



Of Fate & Forbidden Desire

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Description: Abandoned as a baby, Charleene is happily living her life in York, unaware of the hidden world around her. However, a one night stand with a mysterious woman changes everything. Giving up control and facing a life on the run, she must find her lost family. Can she uncover the secrets in her past, to survive her present?

For three hundred years Dina has barely existed, living a half life as a Huntress, bound by loyalty to the Coven that saved her. But when an intoxicating scent draws her to an unusual human, she finds herself fighting between duty and her heart. Running from a rogue vampire, her carefully ordered world descends into chaos and mayhem.

Can they outrun those hunting them? Or will they become the prey?

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Chapter One

Night is my favourite time, peaceful and safe. Until I cross her scent and it's like I'm hit by a truck. She's like a drug and I'm hooked. - Dina

“Be careful of the night Adrina, monsters thrive in the darkness.” My long since dead mother's voice fills my head, as I leant over the roof edge. She had given me and my sister those words of warning, every night as she tucked us into our nice warm beds. However, my problem was that I'd always been fascinated by the dark. The stars each evening had called to me, even now they seemed to call my name as they watched from above. Well I guess that makes me a monster now, I think sarcastically, banishing her words back to where they belonged, in the far recesses of my memory and turning my concentration back to the street below.

Human and Supernatural folk alike fill the streets below, queuing up to gain entrance to one of York's most popular nightclubs. My eyes scan over the ever growing line, searching each face, looking for one that didn't quite belong with the others and coming up blank. Ignoring the infernal chatter, I inhale the cool October air that blows my dark hair away from my face. I know that the wind is cold, it only takes a moment of watching the humans shivering in its chilled fingers to remind me. Thanks to being turned, I no longer shiver in the cold or sweat in the heat; I hadn't felt the changes in the seasons for quite some time now. I mean there had to be some advantages to sacrificing your soul after all.

Yep, that's right, according to human lore and history, I was a soulless, blood-sucking monster. A vampire. One who stalks the night feasting on the necks of young maidens. Yet in my three hundred plus years of being one I could certainly say that

most of the time vampires were the last things a human should be worried about. I might be a surly bitch most of the time, but monster was a bit of a stretch.

Smiling—ok grimacing a little less than usual—I turn my focus back to the street below, searching for our current prey.

“What's got your attention Adrina?” Tilly's sunshine and roses voice almost had me jumping from my rooftop perch, as she materialised next to me. Luckily my quick reflexes allowed me to steal my spine, so that my finger didn't so much as twitch in response.

“Nothing yet,” I say, glaring across at my old mentor. She knows how much I hate my given name, and therefore used it often enough to let me know that she knew. Her devilish smirk almost had my own lips twitching in response but then I remembered our task at hand.

In our society we have four laws that all Vampires were expected to live by and they were simple enough. One: Do not draw human attention. I mean come on, that's a no brainer, we didn't want human's studying us. Two: No unsanctioned killings, we're civilised after all. Three: No interspecies relationships, that one makes no sense to me, but who am I to judge the laws? And our fourth and final law makes so much sense: No turning of children. After all, who wants to repeat school for eternity?

If a vampire, like the one we'd been hunting for months, broke any of these rules, the Elders sent hunters and huntresses, like ourselves, to either bring them to the Council for judgement or to execute them. Our unlucky mark had been placed under a kill order, for breaking not one rule but two of them. The bastard had already drawn far too much attention from the human population, being branded the ‘Dracula Murderer’ in the papers. His kills spanned from Scotland all the way down to where we were now in the city of York, with its old buildings and dense population. I could see one set of the Roman walls and the top of an archway from my perch.

“He's clever,” Tilly mutters, her attention now fixed on the street below.

“How so?” I grumbled back, not wanting to admit this particular vamp was intelligent enough to have evaded us thus far. We were the best hunters the London coven had in its arsenal and we were still chasing our tails.

“The cities he's targeted all have a high population of supernaturals as well as humans.”

I think through her words, realising that they're true, but why would that matter to a sadistic vampire on a feeding spree? I wondered.

“It's clever because they can use the multitude of scents to mask their own.” Tilly continued explaining, forcing me to consider her reasoning.

Vampire's smelt more strongly of iron compared to humans, whereas witches smelt more like lightning during a storm thanks to their magic's affiliation with the earthly elements. Then there were the ancient creatures who smelled of things long gone.

If our prey was indeed using other Supernaturals to hide, then what was the point of their killing spree? None of what they did made much sense to me, it was like they're following a set of rules we didn't understand. From the locations, to the amount of bodies they left behind... even their victim's had all been different.

The sun had set hours ago but the moon was hiding behind the thick clouds and York was bustling. Warm-bloods and cold-blooded alike flocked here in their hundreds, drawn by the two universities, the picturesque city or—in the case of the supernaturals—the ley-line that ran right through the ancient city.

Twelve droll bell tones rang out over the city as the Minister bells tolled midnight and I adjusted myself on the roof edge, not that I needed to—being almost dead and

all— but the human habit of shuffling was hard to lose. Moving my bent knees from side to side I found myself on edge. Normally I loved this time of night; in the countryside it was peaceful and safe, with nothing more than god's own creatures out hunting.

But in the cities, I'd found it was when life was at its messiest and most chaotic. In the country witches held moonlit rituals, whilst the leftover demons and Fae from ages past came out to play. However here in the city even the humans reacted differently in the dark; everything fun seemed to happen under the blanket of night.

Smirking, I looked down at the club opposite wondering what other creatures mingled inside with the unsuspecting humans. Leaning forward a little more whilst still keeping myself cloaked in the shadows, I watched as another small group of friends joined the line, shivering in the early October air.

We'd tracked this particular rogue down from Scotland, following the bodies they'd left behind. Always finding ourselves one fucking step behind. Not even knowing if the rogue was male or female. They'd been here in York for the last couple of days and had already left at least one student's body floating in the river and had abducted another.

Luckily the human police believed she'd simply fallen in the river and broken her neck while drowning, not looking any deeper. The police also hadn't yet connected her death to the others that had been plaguing the North of the UK. We had no clue how long this particular vampire had been running riot, but recently they'd grown messier. Leaving the corpses without attempting to cover up their attacks, meaning that they'd succumbed to bloodlust, an affliction all Vampires tread carefully to avoid. It was when the taste of blood or the thrill of the hunt and kill over-ruled all rational thoughts.

"How long have you been watching?" Tilly asks, breaking into my dark thoughts, nodding towards the club.

Glancing over I noticed she'd once again dressed to impress with a low cut barely there black top, skin tight black jeans and soft suede heeled ankle boots. How she walked in them, let alone was able to fight, was beyond me but she managed. Her make-up was flawless; dark smokey eyes that drew you in, deep purple lipstick that would no doubt match her razor sharp nails. Tilly was one of the best, needing only her speed and fingernails to kill those of us that broke the laws.

I'd been lucky enough to meet Tilly almost three hundred years ago when she'd found me stumbling around Edinburgh trying not to starve or break any of the laws. My maker had abandoned me, a newly turned vampire, with the excuse that I'd disappointed him somehow. No other explanation, the fucking wanker. If it hadn't been for her I would probably be dead, well I mean really dead by now.

Tilly had found me and taken me into her coven for safety and training. However that didn't mean I trusted her completely. I'd learnt that lesson over and over and now I trusted no one but myself.

"About an hour now." I replied.

"Why?"

"It's the busiest club in the city, if he's going to hunt anywhere it'll be here." I said with determination, which was one thing she never questioned about me. I knew how to hunt the most depraved of our kind, her coven had made sure of that. Turning me from a stumbling newborn into a fierce killing machine.

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I was watching the busy nightclub across from me when it hit me! It was intoxicating, a scent like no other. Ancient and floral but with the hint of something else; it was mouth watering as my fangs itched to descend and saliva filled my mouth.

Gazing down at the club line I tried to figure out what it could be as it clouded my mind, distracting me from the prey I was supposed to be seeking.

"What is it, Adrina?" Tilly asked as I leaned even further forward, "are they here?"

"No, something else." I muttered barely hanging on to any rational thoughts as my fangs elongated, digging into my bottom lip, while I searched for whatever the hell smelt so damn good.

Below our perch the line kept moving with more and more people heading inside, as others came outside to smoke or go home. My eyes narrowed on the newest group to have joined the end of the line. Four women. Three of them looked young enough to be new students, except the tallest of them, she looked older.

She kept a little distance between herself and the other three as her long dirty blond hair drifted in the wind. One of the others kept leaning back talking to her, but I couldn't hear what they were saying from up here, even with my sensitive hearing. Frowning I continued to stare, drawing Tilly's attention to the small group.

"Dina what's going on?" she asked, staring down at the women below.

"I don't know." I answered honestly, surprised that she'd used my preferred nickname rather than trying to rile me up.

"When was the last time you got laid?" she suddenly burst out, making me look at her in shock. Tilly knew almost everything about me and she knew that I didn't casually have sex often like a lot of our kind did.

"What has that got to do with anything?" I muttered grumpily at her, my brows drawing together.

"Well, with the way your scent just changed, I'd say a lot." She laughed before turning her attention back to the street below. "Hmmm, that's strange," she stated, drawing my eyes back down, but I couldn't see anything different.

"What is?" I asked, taking the damn bait.

"They're all women." She pointed out before breaking into hysterical giggles as the bouncer let them inside Club Salvation and they disappeared.

Other than the small blip earlier, the night was passing much the same as others had recently, me and Tilly sitting like statues, waiting and watching. We knew the bastard was in the city somewhere, one of Tilly's contacts had predicted their arrival and the killing of their first victim. That's one of the problems with Seerers; they only saw what "fate" allowed them to see, so they never got the full picture. I'd just settled in for a long night of nothing, when Bam! It stole through the night, that fucking mouth watering scent. I stiffened as it filled the air and automatically rose up on alert.

On the street below stood the older woman from earlier, her dirty blonde hair wafting in the wind that carried her scent up to our perch, as she glanced one way then the other. The woman stretched, shaking her head as if to clear it, before walking off down the street towards the nearest bridge that would cross into the city centre.

Why is she alone? I wondered before I could stop myself. Why am I even bothered? I berated myself.

“Dina?” Tilly broke into my thoughts as I leaned even further over the edge of the building without realising what I was even doing.

This isn't like me, I scold myself before glancing at Tilly's green eyes, shuddering at the concern I see reflected there.

“She's human Adrina,” Tilly states.

“I know Tilly but...” However, there is no but, she's human, her life would be but a blip in my existence. I'd seen far too many Vampires go berserk after losing their human companions, if they didn't kill them while trying to turn them. I'd sworn to myself a long time ago that I wouldn't condemn another to my own fate. I should let her go, let her disappear into the night and forget all about her, but her scent swirls around me again and I can't think straight.

“Dina, just go,” Tilly says, resigned to the fact that one way or another I was going to follow that scent, “get the little human out of your system, I'll finish up here tonight.”

That was all I needed as I nodded and jumped off the side of the building, falling down the four storeys and landing lightly on the pavement before stepping out of the shadows.

I followed the human's scent like a bloodhound as it wound through the City. Street after street my focus was unwavering as my mind tried to place that ancient flower she smelt of. I'd never, in over three hundred years, been attracted to another woman, until now. I could feel my desire coursing through me, as I let her scent invade my nostrils more and more until I could taste her on my tongue.

What the hell is wrong with me? I scold myself again, walking down another deserted street behind York Saint John university.

Turning right I follow the scent of...Gardenia, that's what she smells of, my mind suddenly supplies as I drag in another lungfull of the sweet and zesty fragrance that's slowly disappearing from the air. Letting my nose guide me I walk past door after door until I'm standing, facing a nondescript blue one. The scent of Gardenias is stronger here than anywhere else on the streets so far and I knew, without a doubt, that my unwitting prey was just behind this door.

Itching to see her again my hand presses into the wood, aching to push harder and break down the pathetic barrier between me and her. But I pause, knowing that would make me a monster, just like the ones I hunted.

Would I really violate her privacy, like mine had been violated all those years before?

Memories try to rise up of that night so long ago, but I shove them back down to the depths in which that night belonged.

NO! I couldn't do that to another, no matter how much I wanted to see her again. Forcing myself away from the door I glance up and down the street, making sure no one is watching from the dark windows before launching myself up onto her roof. Where I perch until the morning sun rises, tinting the sky a pale pink.

Just before I'm about to leave my perch the door below opens, and out walks the human woman who'd unwittingly captured my attention. Her long dirty blonde hair is now scraped back in a high ponytail that looks painfully tight and the jogging outfit hugs her curves leaving nothing to my imagination as I stare down at her. I watch the blood rushing through her veins, just below her creamy skin and everything about her screams breakable to me as every protective instinct I have goes on full alert. She takes off jogging down the deserted street and I follow, intrigued to see what she's up to, it's barely five in the morning.

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Where are you going pretty lady? I wonder, following along the rooftops.

She ran for over an hour, forcing me to stalk behind her on the street as she ran down along the river, following its winding path back towards the city.

She's crazy, I think to myself, wondering if she'd heard of the student who was still missing. Why would she want to run here, alone? I asked myself, as the trees and grass morphed back into the grey, overbearing buildings of the city centre. Birds chirped happily, their songs in tune with the early morning sounds of the city waking up. Before she looped back around through the empty old university campus and we arrived back on her street of terraced houses. She pauses, breathing hard, her chest rising and falling with each inhale as she stretches out her muscles, resting her hand against her house.

The sweet scent of gardenias floats across the street to me, as if the breeze itself is playing with my tenuous self-control. I should have left her hours ago, Tilly was going to be fuming, but I couldn't find it in myself to leave the strange beauty before me.

Chapter Two

Beware of the monsters in the dark, they'll prey upon your soul - Charleene.

Tingles chased each other down my spine as a cold breeze blew through my thin shirt, making me shiver violently in the queue. I was currently rethinking my life choices as I waited to get inside Salvation with Lily, Meghan and Gillian. Why I'd let them convince me to come out after work was beyond me. I was knackered. Trying to

stifle another yawn, I allowed a small gap to grow between me and my coworkers. Tonight's shift at the restaurant had been brutal; we'd been slammed from start to finish and the last thing I needed was to be here in the cold. I should be going home to my comfortable bed and sleeping. I told myself silently as another shiver ran down my spine. I had that tingling feeling, you know, the one you get when someone unseen is staring at your back. Letting Lily's voice drift off into the background I tried surreptitiously glancing around. I watched drunk students milling about, some smoking, others wrapping their arms around themselves in the cool air, but no one was paying me any attention as they went about their own lives.

