina used her magic to hold it. Do you think Ryder had anything to do with this?”

“No,” I insisted, automatically knowing Ryder would never have sanctioned the death of his mother.

“She’s not going to die,” Thrain said.

“I don’t want her to die,” Magnus said, tears in his eyes. “It’s just she asked me to do it, and I don’t know what else to do.”

“It was a morbid request and unfortunately your perspective has been warped and changed. You inadvertently caused the death of your brother’s ex-wife,” Oren said, her voice a strange, soothing sound compared to the normal sharpness of her tone. I appreciated the cool grace of her words, and the temperament with which she was approaching Magnus. He was devolving in front of us, falling apart. His eyes looked at me searchingly.

“Will you ever forgive me, Caroline?” He asked.

I looked at him silently for a moment, searching inside of myself to find out if I had any anger or bitterness toward him whatsoever, and I found I had none. Not a piece of it.

I nodded my head slowly, looking over at him peacefully. “I have no issue with you,” I said. “Certainly, there is nothing you have done that killing your mother is going to help solve. Please know I am happy here and this is where I want to be. I just didn’t know it, so everything is fine from where I’m sitting and you should go in peace back to Earth.”

Magnus had tears streaming down his face and for the first time in all the days I had come to Undirheim, I wanted to reach out and hug somebody and make them feel better.

As if he sensed it, Thrain cleared his throat. This brought Oren stepping between me and Magnus just to make sure there was no contact between the two of us.

“Take them back to Earth,” Thrain said to Oren. “I’ll return her,” he said, grabbing me by the elbow and propelling me through the dark forest.

## Chapter 24

### RYDER

I was greeted by a couple of nereids when I arrived at the Vatican. Like the DGC, the fae found the water sprites useful in the fluid arts of reading people. I guessed these two, who looked like blue versions of the Incredible Hulk did a lot more than just reading. They looked like either one of them could take on an army with one of their hands tied behind their back.

It didn't mean I couldn't do that.

It's just, I didn't want to. That wasn't what I was here for. I'd come to the Vatican to review the portal that was set here to find Cade and his brother.

Without any pomp or circumstance, the nereids escorted me to the high court, where both the dark and light fae were present. Traditionally, they ruled in separate areas of the world, but they had a Congress together in the Vatican, and it wasn't until that moment as I stood there and looked at them, both, I realized the danger we were in.

"You are the targets," I said, unceremoniously dropping the information. The two royals exchanged a look that made it pretty clear. Neither one of them was completely buying my story, but they were willing to listen.

When the demigods had broken with the fae and severed the world in two, the dark and light fae had been forced to come to some level of agreement, something which previously they had never done. In fact, since the fae had come to earth, they mostly had spent the time battling each other. At least until the demigods had risen against them.

The dark fae were forced to stabilize with the light fae and carve out territories that



were agreeable to both sides. Because they were both definitely still two sides of the same coin. There was something so innately core to their differences it would be impossible to say if they were more similar than different.

“Cade is looking not just to take over the world,” I said. “He’s looking to reunite with his family and rebuild his dynasty.”

“How can you be so sure?” The dark fae king asked.

“The fact he brought his brother to life,” I pointed out. “An older brother at that, so he’s giving up any of his rights to rule. In fact, he has resurrected his own ruler.”

“He is still using the magic of your father,” the light fae king pointed out.

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“It’s impossible for us to stop,” I explained. “He was able to get a hold of the rings. He melted them down before I could stop him.”

I had no remorse about it. It was simply a fact, but the whole time I talked about it all I could imagine was Caroline being sucked through the lava portal. Hello one-way ticket to Undirheim.

“Perhaps,” said the Unseelie king. “How are you going to ensure you are protecting our children?”

The Seelie and Unseelie royal families had been doing a trial run of having their children in arranged marriage of sorts. They were both studying at the Crown Academy based in Quebec. Rumor had it the children had been put into the situation in order to foster a relationship that had in fact blossomed into something the youth were willing to call an engagement.