"Charleene?" Lily asked, drawing my attention back to them as they moved closer to the bouncers.

"Yeah," I answered distractedly, searching for whoever I could still feel watching me. It was strange, like an irritatingly itchy feeling that I couldn't shake. I'd felt it before plenty of times and it was always followed by some horrific accident or tragedy. I dreaded feeling it.

"You're still coming in with us, aren't you?" she asked, repeating her question and looking at me with her wide blue eyes.

"Yep, I'm right behind you," I said with a small smile. I knew it didn't reach my eyes as I shook off my foreboding feeling and closed the distance, just as they reached the bouncer, and followed my friend into the heaving club.

The thumping bassline of a new song rattled my bones and set my teeth on edge, as I paid the entrance fee, before we weaved our way through the crowd to the packed bar.

"What you having?" Meghan shouted, leaning in close to me so I could hear her over the music and giving me a whiff of the sickly sweet perfume she'd doused herself in.

“Just a coke.” I replied, listening to the song playing. Castles In The Sky pounded through me, making my body move to its beat. I hadn’t heard this song in years and was slightly surprised that it was even playing, but then a good song never lost its appeal. Nodding my head along, I took the cold glass from Meghan before we moved further into the club. If we found a table at this time of night it would be a miracle but we looked anyway, hoping that there’d be one free. There wasn’t. So I had to make do with placing my cold glass down on a thin ledge that bordered the dancefloor. The others went to dance as I swayed my hips to the music.

An hour later I drained the last drops of my coke and smiled at the girls as they gyrated against each other, their laughter lost under the pounding music. Inching my way slowly over, ducking around a stray dancer, I tapped Lily on the shoulder and leaned in close to shout in her ear, “I’m heading home.”

She pouted, pushing her lips out in an almost comical way before nodding her acceptance. Waving to the others I slipped away leaving them to enjoy the rest of their night.

Smiling, I pushed through the heavy doors and almost sighed in relief as they shut behind me, muting some of the heavy bass from the music that still had my eardrums vibrating. I knew I’d hear about slipping out early from Meghan and Gillian at work tomorrow, but my feet hurt and my bed was calling my name as I walked out into the night.

Shivering, I regretted not having a coat with me as the frigid air caressed any skin it could find, making my teeth chatter as I walked. On nights like this you either needed a thick jacket or to have drunk enough alcohol so as not to feel the wind howling through the streets. I had neither, so opted for wrapping my arms around me and hurrying my steps. I was a few streets from the club, when my back stiffened and tingles raced down my spine again. With another shiver—this one having little to do with the cold—I hugged my arms tighter around me and told myself I was being

ridiculous as my hurried steps sped me towards home.

I was just about to scream like a mad woman, when I finally turned onto my one way street. I'd been throwing glances over my shoulder since crossing Ouse Bridge and now my spine felt like it was about to snap, and my neck had a crick I wasn't sure I'd ever get rid of. It took me several tries to slip my key into the lock with my shaking hands, and when the click of it unlocking came, I let out a grateful sigh.

Slipping silently into my shared student house, I made sure not to slam the door behind me. I never knew if anyone was going to be in, but then I also didn't really care. My housemates kept themselves to themselves just like I did, however we did try to respect each other and that meant being quiet in the hallways. It was why we made the perfect housemates; we didn't pry, hardly saw each other and that's the way I wanted to keep it. I was here to go to university, not make friends after all.

I was older than almost everyone in my classes after enrolling in my early twenties, but my youthful face let me fit in with the eighteen year olds, not that I could tolerate their enthusiasm for all things drinking, drugs and just their overall enthusiastic energy for long. I was here for one thing, and one thing only: an education. Quietly, I sat on the arm of the two seater sofa and slipped my ballet flats from my aching feet, before tiptoeing up the stairs to my bedroom.

Sliding my door closed softly behind me, I barely refrained from running to my soft bed and flinging myself down on it. Screw getting changed I thought, letting my eyes close as exhaustion washed through me and my tired body sagged in relief.

It's dark. 'Why's it so dark?' I wonder, as my feet stumble. Someone grabs the top of my arm in a vice tight grip, startling a scream from me. 'Why can't I see anything?' I think again as I'm forced to move. My left shin slams into something hard and I whimper, 'why can't I move my arms?' I question silently when I attempt to reach down to rub the sore spot that's now throbbing. My heart is pounding against my ribs,

as the hand wrapped around my arm tugs again forcing me to fumble through another series of steps.

“Sit!” a familiar voice croons in my ear as he forces me to bend at the waist. I know what’s coming, I’ve been here before. The bed is hard and the sheets are coarse under my fingertips as they brush it. ‘They’re not my sheets,’ I tell myself as fear slices at me like a knife. “You’re a pretty thing, shame you have to die.” He says. ‘Who is he?’ I wonder briefly, as a familiar sharp pain slices into my neck and I let loose the scream trapped in my chest.

My eyes snap open as I gasp and rub the side of my neck, while my other hand taps furiously against my leg, attempting to calm my racing pulse. Another sodding dream, I think angrily. I’d been having them since about a week after I’d turned twelve. Nothing I’d done ever made them stop, sometimes they’d go away for months at a time but they always returned, costing me numerous families over the years. Why would anyone want to adopt, or even foster, a child with such bad night terrors that she could wake a street with her screams.

However, the dreams were becoming more frequent; small parts of it differed but that voice was always the same and the pain in my neck also never changed. Whoever the unseen man was, he’d creeped me out from the first time I’d heard his voice in my ear when I was twelve. I shivered just thinking about it.

“Today’s going to be a very long day,” I mumbled aloud, rolling over and staring at my alarm clock, which declared it was only five in the morning. Blooming heck, I thought realising I wouldn’t be going back to sleep now after that dream. I just had to hope that they wouldn’t interrupt my sleep for too many nights this time.

It was too early for a shower and nervous energy rolled through me, making my thumb tap incessantly and repetitively against each of my fingers. Glancing around my bare room, I needed something to calm myself and my eyes landed on my running

gear as it poked out of a drawer.

Why not?The city would be quiet this early, and when I got back it would be a much more reasonable time of day and I could jump in the shower. Smiling I slipped on the thin, too tight top that would stop my boobs from bouncing about. Who needed such big boobs anyway?I complained to myself, shimmying into the matching bottoms which hugged my legs like a second skin.

Standing outside on the empty street I ignored the cold nipping at me and rolled my shoulders, before starting off at an easy jog. I'd warm up soon enough. Music blasted through my headphones as my scalp still ached from the savage pull of scraping my hair up into a ponytail. I'd made the stupid mistake of cutting it short over the summer. But it was slowly growing back in. Losing all track of time and space, I focused on my music as Evanescence sang about an imaginary world and my feet pounded the pavement as a small smile grew on my lips.

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Finally after an hour of racing along the pavements, I felt my anxiety calming down enough that I could think about heading back home, as I faced York St John Uni. It was a strange building; half modern, with its steel and large windows, and half stuck in the past with the yellow, rain weathered bricks and tiny single paned windows, but I loved it all the same.

The modern parts housed a massive library, where I practically live when not at work, and some classrooms, but my lessons mostly took place in the older quad. A square, uneven set of buildings with a central courtyard. The floors were uneven, with aged ceilings that if you were taller than 6ft you'd have to stoop to pass under, and so higgledy piggledy that when you went down one staircase you got lost. I enjoyed the history of the building, as it was the remains of the old hospital teaching college that hadn't been lost as time moved on.

Running through the recently unlocked quad I slowed my pace, so as not to accidentally bump into anyone who might be around this early, before lengthening my stride again as I flew past the student union, past the small Chapel and back out onto the streets that would lead me home. I'd just passed the small black gate when a shiver ran down my spine. I was being watched again.

It was the same feeling from last night. Keeping my face unchanged I upped my pace, feeling thankful that I was only five minutes from the house.

Reaching the blue door to what was slowly becoming home, I glanced back up the street and froze. At the top stood a figure, with dark hair. Shuddering I looked away, slipped my key into the lock and turned it. I smiled at the familiar click as the Yale lock opened, before another shiver ran through my body as I forced myself to glance

again at the now empty street.

Shaking my head, I stepped into the dark hallway, and released a small sigh, shutting the door behind me. It's ok, you're safe. I reminded myself silently. It was probably just a passerby being nosey. I justified the stranger and with one last shiver I went to get ready for my nine o'clock lesson.

Smothering another yawn behind my hand, I stared at the lecturer who stood before the massive interactive whiteboard, explaining a new teaching method. I tried to comprehend what she was saying but found my mind wandering. I'd wanted to be a teacher since as long as I could remember. The urge to help others had always driven me, and teaching was a good way as any to help the younger generations.

I knew I should be listening and taking notes, but between my late night and interrupted sleep, I just couldn't force my mind to focus. Giving up entirely I resolved to look up the lecture notes online later as I doodled patterns onto the blank page before me. Intricate spiral patterns began to take shape as I barely concentrated and forced my eyes to stay awake when my phone vibrated in my pocket. Slipping it out and placing it on the desk next to my notebook, I tapped open the new message.

Do you want to join us for George's leaving drinks tonight? X

I smiled while reading it, Lily was always optimistic—a trait I feared I was also picking up—when she invited me out. I almost responded that I wouldn't and then realised how lonely I'd let my life become. Other than work and going to uni, I did nothing and the thought of spending another night alone in my room just wasn't as appealing as it usually was.

Yeah, what time and where?

I text back with a small smile still playing on my lips. Why shouldn't I try and have

some fun? I was supposed to be a carefree student after all, even if I turned twenty-one this winter. Her response came back quickly.

7pm at Society ;)

Society was a smallish bar across from where we'd been last night. It would be busy but if we were getting there early enough we should be able to snag a pretty big table.

Ok, I'll see you there.

I let my smile widen as I returned to my doodles, and a warm fuzzy feeling grew in my chest at the thought that maybe I'd managed to make a friend here in York after all. Always being the weird foster kid, I'd never had a proper friend before.

The rest of my day had passed steadily. I'd caught up on the lecture notes from this morning, had a little nap and taken a long soak in the bath since the house seemed deserted, and now I was standing in front of my wardrobe, staring at my clothing options. What the hell am I supposed to wear to a co-workers leaving-do? I didn't know George very well, he'd done my induction at Nando's, but other than that we hadn't worked together much. Shrugging I grabbed some clothes, trying not to think too much about them.

Chapter Three

A scent so tantalising it drives you mad - Dina

"Did you get her out of your system?" Tilly asks, propping her short lean leg up on the small bedside table in my hotel room and re-tying the laces on her knee high boots.

"No, she was already at her home," I replied, strapping another short dagger to my

thigh. Tilly sighed before turning to face me fully.

“You’re not going to be any use on this hunt until you’ve sated your need for her.” She deadpanned, fixing me with her sternest look. I knew she was right but I also didn’t know how to fix it. “Leave your weapons and go meet her.” Tilly said as if she could read my thoughts.

“You sure? What if you find the rogue?” I raised an eyebrow at her.

“I’ll be fine,” she answered, waving off my concern, which was unneeded. She was deadly with or without my help; she’d been a huntress longer than I’d been alive.

“Ok,” I replied, removing the daggers I had just secured, before giving her a brief smile to show how grateful I was. My head had been filled with images of the woman all day, leaving me with little rest. I’d imagined all the ways she could wrap her legs around me, as her lingering scent in my nose tortured me.

“Happy hunting,” Tilly said instead of goodbye, before she let herself out of my room with a smirk on her lips. Rolling my eyes I glanced in the mirror, checking out my clothes. My tight black shirt and skin tight black jeans would have to do, it was all my wardrobe consisted of nowadays. Long gone were the days when women were confined to dresses and tight corsets. Thank God.

Slipping out of my hotel room I followed a similar route to last night, but as I arrived on her street her delicious scent wrapped around me. Following it again, I stalked her back through the city. Pausing when it almost got lost amongst the throng of party goers, I stood still, shifting through each scent until I picked hers back up and continued following it to the street where I’d first seen her.

Expecting it to go towards the same club she’d been in last night I crossed the road, only for it to disappear. Frowning, I crossed back over and followed her further down

the street to a smaller club.

Society

The name above the door declared and behind a pitiful red rope stood a small queue. Joining the back of it, I stood tapping my foot as the music's bass bounced against my eardrums, almost deafening me as I pondered how I was going to meet her. The queue moved slowly but steadily towards the entrance, and after a few minutes, I stepped inside.

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Lights flashed above the sticky dancefloor as I walked towards the small bar, barely giving the redhead who was serving a second glance, as I ordered a vodka and coke. With my drink in hand I scoured the club, searching both for the human and an empty table. I found an empty table at the edge of the dance floor and sitting down, I saw her!

She sat with a group of humans; all of them seemed to be in various states of drunkenness as they chatted easily and occasionally laughed. My human sat slightly apart from them, but still close enough to be part of their conversation, as she glanced around the steadily filling club. What the heck am I thinking, she wasn't my anything. If luck would have it she'd be a one night stand. Get her out of your system tonight and be done with her. I thought, taking a sip of my drink as I watched her.

The DJ switched tracks to another annoying drum and bass track that were so popular nowadays. What was wrong with a nice piano and violin concerto? I wondered as I scanned the thickening crowd briefly, before my gaze snapped back to her.

I hummed appreciatively, letting my eyes scan the human from head to toe. She kept tucking her longish dirty blonde hair behind her ear, as she leaned forward slightly, smiling back politely at her companions. The black top she was wearing had lacy sections—from what I could see from my seat—that went down her arms and continued over the rise of her chest as the top strained to keep her voluptuous curves covered. Flickering my eyes further down, I took in the short black skirt that ended just before the low table blocked the view of her long legs.

How the hell do I make this work? I pondered, my gaze never straying from the woman I was fixated on. Does she even like women?

One of the human's female companions poked her arm, and nodded over in my direction, making her blue eyes scan the crowd before meeting mine across the room. Her companion whisper-shouted something in her ear and a rosy blush spread across her cheeks moments before she glanced back down at her now empty glass.

Did she not like my attention? I wondered, my brow furrowing, How did humans manage to do this night after night?

Wanting to flee or have the floor swallow me, I downed the last of my drink and stood meaning to merge into the crowded dance floor and leave. I'd taken two steps when her intoxicating scent of Gardenias and Myrrh with a hint of strawberries wrapped around me, and I spun around on the spot, coming face to face with Her.

Flinching back a step, I narrowed my eyes at her innocent look.

"Hi?" I asked, unsure if I even wanted to speak to the human anymore.

"Hello," she said, her voice low and uncertain with a subtle hint of the Yorkshire accent, her fidgeting hands making me fight a smile.

"Erm, would you like to dance?" I found myself asking in a shout, just as the music paused and switched songs, making my voice sound much louder.

The human nodded, with a slight lift of her full lips as she moved backwards. Mesmerised I followed, my hips swaying with each step, as the tightly packed crowd closed around us. My chest brushed up against hers, but I couldn't move away without bumping into someone else.

We swayed together, both nervous and a little shy, until the music changed again to a slower song. I took a deep breath, reaching my hands out, tentatively settling them on her hips as I brought my lips to her ear.

“What’s your name?” I shouted, smiling as she shivered beneath my hands.

“Charleene, yours?” She called back, moving her own lips close to my ear.

“Dina.”

"That's unusual, where are you from?" Charleene continued, competing with the music that's thumping through the club.

"It's an old family name." I called back, not saying how old it was, "And Scotland originally."

"Funny, you don't have much of a Scottish accent," she pondered aloud, making me smile.

"I've lived in England for a long time now," I reassured her.

"What about you?" I asked, not wanting the conversation to end now it had begun, as we danced letting the world fade away around us.

“All over really,” she shouted, before dipping her head as though embarrassed.

A few drinks and dances later and we were chatting away like old friends, smiling, laughing, and she’d even swatted at my arm a couple of times. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so carefree, but with Charleene my worries seemed to float away as my usually slow heart raced like a jack rabbit. She was enchanting.

I'd forgotten we weren't alone when someone knocked into me from behind, startling me, and a low growl left my lips before I could reign it in as I spun around fixing my most pissed off stare at whoever had dared to interrupt us.

One of Charleene's friends stood staring innocently back at me. She gave me a strange look before shaking her head and moving to Charleene's side. "Charl, we're going over to Salvation, you coming?" she asked, glancing over at me briefly.

"It's ok Lily, I think I'm going to stay here," Charleene answered, her eyes never leaving my face.

"You sure?" Lily asked, obviously feeling like she needed to save her friend from me, but Charleene nodded, flicking her eyes to meet Lily's before they returned to mine. "Ok, but you know where we are if you need us."

"Yep," Charleene replied before we're left alone again.

"We can go with your friends if you want?" I forced myself to say, not really wanting to go with them, but I had the feeling that for this human I'd do many things I didn't want to, just to see her smile.

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"It's alright, I'm enjoying myself right here," she said with a small, shy smile while stepping even closer to me and running her hand up my arm.

"Funny, I'm enjoying myself too," I found myself muttering as I stared transfixed into her blue eyes. They remind me of the Mediterranean sea. Smiling back at her I let my arms close around her body; she's an inch or two taller than me but I liked how her head rested on top of mine as we danced.

I lost track of time as we swayed to the music, talking when we could. I found out that Charleene was what they called a "mature student" at one of the local universities, working towards a better future than the past she'd had.

"Last song," the DJ announced through his microphone, suddenly bursting our little bubble.

"What now?" I asked, not wanting our time to end. I found that I no longer cared about getting her out of my system, there was something about her making me want to know her more.

"Do you want to come back to mine?" Charleene asked nervously, glancing around at the almost empty club. "Or we could go to another club?" she tagged on, when I didn't answer quicker.

"I can walk you home if you want." I offered, not wanting to put too much pressure on anything further. I still wasn't even sure if she liked women in that way—or if I did for that matter—there was just something that drew me to her like a moth to a flame. Would I get burned? I wondered as she led me to the exit my hand clasped in

hers.

The walk to Charleene's passed quickly as we talked easily about her varied past growing up in the foster system since she'd been a baby. I could tell it made her uncomfortable to talk about it, however I couldn't find it in myself to stop her. She was fascinating. "I don't know why I told you all of that." Her voice brings me out of my thoughts, as we turn onto her street.

"Sometimes we just need to talk to someone we don't know." I reassured her, "I hope telling me this has helped you."

"It's strange, I feel a little lighter. I also feel like I've known you longer than just tonight." She mumbled, almost to herself, as she unlocked her front door.

I remained on the threshold—and no, we don't need permission to enter a person's home—waiting for her to decide if she wants to take things further or not. Butterflies flutter agitatedly in my stomach as the seconds tick by and my mind goes into overdrive. Do I want to be invited in? Would I be able to take whatever this was further? My mind spun, as I remembered all the rules against same sex relationships from my childhood.

"Erm, would you like to come in?" Charleene finally asked, breaking into my thoughts and making her decision.

"Erm, yes, please" I forced myself to whisper, my butterflies doubling and dancing now, as I slowly stepped into her house.

"Would you like a drink or..." her voice trailed off as if she's embarrassed or as nervous as I am. "Sorry I don't do this often, well not at all recently."

"Neither do I," I whispered, my voice sounding too loud in the silent house. I may

have been a vampire for three hundred years but until now this was one line I hadn't ventured over. Taking another step closer, I shoved my doubts down and tucked an annoying strand of hair behind her ear. I let my fingers trail softly down her face, watching her eyes close before leaning forward and placing a hesitant kiss to her parted lips. She tasted like alcohol and strawberries.

"Dina," she mumbled, her breath skating over my tingling lips and I wondered if I'd done something wrong.

"Mmmm," I answer incoherently, my body now pressing up against hers, enjoying how her lips feel against mine.

"Maybe we should move this out of the hallway?" she asked before backing up, igniting my predatory instincts. I wanted to stalk her, make her heart thunder even faster than it was in her chest, but instead I followed her through the small living room to a thin set of stairs in the corner.

Hunt Her!The huntress in me screamed, when she turned her back to me and took the first step up. Taking measured steps, my mind catalogued everything; the slight whooshing sound of her blood rushing through her veins, the flurry of goosebumps that raised on her exposed skin, drawing in a deep breath, I smile as her scent thickens around me, her desire increasing with each step we take.

It takes every thread of my self-control not to make her run so that I can hunt her. I want to taste every inch of her. Wanted to sink my fangs into her soft skin. I needed to lose myself in her, I realised, as we steadily grew closer to what I'm assuming is her bedroom.

Charleene paused before one of three doors on the tiny landing. She took a deep breath before pushing it open, revealing her personal space. Stepping inside, I noticed that her room is quite plain. The carpet, like the rest of the house, is cream. Her walls

are beige, with a lonely motivational cat poster that says, 'You've got this' in big letters above a ginger cat. She has one bookcase with a few books on the shelves, and her rainbow bedspread is the brightest thing in the whole room.

Catching a glimpse of Charleene in the full length mirror next to the door, I watched as she pushed it shut with a soft click. Her room was illuminated from the closest streetlight shining in through the small window and she didn't switch the main light on. Not that I needed it to see her clearly, as she paused with her hand still on the door. In the past I'd always chosen to keep rooms dark when I've taken someone to bed, but with her something's different; I want to see her every reaction.

Maybe it's because she's a woman, I wondered as my eyes took her in. Her hips curved out, giving her an hourglass figure. She's not overly wide, like some women had seemed to aim for over the centuries, and my hands itched to roam over every curve, even as my mind told me it's wrong. I shouldn't be having these feelings for her.

Confused, I stepped closer, taking it slow, unsure on what I should be doing. With men it was easy; flash a little flesh and they can't seem to help themselves from being aroused, but with Charleene it's harder to judge. Did she find me attractive? Did she want me to make the first move? Should I make any moves at all?

Standing behind her I ignored my errant thoughts and reached out, running my hand down one of her arms, drawing her attention to me. The pink staining her cheeks was adorable and I want to see more of her. Running a finger down the soft skin of her cheek I watched, gauging her reaction to my touch. She leaned her cheek into my palm and I took another step closer.

Slipping my hand down until it settles against the warmth of her neck, my thumb rubbed across her thumping pulse point as I leaned closer.

"You're beautiful," I whispered, not giving myself time to overthink as I pressed my lips gently back against hers.

They're soft and part as my tongue swept across her bottom lip. Emboldened by the quiet moan that slipped from her, I deepened the kiss letting my tongue play with hers. We're battling for dominance, I realised, as her hand grabbed a fistful of my hair. She tugged it forcefully, pulling my head back, and letting me know she was in charge here, not me.

My lips moved slowly down the smooth column of her neck, and I nipped gently, smiling when her fist in my hair loosened. Able to move freely, my tongue flicked out over her thumping pulse. The salty taste of sweat on her skin barely registered as her hand caressed the back of my head, encouraging me on. She gasped as I sucked on her skin gently, and my fingers moved to the buttons on her shirt, slowly flicking them open one after another.

Taking my time, I enjoyed how she responded to my touch. Each soft gasp or throaty hum sent tingles rushing from low in my stomach to my throbbing pussy. But I reminded myself to give her the option to stop this if she wanted.

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“Do you want more?” I found myself asking in the huskiest voice I’d ever heard leave my throat.

“Yes,” she gasped as her hands found my arms. Opening the last few buttons I pushed her shirt from her shoulders and let my lips trail short quick kisses across her skin. Finding a small scar marring her beauty I gave it two kisses, before moving back towards her chest.

You’re in uncharted waters right now, my mind chimed, making me pause in my lips’ exploration as I glanced up. Her blue eyes stared down at me above her pink cheeks.

“Please don’t stop,” she encouraged, like she could read my mind and knew the doubts I was suddenly having.

“I’ve never...” I bit off the words before they could leave my mouth, not wanting her to know how inexperienced I was.

“It’s ok,” she said, being so understanding that I almost growled at her, “we don’t have to do anything you don’t want to,” she said, gently cupping my cheek trying to reassure me. Ha, me, the vampire that’s lived more lives than she could dream needs reassurance from a human. Shut the fuck up! I screamed at my stupid head, I need to be rid of her, I reminded myself before responding.

“I want this,” I choked out, fighting with wanting to have my lips all over her and the morals that growing up in my time had instilled in me. In some ways humans were far more progressive than some vampires.

Her scent was overpowering and now that I was this close to her, I noticed an unusual undertone that I couldn't place. However before I could delve further into what about her scent was unusual, her thumb swiped over my bottom lip, freeing it from my teeth, and snapped my attention back to her. Her smile distracted me as her hand moved softly down the side of my neck and across my shoulder.

Tingles raced away from her touch as it continued down my arm, then across my chest, pausing just above my breast, as her oceanic eyes searched mine. I gave her a shaky nod and gasped as she cupped my breast, making my chest heave forward further into her hand. The tingles raced from my breast straight to my vagina.

“Does that feel good?” Charleene questioned, her smile devilish as her thumb rubbed over my nipple, creating delicious friction between my clothes and the now sensitive skin.

Does it? I wondered, trying to shut off that pesky voice in the back of my mind that's telling me this was wrong.

“Y...y...yes,” I finally managed to gasp out after warring with myself.

“Good.” She responded before taking full control.

Her hands slid to the bottom edge of my top, brushing against my stomach before dragging it up and over my head. Once it hit the floor her hands were back on my skin, gliding up over my flat stomach, feeling every dip in my abs. Then they slid over my smallish breasts, still covered by the thin material of my bra, until she slipped one free and circled her finger tip around one nipple. I couldn't stop the moan from escaping my lips.

My eyes closed when Charleene's thumb and finger squeezed my hardened nipple, as her lips found mine, and kissed away my next moan. I barely noticed her other hand

reaching around my back and unhooking my bra, until it fell to the floor between us, freeing my breasts to the cool air of her room.

A sudden pressure on my bottom lip made me aware of my elongated fangs. Shit, how do I hide this? I thought, not wanting her to be scared of what I was, and with the amount of desire flooding through my blood, they wouldn't be going away anytime soon.

“You ok?” Charleene's voice brought me out of my thoughts. I nodded, stopping myself from overthinking everything and smiled at her, not wanting this to end, but also not wanting her to see my true self either. It was like torture, but torture of the best kind.

I watched as her tongue flicked out, teasing my nipple gently, before sucking it into her mouth hard as her oceanic eyes stared up at me unblinkingly. I loved how she watched my responses to her touch. Tilting my head up I let out the groan trapped in my throat to her ceiling, hiding my mouth as her tongue flicked over one nipple again before moving to the other and I forgot my doubts about what was right or wrong.

“More than ok,” I finally croaked out, needing her to continue as she began pushing me backwards, while lavishing attention to my tits. I'd been with men before but never had their attention felt this good, this single-minded on my own pleasure over theirs.

Charleene's bed hit the back of my calves, and I gave up any preconceived notions I might have had with how tonight was going to go and enjoyed Charleene's mouth and hands on my body. Letting myself get lost in the various sensations coursing through me instead.

The noises I made should have been embarrassing, but each one fanned my desire higher until I was falling—both figuratively and literally—onto Charleene's soft

mattress as she wrestled with my tight jeans.

The rough rasp of my clothing made me realise she was still wearing far too many clothes. Pushing myself up on my elbows I gazed down at the beauty between my legs. “Your clothes need to come off.” I demanded, receiving a sultry smile back before her mouth descended on my soaking pussy, making my head fall back against her soft mattress.

“Mmmmm, delicious,” Charleene moaned, her soft breath raising goosebumps across my flesh as I fisted her sheets. Her tongue was both rough and smooth at the same time as it slipped between the lips of my pussy, hitting my clit in light teasing touches, before repeating the same path over and over, driving me senseless. Tingles chased each other around my body as my hips buckled. I need more, I managed to think somewhat coherently as I began to ride her face, chasing the high her tongue was pushing me towards.

Her finger pressed gently against my entrance, and I groaned as her tongue pressed more forcefully against my clit. Losing myself to her tongue's attention, I screamed as she thrust first one finger and then two inside me. Her fingers twisted and turned, caressing the walls of my pussy and stretching it, as her hand pumped in and out. Wetness rushed from me as her fingers wriggled before she pulled them back out. The slick sound of my desire had my heart beating faster and my hips gyrating against her mouth as she lapped up the cum that escaped.