At least that’s what the fae wanted you to believe. You were never sure of anything with the fae. They would tell you a lie directly to your face while staring you in the eyes just to make sure their control was never questioned. They liked to keep you guessing with masterful plots only of their design.

In this case, I could tell by the disdainful look on the dark fae king’s face I had struck a nerve.

“You seriously think they would dare to attack the Vatican?” he asked.

“How long has the portal been sealed?” I countered.

“Since before Roman times.” The dark fae and light fae kings exchanged a look.

“Has anyone checked the seal since then?” I asked.

“It’s fallen off our radar,” the Seelie King shrugged. It was clear they both consider this an important consideration.

The Seelie king turned to the Unseelie king, and they slowly nodded in agreement. “We have not been checking it either,” he said. “Two thousand years is a long time even in fae years.”

“Well, my recommendation would be that we check the seal immediately,” I said. “Then set up a reinforcement team to pack up whatever measures you currently have in place, which doesn’t sound like it’s much, to provide protection to the portal. We need to make sure the monsters don’t start a run on your capital.”

“Do you not need some refreshment first?” The Seelie king asked me.

“No,” I said curtly. My goal was not to come here and while away my time with the fae. It was to find out if there was potential breach of the monster portal here and then to find out if Cade had his designs set on the Vatican at all.

“In this case I will take you to the portal so you can inspect the seal for yourself. And then you can do some research. There are no older records in all the world than those here in the fae libraries.”

“I’ve heard them say the same thing in Dublin,” I murmured. Even though it only been one time, they were pretty proud of their library there too.

Regardless, I had a job to do, as much as I didn’t trust the fae and I knew their ideas were always in favor of themselves. The biggest challenge was that their desires were

based on whim. They had plenty of everything. They were like the lords of old, bored and causing antics just to get attention or to pass the time. Either way I was going to operate in this room I was not going to be at the whim of the fae. I took a deep breath. That meant showing not a single weakness, especially a weakness. I bowed to the Seelie and Unseelie royal family.

This was not a place to show your weaknesses.

## Chapter 25

### CAROLINE

Oren stood at the door of my cell, her grey eyes piercing me with some level of understanding I didn't want to admit. How was it that this creature who I barely knew seemed to be able to look inside me and understand something so fundamental as the way I felt about Ryder?

"I know how you feel," she said, as if to reassure me.

"What is it you know?" I asked.

"Valkyries aren't like the other creatures in the legends," Oren said.

"You're assuming I know anything about the Valkyrie," I countered.

A slight smile twitched at the corner of Oren's mouth, which was usually pressed in a hard, thin line.

"In many ways we share an experience with you," she said. "Those who discover they are fae past forty get a sudden jolt into the magical world of the Legendi."

“I thought Valkyrie were magical mythical creatures who were born into the world, the Legendi,” I explained.

“The vast majority of our career is like this,” Oren said “I am not one of them. I was a human up until the day I killed myself.”

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“You killed yourself?” I asked, horror washing over me. I’d been miserable plenty of times in my life, but never enough to actually go through with killing myself. It took a certain type of sadness to be able to do that.

“I did,” Oren said. “Killing yourself is considered a crime against humanity. So, the punishment is to become a Valkyrie and escort the dead into their after world.”

“Has that changed your perspective at all?” I asked.

Oren took a deep breath. “That’s not what people usually ask. Typically, people ask why I killed myself.”

“I’m more interested in what your perspective is now. Most people kill themselves over love or finances.”

“Mine was the former,” Oren explained.

Somehow, I felt like I should’ve already known that or maybe I already did know and hadn’t let myself recognize it.

“Where is he now?” I asked.

“Like you, I had an inter-species relationship and I didn’t even know it. By the time I realized it was too late. He was taken from me forever. He was a Viking shifter. So, he went to Valhalla. Every time I go to Valhalla I can have a chance of having a glimpse of him, but I’ll never see him again, not in the way it was like when we were both on earth.”

“And having this little glimpse of him is better than moving into the next world?” I asked, suddenly unsure about my decision.

“Not for everybody,” Oren was clear to state. “Somehow it eases my heart, as opposed to the idea of never seeing him again.”