“Come for me,” she demanded and I did just that, screaming my release when her tongue circles my clit again.

Shivers coursed through my body as I rode her fingers, coming down from the high she'd just given me. Smiling like a dope, I opened my eyes to find her standing and peeling her own trousers off. Lust raced through me as she bent down, showing me her perfect round arse, encased in lacy black panties.

Biting my lip I shoved myself up until I was sitting on the edge of her bed and reached for her. Wanting to taste her, as her scent wrapped around me from the desire I knew was pooling between her legs.

“My turn,” I rasped before sliding to my knees and dragging her lacy underwear down her legs. I placed small kisses up her thighs, first one and then the other, delighting in hearing her lustful noises. She squirmed in anticipation as my mouth drew close to her pussy and I dragged my teeth gently across her skin, wondering if I was doing it right or not.

Glancing up, I met her eyes as my tongue darted out, and captured a drop of her juices as it tried to escape down her leg. Following it up I licked between her pussy's lips, savouring the sweet taste that was completely her. Reaching up, my fingers brushed over her belly, flowing over the dip of her belly button, before I gently cupped one of her large breasts. It was heavy in my hand as I kneaded it. Enjoying my touch Charleene moaned and thrust her breasts harder against my palm.

Giving it a final hard squeeze, I dropped my hand and grabbed her hips, yanking her pussy to my mouth as I let my tongue swirl and lick until her cum was dripping down my chin. She tasted just like she smelt, floral and exotic, as I lapped at her. Remembering how her tongue moved against me, I flicked my tongue over her clit in short quick taps and her moans turned into loud groans of delight. Emboldened by the sounds she was making I parted her thighs more so I could see her gloriously wet pussy and slid my forefinger slowly through it. Exploring how she felt.

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Applying the same amount of pressure as I would to my own, I circled her clit, teasing her, before thrusting it inside.

Twisting my hand so I could slip another finger into her I let my thumb rest on her clit and when I pushed my fingers as far inside as they'd go, I circled her small nub. A small grin tugged at my lips, when I was rewarded with more of her cum, it coated the palm of my hand making it slicker. Charleene's hips bucked, ridding my hand and fingers to the pace that would bring her to the edge she'd thrust me over moments before.

Hazy dawn light began turning Charleene's walls rosy red as the autumn sun began its ascent into the sky. I pulled Charleene's soft, warm naked body against my own, prolonging the moment before I'd need to leave. We'd spent all night pleasuring each other but it still hadn't been enough. Charleene's scent covered me, but it only made me want more. Reaching out I smoothed the small furrow that had appeared in Charleene's brow as she mumbled something about a monster in her sleep.

It had been so peaceful watching the human sleep for the last couple of hours, that I was hesitant to leave her, not to mention the fact that something inside my heart was begging me not to leave.

A soft buzzing, vibrated against the carpet, drawing my own brows into a frown as I realised it would be Tilly wondering where I was. I'd never stayed out all night when we'd been on a hunt before. What's wrong with me? I wondered, while softly untangling myself from Charleene, trying not to wake her. If Charleene woke, I knew it would be so much harder to leave.

I'd just hunted down my jeans and was pulling my still vibrating phone from the back pocket when suddenly the whole room was flooded with the sharp tangy smell of ozone. It was like I'd suddenly been thrown into a lightning storm just after lightning had hit close by. My limbs froze where I was bent, my head turning sharply, watching the sleeping human over my shoulder. No, not human, witch! I mentally corrected myself. It had been the tantalising part of Charleene's scent that she hadn't been able to place until now as her power poured into the room.

"No! No! Get Off Me!" Charleene's terrified voice filled the room, making every protective instinct in me flare to the surface. Flashing to Charleene's side in a heartbeat, I reached out not knowing if I should wake her or let her ride out the nightmare.

What are you doing? I screamed silently at myself, you're supposed to be getting the lass out of your system and leaving, not embedding yourself further into her life. I chastise myself, just as Tilly would have done, if she'd been here. Get dressed and leave the witch alone! My mind begged.

Listening to it, I dressed silently and went to leave. However before I could even open the door my chest ached. For some reason I couldn't fathom, I was hesitant to go without leaving Charleene a note or something, explaining my actions.

Weak! My mind screamed at me, remembering the few times I'd left a sleeping partner before they'd woken and never left a damn note then. However with Charleene, who now slept comfortably again, it felt wrong. Before I could second guess my actions, I acted on impulse, grabbing a pen and slip of paper from Charleene's small desk.

The note was small and to the point; Call me: 07728992124 Dina. Walking carefully to the bed I took one last look at her beautiful face, before dropping the note on the pillow beside her head and using my vampire speed to leave. In seconds I was outside

on the street, dragging in a last lungful of the witch's intoxicating scent, and with one last glance at Charleene's front door, I disappeared into the early morning, already cursing my rash decision to leave the note.

You're not going to see her again! I told myself firmly.

Chapter Four

What do you do when your heart pines for a monster? How can you run when your heart says no? - Charleene.

Turning over, a small groan of disappointment slipped past my lips, as my hand ran over the cold spot on the bed and I woke up alone. Blinking my eyes open I find nothing but a small piece of paper on the pillow next to my own. I suppose I should be grateful that the mysterious Dina had left early, after another dream of the man ripping into my neck with his sharp teeth had plagued my sleep again. What the hell is wrong with me? I wondered and not for the first time.

When the dreams had first started, I'd believed they were real, that someone was coming into my room in the middle of the night and savaging my neck. Only for there to be no marks when my foster parents came running in to find out what had upset me so much. Mr and Mrs Daniels had been lovely at first, reassuring me that I'd just been dreaming. Then after the first year of "the terrors"—as they'd dubbed them—they sent me to a therapist, and after the second year with no change they'd finally had enough and taken me to a group foster home.

No one has teeth like the man in my dreams and no normal person drinks blood as if it was the best beverage they'd ever tasted. I told myself silently. Things like that are only real in horror films and books, they don't happen to regular people, I thought with a shiver. The quilt bunched up as I hugged it tightly to my bare chest, focusing instead on last night and the dark haired woman.

Seven Nation Army by the White Stripes rang loud and clear, accompanied by a vigorous vibrating as my phone danced across the night stand, making me jump a mile in the air and clutch my chest to keep my heart beneath my ribs. Damn alarm, I cursed as it declared seven am, and dragged me back to the present. Goosebumps raced up my arm as I reached over and snatched the offending device to silence it. Shaking my head at myself, I couldn't help but wonder why the dreams had returned. Leaving the note where it lay, I flicked the quilt back, exposing my body to the chilly air.

I'd been staring at my reflection in the mirror for the last ten minutes. My gaze slowly going over every place that Dina had touched last night. I'd been with women before but never had I woken the next morning feeling so sore and satisfied. And never had I craved more of that person's touch. But Dina, the dark haired beauty, had woken a monster in me last night and all I could think about was Dina's fingers teasing my nipples and then sliding through my wet pussy.

With a small smile I watched my own hand trail down my stomach and slip between my legs. Fuck, I'm so wet. I think as my finger slides over my still swollen clit before working its way down to push inside myself.

My eyes close and I let myself imagine it was Dina's finger, pumping in and out, making me breathless and panting, while my other hand braces against the cold glass of the mirror. Sliding in another finger I imagined Dina's lips caressing my neck softly. Moaning, I pump my fingers in faster and harder, making myself wetter.

I imagine Dina's mouth sucking hard on my nipple as I use the palm of my hand to rub against my clit. Tingles swoop low in my stomach, my orgasm coming closer and closer until I was screaming it to the empty room around me. Cum coating my hand as I removed the two fingers from my pussy, with a contented sigh.

My smile grew as I rested my head against the cool glass, who was she? I pondered,

before telling myself it didn't matter, no matter how much I needed to see her again, it was a one night stand. Opening my eyes, my gaze darted to the bed and the small unassuming piece of paper still sitting on the pillow. Almost skipping across the room, I gently picked it up, like it's the most precious thing in the world. My eyes raced over the elegant script, devouring each word.

With a goofy smile, I searched my bed, looking for my phone. Finally my fingers grazed the hard cold plastic, before they gripped and removed it from the twisted quilt. Double checking the digits, I typed in the mobile number that Dina—what a strange name—had left, saving it into my contacts under the name: Mysterious Girl. Maybe I'll text her later, I thought, before putting the phone back on the nightstand. Grabbing a towel and wash stuff from the shelf, I found myself dancing all the way to the communal bathroom. Not quite ready to have my fantastic mood shattered if Dina decided to ghost me. I couldn't force the grin from my face if I tried as I showered and dressed before grabbing my heavy backpack.

The lecture hadn't been all that interesting, important yes, but not interesting and whispers had hissed through the air. Another young woman had gone missing. Trisha had left her friends to walk home on Saturday night and she hadn't been seen since. A shiver raced through me as I realised that could easily have been me

She was the third woman to disappear since term had begun in September. Fear coursed through the university and the city, as the other woman hadn't been found alive and the papers were reporting that the "Dracula Murderer" had come to York. Leaving the lecture theatre I sped past a gaggle of crying girls, before ducking into the library, as my most recent nightmare repeated in my mind. Would poor Trisha be found like the other one, dead in the river? Or had she just simply wandered off and got lost? I found myself pondering sadly. Pressing the button to call the lift, my left foot tapped impatiently on the carpet, as my fingers stroked the screen of my phone.

I wanted to see if Dina's number was real, my heart tripled its beats when I thought of

it, while my head kept worrying that it wasn't or that she'd want nothing to do with me. All the while hoping that the swirling feeling swimming in my stomach would settle down.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the lift dinged and its doors opened. Stepping in, my thoughts once again turned to the mysterious murders that had started in Scotland before moving down to Newcastle, and I now suspected the papers were right and they'd hit York. It had taken far too long for the police to link the victims, mainly because each force's department said there was no link. Male, female, the killer didn't seem to care. Even the ages of the victims had changed from year to year. The only thing they seemed to have in common was they'd been drained of blood. What monster could do something so senseless and horrific?

"Are you getting out?" A polite voice questioned, making me spin on my heel in surprise and stare at the two women, who were watching me with kind smiles. Giving them a quick nod I vacated the lift, not looking at what floor it had stopped on as I went to find an empty study room.

The library was always a busy place on campus, almost as busy as the Student Union bar. Students milled about, talking loudly as they ignored their books. The murmur of voices went unchallenged by the receptionists downstairs, as they knew they wouldn't be listened to. However the noise made me uncomfortable as I glanced quickly into the small study rooms, my heart sinking a little each time I found them occupied. All I wanted was a quiet place to study and write my latest essay, before my shift later. Steeling myself for disappointment I looked into the last room and my stomach fluttered uneasily. I'd always been attuned to the emotions of those around me—an empath my last foster mother had said—but today they seemed to be bombarding me much more than normal.

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Looking in through the small square window, I found that the room was dim and I hoped that I'd finally found an empty one. However as I pushed open the door sadness flooded me and made my eyes prickle.

There on the chair furthest from the door sat a lass around my own age, with tears streaming down her cheeks. "Sorry to interrupt," I gasped, taking a step backwards out the door I'd just walked through.

"No, please," the lass hiccupped, shaking her head and swiping at her cheeks, "I was just about to leave anyway."

"Are you ok?" I asked, unable not to as I looked at the distraught lass.

"I'll be fine," she replied as fresh tears ran down her cheeks and I knew as well as any woman, that when someone said they were fine, they were most likely not, especially when they had tears streaming down their cheeks.

"I don't want to pry, but if you want to talk, I'd be happy to listen," I said gently, against my better judgement and secretly hoping the lass would refuse.

"I'm scared," she answered instead, wiping at her tears again. "Trisha was on a night out and now she's missing. It could happen to any one of us," she whispered.

"Did you know her?" I asked, closing the door behind me and walked slowly towards the crying woman.

"No, not really, we shared a couple of seminars, but I still feel awful for her friends

and family.” She sobbed, as I nodded along and lowered myself into the chair next to her.

“They must be terribly worried,” I agreed, feeling sorrow for those close to the missing woman. “However it will do us no good getting upset, we must hope that Trisha is found safe and sound,” I found myself saying, even though I didn't believe the words myself.

The lass nodded firmly, before gathering her books and giving me a small smile, leaving with a softly muttered, “thank you.”

Sighing in relief at finally being alone, which I then immediately felt guilty for, I leant back in the hard seat, letting the unwanted emotions from the lass run their course. At times like this I always imagined that the energies of others left my body through my feet and returned back to the Earth, leaving me feeling empty for a few minutes until my own emotions returned. I was tired and angry at my lack of sleep and concentration in this morning's lecture, so I yanked out my notebook, and pencil case a little more forcefully than I'd intended to. Slipping in my headphones, I selected this morning's lecture on Moodle and pressed play, listening to what I'd missed.

Scribbling furiously, I didn't realise the time slipping away until the two hour lecture finished playing, my tutor's calming voice cutting off as I looked over my new notes, which looked vastly better than they had earlier. Smiling to myself I finally felt as though I'd been a productive student for the first time in days. On a high from being so productive, I slipped my hand into my jeans pocket, and closed my fingers around Dina's small note. My smile grew wider as I pondered if eleven thirty would be too early to message her, not everyone was an early riser and I hadn't got round to asking what Dina did for work.

Giddiness replaced the small tendrils of doubt as my thumb hovered over the small

blue message icon on the homescreen. What the hell, I thought, pressing the icon and selecting Dina's number.

Me: Good morning, it's Charleene from last night. I had a lovely time with you and wondered if you fancied grabbing a drink later?

Before I could chicken out or over think what I'd just typed, I pressed send as my heart beat thunderously against my ribs. Both satisfied and nervous, I laid my phone on the table beside my notebook, and attempted to read ahead, trying to understand the philosophy of education I needed for my studies. However, my eyes kept straying to my phone as I waited for Dina to respond. After the third time checking it for a message that hadn't come, I shook my head in exasperation. Laughing at myself, I pushed the phone away. I was acting like a silly school girl and grinning like the Cheshire Cat. When was the last time I'd felt this happy and terrified over sending a text message? Never, was the answer I was searching for, but then I'd never really felt this way about anyone before either. Especially not after just one night. I couldn't get Dina out of my head.

Forcing myself to focus, I finally made copious notes, allowing my phone to be forgotten. I let out a small yelp when it suddenly vibrated, dancing its way across the desk. Grinning like a fool, I snatched it up eager to see who'd messaged. My grin widened, making my cheeks hurt as I saw that "Mysterious Girl" had sent a message. Quickly tapping on the message I noticed that it was now one in the afternoon; I'd been so immersed in my studies that I hadn't noticed the time whizzing by.

Mysterious Girl: Good Afternoon, sorry for the late reply I've been sleeping. I'm sorry but I'm busy this evening. :(

My heart plummeted as I read the message twice. It was so formal that I didn't really know how to take it. Is she brushing me off? Or was she actually busy? Hesitating to respond, I reread the message a few times, my heart aching more and more, which

was stupid, we'd only met last night. Tears stung at my eyes, making the screen blurry as a second message came through.

Mysterious Girl:But I would like to see you again.

Those eight words made my tears slip free as my heart began beating again, filling with hope that maybe, just maybe, I'd finally found someone who wanted to be more than friends or a one night stand.Whoa,my mind screamed at me as I began to get carried away,Calm down girl.

Me:That would be nice.

I responded, tampering down my hope and excitement, trying to play it cool like my mind suggested. No one liked someone who was too keen after all. Unable to wipe the smile from my face or return my focus back to the textbooks, I decided to call it a day in the library and shoved all my things back into my battered backpack. Clutching my phone tighter, I couldn't stop the small giggle that slipped past my lips as it vibrated against my palm.

Mysterious Girl:What about tomorrow at 8pm?

After this evening's shift I thankfully had two nights off work, which before now, I'd been planning to fill solely with more studies, however meeting the mysterious Dina sounded a lot more interesting.

Me:That works for me. :)

Almost skipping to the door, I attempted to once again tamper down my excitement so that I could make it back home without looking like a total idiot. But when my phone vibrated again I quickly raised it to read the new message.

Mysterious Girl:I'll pick you up at 8pm tomorrow.

Me:It's a date.

Pushing the button to call the lift, I swallowed down the scream of delight and instead opted for bouncing on the spot in my watered down version of a happy dance. I was still wiggling my bum when the lift dinged and its doors opened to a thankfully empty lift. Stepping inside I quickly pressed the 'G' button for the ground floor and continued my happy dance as it descended. I have a date.Wow, tomorrow I have a date.I repeated happily in my mind, as I walked home.

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The rest of the afternoon sped past in a blur of clothing being thrown onto the bed as I debated what to wear for my date. I wanted to look sexy but casual at the same time. However nothing in my meagre clothing options presented that option. I still hadn't found anything that I wanted to wear when my alarm blared those chirpy bell sounds from my phone, reminding me that I still had to get ready for work.

Crap. I cursed in my mind, looking at the chaos and deciding I could sort it out tomorrow. Stuffing the clothes back inside the small wardrobe without hanging them, I hastily grabbed my black work polo top and a pair of black trousers and yanked them on. Tugging a tight bobble around my hair, securing it into a neat high ponytail, I was ready for my shift in ten minutes flat. Five minutes after that I was in the darkening street, locking the front door and smiling as I turned towards the city centre and the five hour shift that awaited.

Work had sucked balls. From the moment I'd walked in the door a harried waitress had called my name, rushing me to store my things in the small cubby locker that I'd been allocated and almost running back to the main floor still tying my apron strings. From there it had just got worse as the evening went on.

More and more tipsy students entered, the lads with their ridiculous posturing and the girls that mangled the menu's options to fit whatever fad diet they were on at that moment. For all my running to and fro, my tips sucked and my temper was just beginning to flare as the last table's food came out from the kitchen and yet another drunk lad thought he had the right to make fun of my damn job. One of these days I'd pluck up the courage to put them in their place, but tonight wasn't that night.

Suck it up buttercup, I told myself sternly, only another hour till home time.

“Nearly there, Charleene,” Oscar the head chef chuckled, as I grabbed three plates and plastered on my sunniest smile.

“One hour that’ll feel like two,” I joked back, before strutting through the swinging door as he laughed in agreement.

“One Rainbow Bowl?” My customer friendly voice chirped as I stood beside the last table of the night and waited for the blonde to raise her hand before turning to the guy to her right, “One Butterfly Burger and a fully loaded chips,” I continued, placing each dish in front of the right person, “Enjoy your meal,” I finished with a smile and left them to it.

“Tonights been mental,” Emily said when I stepped around the bar area and grabbed a tea towel to help her polish the cutlery so we had anyhope of leaving on time. Other than Lily, Emily was the closest thing I had to a work friend. We’d both started on the same shift and had worked the majority of the same ones since. She was easy to work with; she always had a kind smile or sympathetic whine after a busy shift. She even went as far as to invite me out with her, like Lily did.

“Tell me about it.” I said, giving her a conspiratorial smile, even though my mind had already turned to thoughts of my date tomorrow night.

“What has you smiling like a loon?” Emily’s laughed comment drew my attention back to the present and the fact that I was indeed grinning as my fingers polished another fork.

“Nothing.” I tried brushing it off, with a small glance at her. I’d always been a very private person at work, mainly because unlike the other waitresses I didn’t really have much of a life outside work and uni.

“Come on, I need something to get me through the mountain of cutlery we still have

to polish.” She smiled sweetly at me and picked up the last spoon on the tray just as the pot washer placed another full tray down, that had us both groaning.

Glancing over at my last table I took note of the barely eaten food and caved, “ok, I have a date,” I whispered.

“Eeekkk,” she squealed in delight, almost dropping her new batch of knives.

“Sssshhhhh, I don’t want everyone knowing.” I hushed her quickly as the bartender glanced in our direction with a raised eyebrow and we both dissolved into stifled giggles. “I feel so silly and giddy,” I confessed after the fit had subsided.

“That’s completely normal and part of the excitement. So where is the lucky man taking you?” She asked innocently.

“I don’t know where she’s taking me to,” I told her.

“That’s even more exciting,” Emily said, smiling devilishly at me as her eyebrows raised. “So who is she?”

“I met a woman last night,” I confided.

“The dark haired woman from Society?” she asked, nodding.

“Yeah, it’s just a date but...” I trailed off not really knowing how to end that sentence.

“But you're excited about it,” Emily filled in, smiling over at me.

“Charleene, looks like your table wants something.” Derek’s voice interrupted us. Nodding over at him, I left Emily with the cutlery and made my way back over to the

table in question.

“Is everything ok?” I asked cheerily, smiling down at the trio.

“Can we have the bill?” The dark haired lad asked politely.

“Certainly,” I answered, reaching for the two empty plates, and hesitating at the salad which had barely been touched, “was everything ok?” I asked the blonde.

“Oh, yes, it was lovely but a little too much,” she responded, flashing me a quick smile, as I piled it on top of the rest.

“Can I get you anything for dessert?” I asked, praying that they’d refuse so we could finish cleaning up.

“No, just the bill please Sweetheart.” The other lad smirked, giving me a wink that made my skin crawl.

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“No problem, I’ll be right back,” I explained and left.

“Urg men,” I grumbled, shoving inside the kitchen and dropping my plates next to the sink.

“Pig-headed jerks again?” Oscar asked, raising one of his thick eyebrows that looked like a hairy caterpillar.

“Nothing I can’t handle,” I smiled back at him, “They don’t want dessert.” I told him, making his smile grow as he announced they could finish cleaning down.

“That’s right lass, don’t let ‘em get to you,” he told me as I pushed back into the restaurant. Printing off their bill, I walked back to the smarmy lad and his friends.

“Is it card or cash?” I asked sweetly, placing their bill folder down in the middle of the table.

“Card, please,” the dark haired lad answered before his obnoxious friend could speak. Nodding, I spun on my heel to collect the card machine, and returned as the blonde caressed the dark one’s arm. “Would you like to split it?” I asked, ignoring as her hand slid lower.

“I’ve got it,” Slimeball retorted with another wink in my direction.

“Fantastic, that’s £36.50 please.” I answered politely, typing in their total amount and holding it out to him so he could tap his bank card against the top. I waited patiently for the beep, “great that’s all gone through, have a lovely evening.” I smiled at the

group and left them alone to grab their things and leave.

“How about you come join us, you look like you need a good time?” Slimeball’s voice called to my back. Resisting the urge to shudder I looked over my shoulder, running my eyes up and down his body. He was obviously a guy who took pride in working out.

“You’re not my type,” I threw at him with a tight smile, leaving him slack jawed and amazed at the refusal. Definitely not used to being told no, I laughed in my head and re-joined Emily and the ever growing pile of cutlery.

“Well you certainly told him,” Emily giggled quietly, as I picked up my tea towel and got back to work.

“They never learn,” I muttered under my breath, as they walked past the bar and out the door.

An hour later, my fingers hurt from polishing but I was finally pushing through the door into the cold October air. “You heading home?” Emily asked, rubbing her arms as the chill took hold.

“Yeah,” I answered around a yawn, “You?”

“Nah, I’m meeting Harmony and some others,” she said nodding in the opposite direction I was going, “you want to join?”

“Nah, my feet are killing me.” I told her, wiggling my toes that were burning.

“Fair enough, get home safe,” she wished, turning away and walking towards the nearest bar just before the bridge.

Breathing in the frigid air, I held it in my lungs for as long as I could before beginning the walk back towards home. I'd never really been bothered with socialising, it had always felt like too much effort, but this evening I wasn't looking forward to returning to my empty house.

Watching the ground pass under my feet, I followed the now familiar route home. I'd just turned into the Shambles, an historic street with small wonky looking tudor houses that had been turned into businesses over the years as they leaned over the thin cobbled road. Tourists absolutely loved this area of the city and I could see why. It was quaint, historical and had a magical feel to it. Almost as though you could close your eyes and be transported back in time while walking the tiny winding street and the market square behind it.

A shuffle and muffled groan to my right snapped me out of my daydream. I was certain it had come from somewhere among the empty market stalls, stopping dead. I strained my ears to hear anything and was about to walk on when I heard the low groan come again.

"Hello?" I whisper shouted, feeling like the idiot everyone screams at in horror movies. You know the one that follows mysterious sounds before ending up dead. "Is anyone there?" I continued, just to have some noise in the quiet streets. Tiptoeing around the first row of market stalls I glanced underneath and found them empty. Another groan, this time further away to my right. Picking up my courage and pace, I walked briskly towards where the food vendors trucks would be and froze.

My mind whirled at the sight before me;; a man in a navy tracksuit, who was sorta sitting on the cobbled floor, his legs twitching every now and then as someone with dark hair seemed to be fastened on the side of his neck. No, No, No, Not real! My mind screamed at me, my eyes tracking the thin line of red liquid which ran from beneath the second person's head, down his neck before disappearing beneath the man's shirt. His greyish blue eyes looked distant as another weaker groan left his lips

and he tried to shuffle away.

“What in the world are you doing?” my horrified voice shocked me as it rang clearly through the abandoned marketplace.

The dark haired one shifted as if I'd slapped them with my voice alone and when they looked up, I couldn't contain the scream that had been lodged in my throat, as I met Dina's beautiful face. However, her beautiful dark eyes were gone, replaced by red ones that almost glowed. Protruding from her mouth, were a pair of fangs with blood dripping off the tips, before she ran her tongue over them capturing the man's blood.

Slapping my hands over my mouth to stop myself from screaming again, I turned and fled, running without paying much attention to the streets racing by, until my palms slapped against my blue front door. A sob finally escaped me as I shut it behind me and slid down the smooth wood, until my bum hit the floor and I realised I was shaking.

It can't be real? I silently repeated to myself. It couldn't be! People didn't do that, they didn't bite other people and suck their blood. That was a thing of story books not reality. My thoughts went round in circles as I fell apart sitting on our shared doormat and let my tears coarse over my cheeks.

Chapter Five

How can you lose everything in a matter of minutes?- Dina

“Adrina?” Tilly's voice makes me jump as I carefully let myself back inside my hotel room as the sun finished rising after my night with Charleene. I was still reeling from the fact that Charleene was a bloody witch.

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“What are you doing here?” I grumble at her, wanting nothing more than to fall into the double bed that she’s currently lounging on, “Get your shoes off my bed,” I snapped at her, glaring at the offending knee high black boots.

“And where have you been?” she asked, raising one of her perfect eyebrows in an arch above one of her blue eyes and drawing in a deep breath, “ah, you smell like sex, so does this mean you've got that human out of your system?” she asked, grinning up at me.

“Witch,” I retorted on my way to the ensuite bathroom, slamming the door a little too hard behind me, hoping she'd get the message that I wanted to be alone. I hadn't been expecting Charleene's scent to still be affecting me so much, however Tilly's thinly veiled humour made rage pour through me. How dare she make light of such a special person. My mind agreed.

“How have you gotten mixed up with a Witch?!” Tilly called through the door.

Ignoring her I turned the tap and got the shower running, how indeed had I gotten involved with a damn witch? And how hadn't she known what I was? I'd been asking myself those two questions since leaving Charleene's house and was still no closer to an answer.

Just thinking of Charleene brought a flush to my cheeks as I remembered our time together and my thighs clenched as steam slowly filled the small room. Last night was amazing, I'd never known how different a woman's body would feel compared to a man's. Charleene had been soft and her tongue had known exactly where to play to make me moan. She also hadn't rushed; where most men seemed to be in a race to

finish, Charleene had drawn out each moment of pleasure.

“Adrina?!” Tilly shouted as her fist reigned down against the door, rattling it on its hinges.

“I’m not in the mood Tilly, so leave me alone.” I called back, rolling my eyes at her antics. I knew why she was so concerned, if Charleene was truly a witch then there was no way we’d ever be allowed to be together. Even casual dalliances between species were severely frowned upon by the High Council.

“Fine, grumpy pants, I’ll leave you be for now but tonight I will have answers.” She threatened, before I heard the soft thump of my hotel door closing behind her. Wiping a thick line through the steam on the mirror I met my usual frowning gaze and wondered what the heck I was going to do? A relationship with a human was hard enough, one with a witch was going to be impossible, however I couldn’t stop myself from thinking of her. Quickly stripping out of my clothes, I stepped under the warm water and washed away last night. Once clean and dry, I flopped onto the bed without getting dressed and fell into a fitful sleep.