“It’s not what I chose,” I murmured. The seed of doubt was sprouting rapidly inside me.

“Like I said,” Oren pointed out. “It’s not for everybody. It would be a dark world if we were all lamenting Valkyrie. I’m not telling you to change your mind about your choices. I’m telling you that you’re making the right choice. If you don’t choose to move on, you’ll be stuck here. In no man’s land, the place where only the demons and the Valkyrie rule.”

“Sometimes though don’t the Valkyrie and the demon, you know, like get together?” I asked. It definitely seemed that way from the café where we kept going. I didn’t want to presume. Who the hell knew what demons and Valkyrie were up to in their spare time. I didn’t even understand what they did in their regular time.

Oren looked at me curiously. “Is there something you’ve seen or you want to tell me about?” She asked.

“No,” I said, shaking my head adamantly. “Thrain just seems a little, you know, opposed to the Valkyrie.”

“He may be opposed, but he can’t live without them. He needs them to help shuttle the dead to their final resting ground.”

“I think I need some time alone,” I whispered, thinking about everything Oren had shared with me. Was it wise for me to move on to the fae world and abandon Ryder

completely?

Oren left without taking me to the café. I was alone with my thoughts in a small, dark cell, in what seemed to be some strange aberration of hell. Without the pain, just with a numbness of apathy.

I didn't want this.

I wanted the human feelings I wanted the experience of love. I could feel it rising up inside of me, the desire for Ryder not just as a dim memory in my past, not just as if I'd been in another dimension.

I wanted to be with Ryder in life. With all of its messiness and all of the pain and agony we had caused each other. I wanted to be with him in that. I wasn't ready to give it up, not yet. Maybe it couldn't last forever, but I was damn sure there had to be a way I could have it last longer. I had Bales the hell hound, right? I'd seen a few of them down here in Undirheim. I don't know if this was their original home, but they found a way to come in and out.

I had to be able to find a way too.

And in the dark, I gave a soft keening song, calling to Bales, knowing he would answer, knowing if it was in his power to get into Undirheim, he would be here. He would find a way to pull me out and bring me back to Earth, of that I was sure.

The speed with which Bales responded was impressive. I had thought for the entire time I had been in Undirheim that if I called Bales, he would come. I had chosen not to. I had chosen to keep the rift between us closed and not let him find where I was. As I started humming to myself, and then slowly singing. This time not the song of the dead. This time the song was calling in the hell hound and within minutes Bales was standing in my cell grinning from ear to ear like a lopsided puppy with razor



sharp teeth...a lot of them.

It seemed like I'd been asleep in a waking dream. The minute Bales showed up and pounced on me, licking my face, I threw my arms around him, feeling my heartbeat against his chest, knowing he would show me the way out and bring me back to home and to Ryder. Help had always been there. I just had to reach out and ask for it.

## Chapter 26

### RYDER

I stood in the halls that were more like tunnels full of bones underneath the Vatican in Rome. Among the bones, there were markings and symbols and signs and documents and papers; they could all be read like a library of information. It was here I hoped to find out some of the deeper stories around Cade and his monstrosity of a brother. I needed to find out what was special about this portal. What was it the monsters could do here they couldn't do anywhere else? What made this a weak point for the monsters to come into?

From what I had been made to understand some of the strongest portals in the world, like the one at Cougar Creek, were protected by some of the strongest magic in the world, so it didn't seem like it made sense if they would protect Cougar Creek with something as strong as the Cougar Creek Coven that they wouldn't have already overprotected the Vatican portal as well. It didn't change me wanting to know why Cade wanted to go after the Vatican.

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I had come to the section of the hallway where knights were once buried, their tombs lying, hidden in stone sarcophagi. It was in between these tombs, some of the oldest written words of the current branch of the ruling class of the Seelie could be seen.

I came here because I felt like it was old enough to know something, but not so old that it became mythic. They might've tried to put some level of logic on it.

"She's dead," Magnus stepped into the hallway, completely unexpected. His voice rang out among the bones in the basement of the church.

I looked up at him, startled to see the wreckage on his face. I didn't even have to ask who he was talking about. "Mother," I said, my breath, inhaling sharply as the reality of the words hit me.

She was dead.

Magnus' bloodshot eyes blinked, and tears slipped down his cheeks. He came forward, falling into my arms, and even as I hugged him, a cold chill came over me.

"What are you doing here, brother?" I asked, pushing him off me and taking a step backwards.

"I killed her," he said. "She asked me to do it. She asked me and I couldn't deny her. She did it not just for herself. She did it for you."

My stomach roiled as I reacted to his words, trying to process the information. My mother, the woman who had been a centerpiece of my life for more than a thousand

years...my mother was dead.

My brother Magnus had killed her.

His hand clutched up, but I took a step back and he grasped air. "And we thought it would give Caroline a way out of Undirheim," Magnus moaned. "And it would give mom respite from her human feelings."

I heard what he was saying, and while I understood the logic of it, there was no way I could get behind what had actually happened.

My brother had killed my mother.

I turned my back on Magnus, and it was then I saw the symbol etched in the stone across from me. An arrow pointing and angled to the right. I reached up and turn the symbol to the left.

"What's that?" Magnus asked.

"It's a trick," I said, moving the arrow back again. "This is the symbol for the Vatican, the monsters use on their runes." I moved the symbols, so it was pointing upwards in the left-hand direction. "And this is the symbol the monsters use on their runes for hell."

"Sister cities," Magnus said. "I thought that was always kind of a joke."

"In this case I guess it isn't," I mused, flipping the rune back and forth.

"It makes sense monsters want to rule Earth but not from Earth it so they want to rule it from Undirheim."

The thought turned my stomach.

Even the brief moments I was in Undirheim were enough to let me know it was completely different from Earth. It was muted and hushed and quiet and dead. There was apathy and lack of feeling and lack of sensitivity, and it was something, as a monster, demigod, and human that just didn't fit anywhere in my world. I could understand chaos. I could understand heightened emotions and intensity. I couldn't understand apathy, or the ritual cleansing of the spirit and memories that seemed to go on in Undirheim.

"We have to go there," I turned to Magnus.

I saw him blanch. "If we go there, it'll be almost impossible to come back," he said. "I know you did it, but I don't think just anyone can do that."

"I don't care if you come back or not," I said, harshly.

I didn't want to unpack all my feelings for my brother right now, but him coming back was the least of my worries. If the monsters were about to overrun Undirheim, Caroline was going to be right in harm's way. She had about twenty-four hours before she passed into the fae afterlife, and we still needed to find our way from another portal to Undirheim. Fortunately, in the eternal city that wasn't hard to come by. Just finding one open for business was a little harder to do.

Fortunately for both of us, Magnus knew people.

I supposed when you've been around as long as we had been, you got to know people too. It was just in the land of the fae I wasn't considered one of their favorite people. This was one of the places where Magnus had more friends than I did.

Some of his activities that were dubious against the DGC were smiled upon by the

fae, while my work was clearly in the DGC camp and was much less favored. It didn't take long for Magnus to find a portal to Undirheim, and a demon who was willing to let us pass. I didn't ask what agreement Magnus had made with the demon. The truth was, I didn't want to know not at all. I just wanted to get to my girl, to find out how she was and just see what I could do to help her. I had to stop the monsters from overtaking Undirheim and ultimately ruling the earth from there.

## Chapter 27

CAROLINE

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:28 pm*

I exited my cell full of confidence and willingness to meet Undirheim head on. It felt more dangerous and less protected than when I had traversed through the streets of Alameda, invisible to the satyrs who had hunted me for my own protection.

Here it wasn't quite the case.

From what I had been told, the demons and the Valkyrie were not to be trusted on any level.

They might have tasks of taking people from one realm to another, but they had no actual responsibility. They were just meant to cleanse the dead and pass them on.