A loud thumping at the door, forced me awake for the second time that day, leaving me feeling grumpier than normal as I left Charleene in my dreams. Opening my eyes, a little of my ire left me, as the dim light of evening peeked in around the heavy curtains and I remembered my promise to meet Charleene tomorrow. I’d woken earlier from tortured dreams of the life I would have had, if it hadn’t been stolen by a man with hundreds of broken promises and when checking my phone for the ungodly time I’d found a message from an unknown number. Clicking on it had taken me longer than it should have but once I’d read her short message my heart had soared.

More thumping came from the door, dragging me back to the present as I wondered sourly, What now? before tossing back the thick quilt and hunting for something to wear in the small wardrobe the hotel provided for its guests. Finally dressed in another

black shirt and skin tight black jeans, I threw the door open, revealing a frowning Tilly with her clenched fist in the air, clearly ready for another round of pounding. “What?” I grumbled at her in an almost growl.

“What? What?!” She demanded striding into my room and pinning me with a piercing glare, “This morning you come back from your night of...fun” she finally said finding the word she wanted, “and dropped the bombshell that the woman you’d bedded was in fact a witch, before kicking me out.” Tilly was incredulous and I understood why, I was edging into dangerous territory. However it seemed that when it came to Charleene I wasn’t entirely my usual rational self.

“Yes, she’s a witch, big deal.” I threw back at her, slamming the door shut, ready for whatever fight was coming.

“Big Deal?” she threw back at me raising one of her perfectly shaped eyebrows in question, “Do you even hear yourself Adrina?” Tilly stomped over to my unmade bed before spinning back round to face me, “if she is a witch, nothing further can happen between you both. You know our laws better than anyone, and what happens when one of us breaks them.” Her voice dropped some of its anger by the end of her speech.

“Of course I know our laws Tilly, I’ve spent the last century enforcing them, but—”

“There are no buts Adrina, you must leave the witchling alone.” Her words made my heart squeeze painfully at the thought of having to never see her again. “We need to inform the York Coven so that they can bring her into their fold.”

“What?” I almost shouted at her, “she clearly doesn’t know what she is Tilly,” I protested trying to protect Charleene, from what I wasn’t too sure, but the overwhelming need to keep her from harm crashed through me.

“And what? You’re going to be the one to tell her, train her?” Tilly’s questions brought me up short, making me think rationally, and realise I probably wasn’t the best person. “The York Coven is better equipped to deal with a wild grown witch, we are not.”

I knew she was right, it would be best for the both of us if I never saw her again, but the thought of hurting Charleene didn’t feel right. “At least let me say goodbye?” I asked, defeated.

“Fine but you need to feed before you go anywhere near her again.”

Nodding my agreement, I sank onto the hard chair near the small desk and asked my next question, “What about the rogue?”

“Seems to have gone to ground with his latest victim.” Tilly said drearily as she followed suit and perched on the edge of my bed. “If they follow their usual pattern, we’ll have a couple of nights before another human is taken.”

“Then I’ll take tonight to feed and say goodbye to Charleene tomorrow evening.” I said, falling in line like the good soldier I’d always been since the London Coven had taken me in. Finding the rogue vamp before they killed again had to be our priority, too many innocents had already died.

“Good, I’m going to check in with some of my contacts in the city, hopefully they’ll have heard something new.” Tilly muttered dejectedly. She was fuming that whoever this vamp was, they’d managed to out manoeuvre us for so long and I completely agreed with her. We hadn’t had this much trouble finding one vamp in our centuries of working together.

Before my thoughts could turn to Charleene again, I bid Tilly goodnight and grabbed my favourite coat from its hook. The hotel key card was still in my pocket from this

morning, so leaving her to close up, I stomped off down the hotel corridor. Using my vampiric speed I was out in the darkening night ready to begin my hunt in a matter of seconds. Being a vampire certainly had its perks, I thought turning to my left and merging with the throng of humans. The crowds thinned as I walked unsuspectingly to the nearest archway out of the city walls and breathed a sigh of relief as I picked up my pace, eager to find someone I could use to satisfy my bloodthirst.

I'd only been searching for a few minutes in one of the less reputable areas belonging to York, when I crossed the sickly sweet scent of burning drugs. Following it like a bloodhound, and bingo. He stood at the end of a dark alley, with no street lamps, towering over two skinny children with messy hair and dark shadows lining their eyes. They barely looked old enough to be roaming the streets, let alone being drug addicts already. Such a waste, I thought sadly to myself as I stalked closer down the alley. My hackles rose when I heard his threatening voice, pushing them into handing over cash for the life-draining drugs in his hand.

"Come on," he purred down at them, "you know you need what I'm giving." Sneering, I made sure my feet made no sound on the litter strewn floor. The youngsters' eyes widened as they spied me first, raising my finger to my lips. I gestured for them to be quiet before tapping the thug's shoulder with my right hand. "Just a minute," he grumbled without taking his eyes off the kids.

"But I'm desperate," I fake whined, already enjoying the hunt that would come soon.

"I have enough for everyone, Sweetheart," he answered smugly and finally glanced at me over his shoulder. His glazed eyes flowed over my body, noting the tight clothing I wore and my short stature as his attention switched from the two kids to fix firmly on myself and I smiled up at him.

"Oh, that's a relief," I gasped, taking a step back. I needed the kids to leave before my fun could truly begin. Other than the laws set by the Vampire Council, I had my

own which kept my humanity in place and protecting the young was very high up on that list. “Why don’t you kids get out of here,” I prompted them, flashing the thug another coy smile as he stepped towards me.

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“Yeah, get lost.” He growled back at them, as his eyes fixated on my rising chest and a grin showed me his blackened rotting teeth. The two kids glanced at each other before one of them found their voice.

“But...”

“Get lost you twits!” The man roared, making them both cower before they darted around us. “Right, where were we honey?” he asked rhetorically and reached one of his grubby hands out towards me.

“Right where I want you.” I answered letting my own grin spread across my face, “however, I think you might want to run.”

“Run? Why would I run from what you’re freely offering?” he questioned, confused at my answer, his brows scrunching together.

“Because I’m your worst nightmare.” I said, letting my fangs descend over my bottom lip and laughing cruelly as his face blanched.

“What kinda freak are you?” he snapped, trying to master his fear.

“The kind that likes to play with her food.” I retorted, drawing out his confusion and the fear that was steadily worming its way through his scent.

“What...” he began but didn’t get very far before my lips were latched onto his neck and my fangs sank through his skin. Pulling a long drink of his tainted blood into my mouth, I smiled against his neck when he began to struggle. “Get off of me you

freak.” He yelled, his fist connecting with the side of my face and dislodging my mouth.

“RUN!” I screamed, pushing him to the damp floor. I wiped the small dribble of blood that had escaped my hungry lips, with my finger, and made sure I was looking directly into his eyes—smiling probably a little menacingly—before I licked it clean. He scrambled backward, his legs not wanting to work properly as he finally realised he wasn’t the predator anymore. Laughing, I gave him a few minutes head start before I began hunting him.

I took my time, relishing in the power I had over him, as my noisy pursuit made him panic. I focused on his racing heart and followed him down yet another street as he flicked a fearful look over his shoulder. We were nearing the city centre and I knew I’d have to end this game of cat and mouse far sooner than he deserved, but I had to feed and he needed to learn not to be such a massive douche-bag. With a short laugh that echoed towards him I forced him down a small alley to his right and finally into a dank abandoned square.

“You’ve reached the end of the line,” I purred at him when his head spun from side to side and he realised there was no escaping me. He dropped to his knees as I drew closer making him feel the same fear that his own victims would have undoubtedly felt at his hands. Tears ran down his face as he muttered indistinguishable sounds, when my hands yanked his head to the side roughly exposing his neck and I plunged my teeth into him again.

“What in the world are you doing?” a horrified female voice pierced through the fog of bloodlust which had claimed my mind shortly after I’d begun feeding. The words she’d spoken meant nothing but her sweet shaking voice had my head flinging back, breaking the seal of my mouth on this worthless guy's neck. I met her brown eyes and reeled back further as reality came crashing down at her fear-filled look.

I knew what she was seeing and hated myself for being so careless. She was seeing the monster I'd carefully hidden from her last night. Blood dripped off my chin as her eyes pinned me in place and her heart sprinted, much like the man's had done until seconds ago. I watched, trying to force my bloodlust to clear, as her eyes ran over my face and her head shook from side to side. A whimper that shattered my heart came from her lips before she turned and fled.

Unable to make myself move, I watched her long hair swing from side to side as she disappeared down the small cut through. Looking down at the man, who was still breathing—luckily—shame barrelled through me. I hadn't hunted a human like I'd done tonight, since the night Tilly had found me half-mad from bloodlust in Edinburgh. Yes he'd deserved every minute of the fear I'd made him feel, but did he truly deserve to have his life ended by me? I wasn't any better than him after all. It took me a few more minutes until my mind was my own again and I pushed to my feet, leaving the shit-stain where he lay. Tilly was going to be furious when she heard how tonight's hunt had gone. I'd been supposed to go to the clubs, sipping small amounts from those too drunk to notice, not meet-out my own form of vigilante justice on York's drug dealing population.

I could already hear her voice as I whipped the blood from my chin and buttoned up my long coat, before turning and walking back towards our hotel with Charleene's horrified voice ringing on repeat.

Shit, what have I done? I berated myself.

"What the hell did you do?" Tilly accused, when she saw the dejection on my face. She'd seen it often enough in our past to recognise it.

"I fucked up," I answered honestly, I knew it was pointless in trying to hide anything from Tilly, she knew me better than I knew myself most days. Ushering me inside she gently closed the door before speaking again.

“Is anyone dead?” she asked, raising an eyebrow while reaching for her phone, in case she needed to call for someone to clean up whatever mess I’d caused.

“No.” I grumbled, Charleene’s fear filled eyes flashing through my mind, making me flinch.

“Then what?” Tilly asked, her voice softening slightly.

“I hunted a dealer tonight, and took all my frustrations out on him,” I paused, meeting her green eyes, “and she saw me.”

“Who?”

Charleene’s horrified voice rang through my head and I flinched again as my mouth uttered her name, “Charleene.”

“The witch?” Tilly asked incredulously, “Wait where were you feeding, for her to find you?” her voice turned suspicious until my next words made her furious.

“In the Shambles.”

“Adrina!” Tilly snapped, her ire returning as she shook her head at me, “anyone could have stumbled upon you.” She ranted, pulling at her hair and pacing a line in the carpet before me.

“I know, I was lost to the bloodlust. I wasn’t thinking clearly after I’d found the scumbag dealing to kids.” I excused myself.

“That’s no excuse, this is why we have rules against you hunting dealers.” I knew she was right, she’d placed the restriction on me for a very good reason. I lost all rational thought when hunting people like the shit-stain I’d fed upon tonight. Something from

my own turning made me hunt anyone who pursued children with a single minded focus.

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“I know.” I answered, ashamed of my actions for more than one reason. “What am I going to do about Charleene?” I asked my voice a little hesitantly.

“Nothing.” Tilly’s voice cracked across my ears like a whip.

“But—”

“But nothing, Adrina! I’ll call the York Witch Coven and they will deal with her.” Tilly said, already searching through her phone.

“No!” I shouted at her, not willing to let Charleene go. Something about her had burrowed its way beneath my skin. “She’s Mine!”

Tilly jerked back from either the manic look in my eyes or the short tone of my voice, I wasn’t sure which, but whatever it was shocked her. “Don’t be daft.” She laughed incredulously. “You’ve known her for what? Three days? She’s not yours and never will be Adrina.”

“I can’t explain it myself Tilly, but there’s something about her that calls to me, here,” I told her tapping above my heart. “I’ve never felt like this before.”

“Adrina, you have to let her go.”

“And what if I can’t?” I snapped back.

“Then I can’t protect you.” Tilly’s voice had grown sad and her eyes implored me to see this more clearly. “If you keep on down this road, it will be you I’m hunting

next.” Frustration boiled inside me, forcing me to grab hold of my short strands and tug them. “If the witch means that much to you, then let her go, Adrina, it’s the kindest thing for both of you.”

Chapter Six

What do you do when your world turns upside down? -Charleene.

Idon’t remember forcing myself from the front door, or climbing the stairs and falling into bed. Yet I woke up with bright sunshine shining through my still open curtains and my spare pillow hugged to my chest. Flashes of what I’d seen last night, played on repeat through my mind. Forcing me to question everything I’d known to be real. Vampires couldn't exist, because if they did it meant that the dreams I’d been having since I turned twelve were real too. Shivering even though the house was warm, I burrowed further beneath my quilt, hugging my pillow closer. My phone vibrated somewhere in my room, but I didn’t have either the energy or desire to go retrieve it. Too scared to see if it was Dina.Oh My... What if she came back here and killed me for what I’d seen? That’s what they did isn’t it?My thoughts spiralled out of control as fear took over.

Anxiety flooded my body and without consciously making the decision my fingers tapped, one after the other, against my leg, as I tried to calm my racing heart.She'd seemed so normal, how could she be a monster?I wondered, going over our limited interactions. My skin started feeling too tight, like it was shrinking, and my breaths sped up. I knew I was panicking, but what else was I supposed to do? It wasn’t every day you realised monsters actually existed. The room swayed as my breaths shortened, squeezing my eyes shut I concentrated on the soothing pattern my fingers were making against my leg.Breathe in...and...out.I told myself calmly, forcing each breath to grow longer and slower. The tingles in my fingertips subsided with each deep breath I took, and after a few more moments, my skin began to feel less tight as well.

When I was certain the panic had receded I let my eyes open, reassuring myself that there were no monsters in my room. I was safe, for now at least. Come on, don't be a wuss and get out of bed. I scolded myself silently. Pushing upright, I felt the familiar stiffness in my muscles that came after having a panic attack, and knew no amount of stretching was going to work out the tension. So instead I grabbed my wash stuff, a clean towel, and prayed that the bathroom would be empty. Not bothering to look at my phone, I padded downstairs, flinching as my bare feet hit the cold kitchen tiles, and walked towards the small bathroom which was blessedly empty.