They were a group unto their own, who followed their own rules and regulations, and didn't adhere to one side or the other. I wasn't supposed to be leaning more toward the demigod side. After all, that's who the witches had sworn allegiance to. I wasn't a witch. I was a fae, and no doubt by my actions I was giving up any chance of being allowed into the fae after the world. That was a risk I was going to have to take. I needed to see Ryder.

Missing him had erupted like an aching in my bones. I needed to be near him, to see him, to talk to him, to touch him. Everything that had been blocked out by being in Undirheim was gone. The separation from my feelings was gone. Now all I could do was hurry and rush to find Ryder.

I raced with Bales through the darkened streets, only stopping when I realized there was a commotion going on that had gained everyone's attention. In my heart I hoped it was Ryder who had sparked the interest of the Valkyrie and the demons. As I heard

the screams erupt, though, I knew it wasn't the case. Something was causing disruption in Undirheim and for all of his strengths and weaknesses, I prayed it would not be Ryder.

And suddenly I felt a keening rising within me, and I realized that despite the fact we were in Undirheim, people were going to die. That would have to mean demons or Valkyrie were going to die.

My eyes whipped down to Bales. "We have to do something," I said, as I watched the demons and the Valkyrie flee. I stood looking toward the center of the monsters, and I suddenly had a sickening feeling in my stomach. This was Cade, and beside him was the most terrifying monster I had ever seen in my entire life or even imagined. It was over nine feet tall, grey thick elephant hide-like skin in and its torso ended in a plethora of tentacles moved it forward over the cobblestones of Undirheim.

"Holy fuck," I whispered to Bales. This monster was a beast, one I couldn't imagine going up against.

I imagine Ryder could take it. Not that it would be easy. It wouldn't be, but Ryder would have the knowledge and the power to do something about this beast.

That's when I made the connection. The legs like tentacles...the monster was exactly the way Ryder described his father in his monster form. This creature wasn't just Cade's half-brother, he was also Ryder's half-brother.

The singing erupting from my chest was heralding the death of people. I looked around, unable to tell exactly who it was who was dying, but then I saw her. It was Ryder's mother. Called forth by Cade and his brother.

"Your sacrifice made it possible for us to come in to Undirheim." Cade smiled.

“It wasn’t meant for you,” she said, looking in confusion from where I stood in the shadows to where Cade’s brother stood.

“It doesn’t matter what you meant,” Cade said. “The results are what they are.”

Ryder’s mother turned toward me, wailing. I wasn’t sure I wanted that much attention brought to me, but it seemed like it didn’t matter. It was going to be what it was. Cade and his brother rounded their attention on me.

“This is the one who sacrificed herself with the ring,” Cade said, with a smile and nod. “Is not what we made together beautiful?”

He gazed lovingly at his monstrous brother. It wasn’t so much the monsters on the outside perspective I didn’t like. It was definitely much more of the intention they had of wiping out all of humanity starting with Undirheim.

“You can’t just come in and wipe out Undirheim,” I stepped forward from the shadows.

“Who said anything about wiping it out?” Cade asked.

I motioned my hands to the demons and Valkyrie who were already pinned down by monsters.

“There’s no stopping you,” I cried.

“You haven’t even tried,” Cade countered.

“I don’t have the power to stop you,” I said, shaking my head.

“You could always try,” Cade grinned at me encouragingly. I wanted to smack him in



the face.

Something beat me to it.

A whirling mass of fang and wings and leathery skin flew past me, landing square on Cade's chest.

Ryder had made it back to Undirheim.

Chapter 28

RYDER

Blood pumped through me with renewed vigor as I landed square on Cade's chest, pushing him aside and pummeling him with my fists to keep him away from my wife.

"This is over now," I said, beating him mercilessly.

He whipped back up, twisting to the side and writhing away from me. As I turned to engage him again, my eye was caught by a dark shadow moving up behind me. I spun around, completely ignoring Cade, and instead focusing on this new threat, his younger brother. Caseous, with a striking resemblance to my father in his monstrous form.

However, he wasn't my father's child.

My father and his father were brothers. He was my cousin. It didn't make me any easier on him as I betted my wings in the air, pulling myself up and driving myself down in a jackknife attack against him. I slammed him into the ground; it was satisfying to hear the crunch of his skull against stone.

I glanced over at Caroline, even as I thought that. She must think I'm a monster. She'd be right. I shook my head and turned away. There was no point in me worrying about Caroline's opinion of me at this stage; either she accepted me or she didn't. Based on the look on her face as she watched me she wasn't worried about me being a monster. She was more terrified I would be pummeled.

Between Cade and his brother, I was out numbered. They both fought equally well.

One of them fought me, the other one rested, and vice versa, so while they were taking small in between rests, I received no respite.

Eventually, they were wearing me down my energy, my fists landing weaker on them, and there's landing with continued ferocity.

One particularly mean punch landed from Cade, squaring me right across the jaw. I landed face down on the cobblestone streets of Undirheim, pretty sure this was where I was going to end it.

"Need a hand there, brother?" Magnus's voice rang out and seemed to echo through Undirheim as he offered me his hand. I knew there was blood on my brother's hand, but I also knew Caroline was following her chosen path. And if she chose to come back to me, then she would. If she didn't, then she wouldn't and that had nothing to do with Magnus whatsoever.

"I do." I reset my hand and gripped his firmly.

With my brother at my side, we were able to take on Cade and his brother. At least now we were able to shift the tide in our favor and push them to the limits of what they could sustain.

Cade's weakened defenses crumbled beneath my angry vortex of power. This creature had tried to take away Caroline. He had almost succeeded. I had seen her standing there, watching me when I first came into the space and there was something about the light in her eyes that made me realize she recognized me in a way she hadn't before. It was as if now she did more than just see me.

She felt me.

That made all the difference. Her ability to feel me again. It opened up between us

and I could feel the radiating love pouring from her toward me. It filled me up and lit my soul on fire. I brought around my elbow with the resounding crack, connected it so hard to Cade's jawline I thought I might dislocate my shoulder.

Instead, I broke his jaw.

The battle was short-lived after that.

Thrain came in with a team of demons, who subdued any monster that wasn't willing to go into the rift. After seeing what it took to subdue one of them, most opted for just returning to their homeland.

Cade's brother slipped out with all the monsters crossing the rift. His time back on earth had been limited, and I guessed he had not had the best impression of our realm, but it didn't bother me in the slightest. The less intelligent monsters I have here, the better.

Thrain bound Cade's hands behind his back and nodded his head toward me. "We'll keep him busy here in Undirheim to make sure he stays out of trouble."

"How can you even do that," Cade said. "I am a monster. You have no jurisdiction over me."

"You broke the laws of Undirheim," Thrain said as he slipped some metal armor hand cuffs over Cade's wrists. "I have complete jurisdiction over you. That will keep you focused on your service to the realm."

Magnus stepped forward.

"Not so fast," Thrain said. "There are laws in Undirheim. You can't just come and go as you please. You've come and gone already."

I looked at my brother. “This is maybe the best place for you to be,” I said.

He nodded in agreement.

Then I turned and saw Caroline, her eyes full of love and longing and I knew I had come home.

Chapter 29

CAROLINE

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:28 pm*

The hot water pummeled my body as I stood with my head bowed, letting the shower rain down on me. Undirheim was a dim memory that the last month had almost washed away.

It almost felt like it had been a dream.

A muted dream I could barely remember. The way my emotions had been dampened was hard to calibrate with how I felt now. Every molecule of my body was alive and tingling with the intensity and excitement of love. The focus I had had Ryder back in my world.

It was such a shock to the system.

I thought back on my time in Undirheim. It had all felt so peaceful, calm and quiet. As if my whole life was going to be a simple flatline, with no up and no down on it whatsoever. At the end of the day, I wasn't ready for that. While it might make sense at some point to rest to want the peace and quiet of death I certainly wasn't ready for it yet.

I had just begun to explore my real relationship with Ryder. We had just become honest and close with each other when I had died and been taken to Undirheim.

We had almost lost each other. I was almost seduced by the peace and calm of Undirheim. It almost convinced me it was a better option for me.