I wasted no time locking the door and turning the hot water tap on, letting it run until steam filled the room before I put the plug in. Wiping a small section of the mirror I gazed into my haunted eyes, noticing how they looked more like dark chocolate than their usual hazel. My skin was pale and clammy, which was no surprise, and my hair could definitely use a good brush. Yet it was the sadness which seemed to pour from my eyes that had me transfixed. I should feel horror or appalled at what I'd seen. Yet there was a small niggling part of me that kept laughing and saying you should have known, and an even smaller part that wanted me to give her the chance to explain.

Sucking in a deep breath I turned back to the bath and watched as it slowly filled. When it was half full I leaned over and turned the cold tap on, before perching on the cold lid of the toilet. I let the rising steam swirl around me as my foot tapped incessantly on the small tiles still trying to rid myself of the nervous energy. I was impatient to sink into the warm water and give my muscles a much needed soak, but was also looking forward to blocking out the world, even if it would just be for an hour. Zoning out I listened to the running water, letting the rushing lull my chaotic thoughts.

As the water reached almost to the top, I quickly checked the temperature and turned off the taps. Stripping out of last night's clothes, I stepped into the bath, sucking in a sharp breath as my cold feet stung in the hot water. Sinking down until my shoulders were under and my chin rested on the warm surface, I let myself relax. There was no

noise in the house, so either everyone was still in bed or they were out. Not that I particularly cared, none of them had bothered to get close already knowing we wouldn't be best buds or anything. It was the main reason I'd picked this particular house share, everyone was nineteen or older. More mature than the houses available to first year students. Instead I'd looked at houses that were looking for second year students, I just didn't inform them that I'd only be in my first year at twenty-one. Basking in the silence, I let myself forget for a small time everything I'd seen, pretending that all was normal, while I enjoyed the warm water surrounding me.

When the chill started nipping at any exposed wet skin and the water around me had cooled, I let out a heavy sigh. Opening my eyes I didn't move for a few moments, instead I just stared up at the cream ceiling, while gathering the energy needed to wash and get out. After brushing my teeth and using the loo, I trudged back upstairs to my room and got dressed in my comfiest pair of joggers and thickest sweater. With a pair of fluffy socks and nothing else to do with my day, I flicked on Netflix and found a rom-com I'd been meaning to watch for ages.

The day flew by with one movie after another, until I was completely watched out and the sun was turning the sky red. With a heavy sigh, I decided I'd best get dressed for work. Grabbing my last clean uniform from the hanger in my small wardrobe, I reminded myself to put a load on to wash tomorrow and quickly changed. I wasn't looking forward to leaving the house, let alone the seven hour shift I had tonight, but I also wasn't in the position to turn down the money I'd get at the end of the month by skiving off tonight.

Once I'd forced my hair up into a high ponytail, I finally retrieved my phone from the floor, where it still lay beneath my jacket from last night. Plugging it in to charge, I watched as it booted up and five messages came through, making it vibrate in my hand. They were all from Dina and each one made me shiver both in desire and fear. With a shaking finger I opened the first one from this morning.

Mysterious Girl: We need to talk. D.

My eyes moved to the next message:

Mysterious Girl: Please Charleene, let me explain.

The next two messages were along the same lines, Dina begging me to respond and talk about what had happened last night. However the fifth and final message, made my heart speed up.

Mysterious Girl: I need to make this right. I've fallen for you like a ton of bricks. You make my heart race just by being near you and I've never felt this way for anyone before. I'm sorry you saw me at my lowest last night, but please let me explain everything.

My thumbs hovered over my phone's keyboard, itching to type the words swarming through my heart. But my mind overruled it and made me relive last night's encounter again. What could she say to make this any better? I thought sadly, closing the messages and leaving her on read.

My shift was a nightmare, my low mood hadn't helped much either. I couldn't stop thinking of Dina and whatever had been growing so quickly between us, which had me distracted as people both in and out of costumes had kept swarming into the restaurant. I'd been shouted at numerous times by folk wanting a table when we didn't have any. Customers had grumbled about the wait times on food and rolled their eyes as I informed them of things we'd run out of. I couldn't believe I'd chosen to work on Halloween but then again I took any shift offered to me, without complaints. However, I felt jealous of Lily who had booked tonight off so she could go out with her housemates instead.

Conversation rumbled through the restaurant, creating a cacophony of constant noise,

as my last hour came around. I was tired, cranky and my feet were killing me. It's almost over, I kept reminding myself, as I kept my fake smile plastered to my face and pushed my conflicting thoughts of Dina from my mind and focused instead on getting through the next hour without screaming at a customer.

Lily had texted me just before I'd started work, asking if I'd wanted to join her after my shift, and feeling unlike my usual self, I'd found myself texting her back with a yes. I should have probably just gone home and to bed, but after last night I needed to feel normal and what better way to feel that than going clubbing? I was barely twenty and could count on one hand the times I'd been out and let loose in a club.

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Feeling nervous and excited all at the same time, I couldn't help my eyes from checking the time whenever I went to the till, even knowing it was making the last of my shift drag. When the numbers finally hit 21:00, I wanted to run to the staff area for my stuff, but forced myself to explain my remaining tables calmly and carefully to the new waitress who'd taken over from David instead. I waited for her to nod and politely wish me a nice evening, before walking to grab my bag, phone and jacket from the back.

Striding back out through the heaving restaurant, I gave the remaining staff small smiles as I silently commiserated with them on having to remain at work while I escaped. My smile grew a little more natural as I saw Lily's beaming face through the plate glass windows, and my steps sped up. Letting out a long relieved sigh, I pushed through the doors and left the noisy chatter behind.

"I can't believe you said yes," Lily squealed in delight before throwing her arms around me in a vigorous hug.

"Me either," I laughed back at her as she released me and wobbled on her six inch heels, "you're going to break your neck in those."

"Nah, I can manage," she responded, wobbling again and linking her arm through mine.

"So where are we headed?" I asked, needing to fill the sudden quiet with some noise after being bombarded with it all evening, and took in her skin tight black top and the shortest pair of shorts I'd ever seen. She even had a pair of black furry cat ears fixed to a dark headband and had drawn a cat's nose complete with whiskers on her face in

make-up. “Catwoman?” I asked, nodding at her outfit, which was making me shiver just looking at her.

“Yes, and Society, it’s throwing a halloween monster mash and everyone dressed up gets a free shot.” She giggled, tugging me in the direction many others were heading in, “Matt, Lincoln and Trace have already gone on ahead.” She informed me as I walked and she tottered down High Ousegate. I loved the city of York, with its old buildings, river and the ancient city walls. In some areas it really made you feel as though you'd stepped back in time. It was one of the main reasons I’d chosen to attend York Saint John University, with its blend of old and newer buildings and the city walls just across the road. It had been everything I’d hoped to find for a university campus.

“We’re nearly there,” Lily beamed as my spine tingled.

“Great I’m dying for a drink,” I uttered somewhat distractedly as I felt someone walk across my grave and couldn’t hold back the shiver.

“You ok?” Lily asked, her eyes crinkling in concern.

Forcing my lips to lift in a smile, and hugged her arm closer, “yeah, just cold.”

“It is freezing tonight,” she agreed, hurrying her clip-clopping steps so we could walk faster across the bridge and join the throngs of party-goers. “Oh, just you wait until you meet the hottie I’m hoping to convince to take me home tonight. He’s like a Greek God of pure yumminess.” Lily laughed.

She was the epitome of gorgeous, with her blonde hair and tanned skin, of course she’d have this new man wrapped around her pinkie in a second, especially with her boobs pushed so far up they were almost spilling out of the top. Shaking my head at her I almost let out another sigh as we turned onto Tanner Row. We made our way

quickly up the street following the booming music from the club and I let myself relax. I needed this, I told myself, fixing a smile to my face as we joined the small queue.

“May I join you?” Dina’s voice was small and polite but it made my shoulders tense.

Opening my mouth to tell her no, Lily’s perky voice beat me, “Of course you can, the more the merrier.” She beamed at Dina who stood behind us. Rolling my eyes I turned to meet her cautious gaze and nodded once, not wanting to make a scene in front of Lily.

“Thank you,” Dina replied, giving my friend a small smile and coming to stand on my right. “How are you?” she asked me.

“I’m fine.” I replied, not really wanting to talk to her, but feeling like I should at least be civil, Lily didn’t need to know the things I now did.

“That’s good,” Dina said, “how was work?”

“Busy.” Maybe if I only gave her one word answers she’d get the hint and leave me be.

“That sucks.”

“It does, I’d hate to have been working any of Halloween, it’s such a fun night out.” Lily piped happily as we moved forwards one step at a time.

“Why do you like Halloween so much?” Dina asked, perplexed by the slight frown to her brows. “Everyone’s dressed up and pretending to be someone they’re not.”

“Exactly, it gives you the excuse to become someone else.” Lily bounced as she

explained.

“But if someone wanted to hurt you, you’d never know who it was,” Dina said seriously, dimming a little of Lily’s natural cheeriness.

“Well that’s...” she trailed off clearly not knowing what to say, to such a depressing thought and looked beseechingly at me.

“It’s fun to pretend for one night.” I said lamely with a shrug. I didn’t overly like Halloween for the same reason Dina had given, so I wasn’t the best person to cheer for it.

Lily shook her head after giving both of us a quizzical look and went back to being her usual self, “Come on we’re next.” She bounced and tugged my arm. The bouncer took one look at us and ushered the three of us inside. We paid the entry fee, and pushed through the double doors. The music which had been loud before now deafened me, as its rhythmic beat coursed through my body, making me smile as my head bobbed along in time. Lily wove us through the dancing crowds to a booth where a group of six people sat waving. Each of them but one was dressed in some sort of costume and wore the biggest smiles.

I noticed the “Greek God” as Lily had dubbed him and to be honest she wasn’t wrong. He had muscles to spare, longish blonde hair and a chiselled jaw that you could probably break rocks on. Pair that with his plump lips and hazel eyes and he was sex on a stick, if you were into men of course. He had a blond woman plastered to his side, as she shouted something into his ear. Noticing my gaze he offered me a megawatt smile and a small wave as we drew closer, then his eyes shifted to Dina and a small dent appeared between his brows.

Her arm suddenly wrapped across my shoulders and Dina tried tugging me into her side. Shaking my head I flicked her an unimpressed look, amused a little by the frown

she was throwing at mister greek god, but didn't dislodge her arm. It felt nice, being wanted by someone so much that they were jealous of me looking at someone else. I'd never had that before. "Do you want a drink?!" Dina leaned down and shouted in my ear so I could hear her over the music.

Nodding, I felt her absence the moment she dropped her arm and left. I knew we needed to talk about what had happened last night, but I also wanted to pretend that it hadn't happened. Torn, I let Lily deposit me in a space on the curved bench seat and attempted to listen as she introduced everyone, but all I could hear was the thumping music, so I just smiled and nodded along. Once she'd pointed at everyone, I relaxed into the seat and listened to the songs playing, letting my shoulders move as they wished. When Dina returned with our drinks the Greek God got up and with the blonde stuck to his side disappeared into the crowd. Strange, I thought, he'd looked comfy enough on his perch at the back of the booth. Shrugging it off as me being paranoid I gave Dina a smile in thanks and took a sip of the whisky and coke she'd got me.

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The coke fizzed on my tongue as the smokey taste of the whisky burned down my throat. Taking another longer drink, I shuffled over to let Dina sit beside me. The tension between us rose by the second as I forced myself not to look over at her and focused instead on the wet sticky table top, but three songs and another double whisky and coke later, I couldn't help myself and turned to meet her dark gaze. Staring into her eyes I noticed the small rim of silver that broke the brown from her black pupil. "Can we talk?!" she shouted over the music and I knew I couldn't put it off any longer as she broke my fake bubble.

Nodding, I waited for her to move and leaned across to Lily, letting her know I was leaving. She gave me a fake pout and sad eyes but eventually nodded and blew me a kiss. Following Dina, I shivered violently as the cold wind blew at me, chasing away the stifling heat from the club.

Breathing in the crisp, fresh air, I moved further up the street and turned to face the woman who had become a monster. "What do we have to talk about?!" I snapped at her, holding on to my anger. She took a step towards me which I matched, keeping the distance equal between us.

"We have a lot to talk about," she started, losing the hopeful smile that had graced her lips since I'd agreed to talk with her, "but let's start with why you ignored my messages?" I knew she was picking the easier topic, however I was having none of it as a startled, sarcastic laugh burst from me.

"I watched you, sucking someone's," I glanced around us and lowered my voice a little, "blood last night, like he was nothing but a bloody milkshake and you want to know why I ignored you?" I laughed incredulously.

“I don’t want to have that particular conversation here.” She said, glancing around to see if anyone was paying us any attention.

“Where do you want to have it?!” I snapped back, “somewhere private, where I can disappear without a trace?”

“Yes, No... I mean somewhere a little more private than this,” she waved her hand at the street and matched the step I’d taken back, “but not so you would disappear, I’m not a monster.” She finished giving me an unamused look.

“You’re not a monster?” I questioned, shaking my head as her sucking on that man’s neck filled it again and I once more stepped backwards, “then what are you?”

“No, I’m different from humans, but then so are you.”

“What do you mean so am I?” I threw at her my brain latching onto her stupid notion that I was anything but human. Her face crumpled, and she let out a frustrated breath.

“This wasn’t how I wanted to have this conversation,” she told me, fixing me with a soft look, “You’re not normal Charleene.” Her voice was low and filled with sympathy as she tried to yank the world from under my feet. But I knew what she was doing and refused to play into her hands.

“How am I not normal?” I went on humouring her crazy.

Exasperated with me as we stood, glaring at each other in the street, she ran her hands through her hair tugging on it in frustration. “You’re a witch.” Her words took me so much by surprise I burst out laughing at her.

“A witch?” I sneered, “Yeah I look like one don’t I.” I snapped back at her, indicating my missing hat and broomstick.

“Charleene—”

“No,” I snapped, cutting her off as my head shook, “you’re obviously crazy and deluded and need professional help. Witches don’t exist and what you did last night isn’t normal. It’s like six shades of fucked up. Just leave me alone!” I threw at her with my best icy glare, before angrily turning and striding off up the street, shaking my head at her outrageousness.