I raised my face up to the streams of water that poured from the showerhead.

One day rider and I would be separated. That was true. One day I would die, and he would go to a different world. It wasn't today though.

I grabbed the soap and slathered up my body, feeling my gentle curves.

I wanted a life with Ryder. I wanted my love with Ryder to be fulfilled. I wanted to live a wonderful time with him and not be tied down to a negative experience. My relationship with him previously had been fraught with mistrust dissatisfaction and constantly trying to control the other person. I had wanted him to be home, which of course made sense, but now that I knew what he was doing, it also made sense he needed to be away from me to fight the monsters and protect the Earth.

Not that I knew what was in his heart of hearts, but I knew I wanted for him exactly what he wanted for himself. I wanted him to be the hero and save the world. It made me nervous when he was off fighting the monsters, but I also knew it was important. It wasn't just for the demigods and humanity, it was important for him to do the right thing and protect the world. It was just as important as doing cancer research was to me.

I turned off the shower and grabbed the tan fluffy towel that was on the counter in the bathroom. I loved living in Alameda. It had turned out to be a wonderful move. As much as I loved Boston, the fact I no longer had a home there had suddenly freed me up to find other options.

Ryder's Victorian house was a beautiful option.

On top of that, the DGC had agreed to fund a chemistry lab in Alameda, and we had been setting it up over the previous months.

The only dark shadow in my life with the absence of Laney.

They had told me everything that had occurred, and how she had just disappeared from the command center one night. Ratchet had gotten his head together and gone to look for her. Or so he said.

Still, we had not heard from her in the month since I had been trapped in Undirheim.

We received daily reports from Ratchet, but they were always the same. He had no leads.

The reality was he was no closer to finding Laney.

At some point I had to think there was someone else involved or something had happened to her, but we couldn't find a trace of it, even the witches couldn't.

I had started setting up my laboratory in Alameda, and I was grateful and excited for the opportunity. I wanted to make a difference and learn this new world, and maybe try to find some cures for the Legendi who lived in this world.

I stood in front of the mirror, eyeing up the curves of my body and running my hand over my stomach. It wasn't bad, even though it hadn't been flat in twenty years.

I had something to tell Ryder. Something that neither one of us had ever expected.

I had just taken the test this morning before I got in the shower. I smiled gleefully to myself. My life's dream was coming true in a way I had never expected. I dreamed of nurturing and caring for other people was going to happen in a big way.

I was pregnant.

Chapter 30



## RYDER

I bounded up the stairs two at a time when I heard the shower shut off. Caroline, had been through a lot when she burnt to death, became trapped in Undirheim. Now she was here with me and the strangest feeling of romance blossomed in every part of my life. Something I have never experienced. Intimacy. We could finally be honest and true with each other.

She was finally mine. I was finally hers. We were giving each other kindness, compassion, and love in a way we'd never experienced before.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:28 pm*

I grabbed the handle on the bedroom door and pushed it open. Ever since Cade had been defeated with his brother, there had been a noticeable absence of monsters crossing the rift to earth. It was like all the monsters realized there were greater dangers in coming to earth than previously anticipated.

Cade and his brother had failed them, and now there was no one they could trust. Better to stay in their own land, despite as crowded the conditions were.

It had given me time to stay focused on Caroline and the DGC. She wanted me to do more when it came to searching for Laney, but the truth was, I didn't want to. Not because I was worried about any latent feelings, I might have for Caroline's BFF. In fact, I had told Caroline I had kissed her. I didn't want there to be any secrets between us.

She had understood and even made a joke that she would have to try kissing Ratchet to see how that felt. I had groaned, but also knew she had not meant anything by it.

I was still devoted to the DGC and protecting the earth. That would never change.

Caroline was still devoted to cancer research, and I had helped her set up her DGC-funded labs here in Alameda so she could start finding cures for some of the ailments the Legendi suffered.

Right now, though, we didn't have to solve the problems of the world.

In this moment, we had each other.

I pulled open the bathroom door, catching Caroline wrapped in her towel, smiling in the mirror at me. I

“You look like the cat that ate the canary.” I held her close, moving her into the bedroom and kissing her on top of her wet hair. “And I plan to be the cat that ate the canary.”

“Not so fast,” she grinned at me and turned in my arms, lifting her lips up for a resounding kiss. “I have something to tell you.”

She was warm and happy. I knew that should’ve reassured me, but there was something life changing in her look that put a tingling of concern through my bones. Some of the surprises I’d been dealt in recent months had not been terribly pleasant. My mother died. Caroline died. Laney disappearing. There were things that needed to be put to rest and I could use a bit of peaceful quiet in my life.

“Not now,” I said. “I just want to be inside you.”

I pulled her lips up to mine and buried my tongue in her warm, wet mouth. My body had been aching for her all day, and I needed to feel her surrounding me, her love keeping me steady. I don’t think this woman had any idea what influence she had on me. One day, we were going to cross that bridge, but not right now.

Today was an afternoon for lovers.

I felt her arm on my chest, pushing me back in as she closed her mouth and twisted her head to the side.

“What is it?” I asked, suddenly curious about what could be interrupting her wanting to kiss me. I had no doubt she had the same thrill of the touch I had. I knew she felt it.

“I hope you’re ready to be a daddy,” her chin tilted down while her eyes looked up.

I felt a tug on my pants. I wanted this woman. Now.

“I’m ready to be your daddy.” I kissed her again.

This time, she pulled away.

“No, I mean really,” she said, placing her hand on her stomach.

Daddy? My lust-fried brain looked at her hand on her stomach and repeated her word. What she was saying started to dawn on me. “Seriously?”

She nodded.

“A baby?” I still couldn’t quite believe it. “Like a little tiny, soft squishy thing that cries?”

She nodded, tears glistening in her eyes.

Joy erupted from deep within me, like a well of happiness I had never known existed, but now they flooded me as if they were coming home.

“We’re going to be parents?” I asked.

“Yes!” Caroline cried, tears beginning to stream down her face. I kissed her solidly, picking her up in my arms and turning in a circle in the bedroom.

“A family of my own.” I kissed her neck, and her breasts, letting the towel slip to the floor. My lips trailed from her shoulder down to her breast to catch her nipple in my mouth. As it pebbled beneath my tongue, she tilted back her head and moaned.

“Ryder,” she murmured.

Suddenly I stopped, looking up and peering at her closely. “Should I not do this?”

“Oh, no,” she said, arching her back in my arms and pressing her breasts up towards my face. “No, you should definitely do that.”

“But you’re fragile. I don’t want to hurt the baby,” I said.

“Even with your monster dick, I don’t think you’ll be able to reach up inside my womb,” Caroline laughed, and I felt self-conscious.

I wasn’t really clear on how all the anatomy stuff worked, but I didn’t want to hurt any baby. I didn’t want to hurt anyone, but I wanted her.

I placed her gently on the bed and lay down next to her, trailing my hand along her stomach. It was a marvel there was a life inside of her growing. I kissed her gently on the stomach, trailing my tongue down from her belly button to the soft spot between her thighs. I edged my body closer and closer, kissing her, feeling the pulse of her blood racing as her breath quickened beneath my touch.

I slowly slid my tongue in between the folds of her petals. Listening to her moan as she lifted her hips and pressed her tasty clitoris against my teeth, rubbing it hard. I licked it with fervor, feeling her body tense as mountains of excitement built inside of her.

My heart raced, thrumming to meet hers.

There was something new and special between Caroline and me now. There was a family.

I brought my fingers around. I wasn't going to put my dick in her today. I was going to pleasure her with my fingers, with my tongue. I wanted to please her until she was satiated.

I moved two fingers inside her gently and slowly, sliding them in and out. I curve the tips of my fingers slightly, softly stroking the spot insider her I knew so well. My thumb strummed her clitoris as she ground her hips against my hand and I kissed her mouth. I could feel the passion rising with her.

This was my woman.

She was mine.

As I listened to the cries of her orgasm, I knew that she would always be mine.