What a load of crap! I snapped inside my head, letting my feet take me further from Dina and the crazy that came with her. I wasn’t paying any attention to the street around me until I felt a soft tap on my shoulder from behind. Spinning around ready to scream at her to leave me alone, my words died on the tip of my tongue as a pair of blood red eyes stared down at me.

“A lovely woman like you shouldn’t be walking the streets alone,” his deep voice crooned and my hackles rose at it.

“I’m not alone.” I told him letting my anger cover the fear that whispered through me at the sound of his voice. I knew that voice?

“I don’t see anyone with you.” He continued, making me mimic his head as I took in the empty street I’d unwittingly paced on to. At the bottom the Aviva building towered like a dark sentinel and the shushing sound of the river drowned out my racing heart, as I noticed the lack of people. A sharp pain drew my attention back to the man and my fear grew tenfold as he lifted his thumb to his lips and sucked on it. His eyes closed in pleasure and I took the chance.

Darting towards the river I ran beneath Lendal bridge praying that I was fast enough to scramble up the steps on the opposite side. Why had I been so stupid to not pay attention to where I’d been walking? Panic built inside as I ran my steps slapping against the floor. Risking a glance over my shoulder I froze when I found the

pavement empty.

“You’re the one I’ve been looking for.” His voice washed over me, and my head whipped round and found him lounging against the thick pillar that held the bridge aloft. His blood red eyes glared brightly at me, a stark contrast to his blue tinged skin, as a chilling thought rushed through my mind. I knew where I’d heard his voice before and the thought alone had my blood running as cold as the frigid wind that was whipping my hair around my face.

“My, my, all alone little witch.” He laughed at me, deepening my confusion and making my terror spike as I glimpse the twin fangs protruding into his bottom lip when he stepped towards me.

“I’m not a witch,” I screamed back at him, not knowing what else to do. Witches aren’t real, but vampire’s are? My mind reminds me as I stare at the one before me, “please, just leave me alone.” I beg as my voice wavers.

“Oh, but you are,” he drawls, “and I bet you taste just as sweet as the ones I’ve already tasted.” His words scare me to the bone, what others, does he mean the missing girls? His tongue darts out over his bottom lip as my fingers start to tingle and when he steps another step closer, I act on some long buried instinct. Crossing my arms in front of me I let the tingles grow until I can feel them spreading up my forearms and when I can’t stand the pins and needles feeling any further I thrust my arms forward.

A strange blast of energy rushes from my heart, down my arms and out of my hands and a shocking blue brightness lights up the surrounding area beneath the bridge. The vampire before me startles and stumbles back a step from the force, as I stare in stunned silence. My muscles are locked as I stare at my hands; what the hell was that? I ask myself not knowing how or even if I’d done that. No, it couldn’t have been me. Otherwise both Dina and this new vampire had been right and I was something

I'd never known myself to be.

Blue ribbons of light still danced between my fingers and the tips tingled like that moment before you get a static shock of metal or another person. Those entrancing blue ribbons however told me more than anything else that the blast of energy had definitely come from me. Shaking them vigorously, I attempted to get the blue light to leave me alone. I didn't want this power, I was a normal woman. My mind repeated over and over as my head shook in denial.

"You ok?" A sweet voice asked, drawing my attention from my hands. She's slightly younger than me, with bright red hair and wide brown eyes. Nodding automatically at the kind stranger, I want to scream at her to leave before she gets hurt but my voice lodges in my throat as I look over her shoulder, where Dina's squaring up to the other vampire with a damn sword of all things. She looks like she'd stepped out of the middle ages and even though I was pissed at her, I had to admit she looked hot as hell.

"I'm going to kill you!" Dina snarled at him, making my pussy flutter at the possessive tone which laced her words.

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“Good little huntress, always following orders.” He mocked with a sinister grin that peeled his lips back from his teeth. Suddenly his eyes shift to the stranger beside me, “and what have we here?” He asks, nostrils flaring as they sniff the air.

“Run both of you.” Dina hisses at us, almost as if she doesn’t want the man to hear, without taking her eyes from the vampire who’s drawing in another deep lungful of air.

The stranger next to me doesn’t need telling twice as she grabs my hand in her own and yanks me after her as she takes off running back towards the tall Aviva building. “My Master will put you all in your rightful places.” He snarls after us, forcing my head to whip around and ice freeze around my heart as Dina places herself between him and us. The last thing I see of her—before my sight is cut off by the ancient stones of Lendal bridge—is that damn sword of hers swinging as the vampire with dark hair lunged at her.

Chapter Seven

Can I protect the one who holds my heart, even if she hates me? -Dina.

I cursed Tilly in my head; her meddling had almost cost me Charleene. I'd barely made it to her in time, after finally shrugging Tilly's restraining hands off my shoulders. How dare she interfere, I thought, letting loose a vicious snarl, as I faced off against the vampire before me. His conversation with Charleene had made me see red, as I'd drawn closer, I knew exactly who he was. The damn rogue we'd been tracking.

I swung my sword, when the bastard lunged forward, forcing him to doge back again as he attempted to follow Charleene. “You're going nowhere near her!” I snarled at him.

“You want to bet Huntress?” he laughed back, an edge of mania making his eyes dart around.

He attempted to change direction and spun around, trying to reach the large stone steps on the other side of the bridge, but his shifty eyes had already clued me in on his thoughts. So I was already moving to block him. I grinned as my blade cut a neat line down his cheek and he flinched back towards the river off balance.

My feet moved faster and before he had the chance to recover his own footing. I grabbed his throat in my hand and shoved. He growled, leaning into my face but I just kept pushing him backwards, even as he gnashed his teeth at me and his foul breath spilled over my face.

“I'll have her!” He threatened as I shoved harder, pushing him to the river's edge.

“You'll never have her!” I hissed back at him as rage rushed through me at his words and one thought kept repeating over and over. Protect her!

With a snarl I gathered all my strength and threw him back, my hand releasing as his head flew over the river and I knew he couldn't recover his balance. Watching him flounder almost as if in slow motion as his arms windmilled, I smiled as he fell into the fast flowing river, and the current washed him away.

Breathing heavily, I closed my eyes briefly and let my anger go as my panic receded. The threat was dealt with, at least temporarily.

Spinning on my heels I followed Charleene's addictive scent, which was now

mingled with roses and something that shouldn't be there. Pushing my muscles to increase my speed, I felt my heart settle slightly as I saw them both running towards the Minster. At least the redhead didn't waste any time in getting them both away, I thought as I drew closer and they slowed to a stop. The woman's brown eyes widened as I sprint faster, using all of my enhanced speed to get back to Charleene. I'd left her side to cool down for a minute and she'd run straight into the damn rogue vampire me and Tilly had been tracking.

"What are you?" she gasped as I stopped in front of them, making me question if I'd identified her scent correctly.

"Thank you." I managed to get out, with what I hope is a smile or some sort, before ignoring her question, I turned my attention to the only person I gave a damn about here. Charleene. She stood shaking even though she was dressed appropriately for the chill October weather and I knew it wasn't the cold which was making her shake. "What happened?" I asked, making sure my voice was calm and low, not wanting to scare her anymore than she already had been.

"I...He..." Charleene stammered, staring at the ground as her arms wrapped around her stomach, making me ache to hold her.

"What are you?" the woman repeats her tone a lot more angry than before, "what was that man? How are you real?" Not needing to deal with a human finding out about us, I sigh deeply in frustration. It had been stupid to ignore her this long, I should have already dealt with her and sent her on her merry way.

Staring at her and quickly closing the few steps between us, my hand whipped out and pinched her small chin between my fingers in a hard grip. Before she could even start to squirm I stared deep into her eyes and in a hypnotic voice said, "You saw nothing. You walked home and nothing strange happened." My voice was strong and commanding, just like Tilly had taught me. I could even see her pupils dilated and her

face softened for a moment. Then the impossible happened. Pain made her face scrunch and her next words came out in a scream.

“GET AWAY FROM ME!”

Confused, I kept my grip on her chin as her eyes closed and my other hand wrapped around her arm trying to keep her steady. She should have accepted my mental suggestion, I’d done everything correctly. Inhaling her peculiar scent of roses and something else, my brow furrowed over the old scent humans no longer used like they used too. I didn’t have long to ponder it when after a couple of minutes her eyes snapped back open and her lips peeled back from her teeth in a snarl. The wind around me grew steadily, making my eyes widen in disbelief, she couldn’t be another...

I didn’t get the chance to finish my thought before my feet left the ground and the wind flung me away from whoever she was. I barely managed to land on my feet in front of Charleene.

“What are you?” I snarl at her as she smiles in pride. I inhaled her scent once again trying to figure out what she was. She didn’t smell like a witch. No, she smelt of ancient things. Things that had long ago left this world, if my own coven’s legends were to be believed. Drawing in another deep lungfull of her scent, a shadow eclipsed her smaller frame, and my eyes widened in disbelief as a man stepped up behind her.

“I suggest you leave, while you still can Huntress.” His deep voice was cold and angry as it addressed me and his ice blue eyes narrowed into a scowl. The woman before him shivered and her face relaxed slightly like she knew and trusted him, as he finished his sentence, “and take your pet with you.”

Terror raced through me, as I took in his sharp cheekbones, pale face and pointed ears. Fae! My mind screams at me as I take a small step backwards. I’d been told the

tales of the cruel Fae who'd made our race, just to torture us and use us as slaves. I'd also been told the tales of the Fae leaving this world.

"Impossible," I threw at them both, "you're kind don't..."

"Leave now." He snarls at me, cutting off my words before I can even utter them and takes a step closer, his chest brushing up against the redhead's back. His menacing glare made a shiver run from my head to my toes and I watched, unable to move, as one of his arms closed tightly around her back. While the other slipped beneath her knees and without taking his gaze from me he bent slightly, lifting the woman into his arms. His narrowed eyes almost seemed to scream, Mine, at me as he lifted her from the ground and her face screwed up in pain, as it fell to rest against his shoulder.

"Lysais," she whispered hesitantly as her gaze went distant, but she didn't take her eyes off of the man holding her. She smiled dreamily up at him— almost as though she cared for the Fae male— before her eyes closed and her body slumped in his arms.

"You're safe now Princess," he whispered, down at her as his whole face softened and without even a backward glance he stole her away into the night.

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Not knowing what else to do or even believing what I'd just seen, I glanced around making certain that we were now alone and not in any immediate danger, before I turned back to Charleene. Tremors ran through her hands as they clung to my arms in a death grip and her head shook from side to side. "Hey. Hey," I murmured, attempting to calm her panic. Ducking down I met her worried eyes, getting caught in their beauty, "You're ok, You're safe now." I told her gently, not wanting to spook her more than she already had been tonight. Shoving down my own discomfort, over the appearance of an ancient race we'd long thought gone, I focussed fully on Charleene and helped her through her own panic attack. "Breathe Babe."

I made my own breaths long and deep, exaggerating my movements as she followed. Charleene's fingers tapped rhythmically against my upper arms, her grip loosening but still shaking.

"That's it good girl," I cooed, pleased as her breathing slowed and she finally met my eyes without me needing to duck down. "Everything's going to be ok." I said, my voice calm and strong. She gave me a small nod and weak smile as I took my long coat off and placed it around her shoulders.

Wrapping my arm tightly around her back, I let her pull my coat firmly around herself and turned us in the direction of my hotel. I needed her somewhere safe and off these streets. I knew the rogue vamp wasn't dead, he'd return at some point and when he did I was going to kill him.

Keeping one arm around Charleene's lower back, we walked quickly back to mine and Tilly's hotel. Neither of us spoke, and by the time I tapped my key card against the hotel scanner, I was even more on edge and waiting for her to explode or dissolve

in tears. At this point I'd take any reaction over the silence and shaking. Encouraging her to sit on the bed I walked into the ensuite, and keeping the door wide open, began running her a bath. The warm water would help unlock her muscles and relax her. Glancing between the bath and the woman on my bed, I watched as she began processing tonight's events. She was quiet and still as she sat perched on the edge of the bed, my coat still wrapped firmly around her like a safety blanket. Her cheeks were pale and her rose lips had a blue tint to the edges that I didn't like, as they moved, forming whispered words.

Straining my enhanced hearing, I attempted to hear what she was murmuring to herself, however no sound reached my ears making my frown deeper as concern spread through me. Unable to stand the silence any more I padded over to her and sank into a crouch. "Charleene. Babe, please talk to me?" Gripping her hands in mine, I forced her to meet my eyes again with her tear filled ones.

"I...I...I..." she began stuttering, before shaking her head and closing her eyes.

"I know you're still mad at me but please let me help you through this." I pleaded, knowing I had no right to demand anything from her, but needing to do something. I watched in pained silence as her first tear escaped, trailing down beside her nose, before another quickly followed it. "That's it, let it all out," I muttered, not knowing what else to say. What could you say to the woman who held your heart in a vice-like grip, after she'd had a crash course into the supernatural.

Standing, I pulled her head to my stomach, running my fingers through her hair, soothing her pain and letting her tears fall freely without judgement. I pulled back when I heard her first snuffle, "Come on, let's get you warmed up." Was all I said before tugging her gently towards the bathroom that was now filled with steam. Sitting her down on the toilet lid, I returned my attention to the quickly filling bath, switching the hot water to cold and letting it fill until the water almost reached the top of the tub.

Prizing my coat from her shoulders, I cupped her cheek in one hand, my thumb brushing her cheek as I tilted her head up, “Do you want me to leave?” I asked, letting her decide if she wanted my company or not.

“No,” she whispered, her eyes darting between me and the still open door as her breathing spiked again.

“I’m not going anywhere.” I promised, holding out my hands.

“Ok,” Charleene whispered and gripped my offered hands, pulling herself to her feet.

Keeping my eyes on hers, my fingers went to the buttons on her shirt, flicking each one through its hole, until it gaped from her shoulders, revealing the tight black strappy vest top beneath. Waiting for her to give permission, my fingers trailed along the bottom of the fabric, brushing her soft skin. Charleene pulled her bottom lip beneath her top teeth, forcing a growl from me at her sudden uncertainty. She was stronger than this and I would be damned if I let the last couple of nights break her. My growl widened her eyes and she released her lip, as my grip tightened and I ripped the vest in two halves.

“You are strong.” I reminded her. “You will get through this and be even stronger.” I said, opening the button on her trousers and pushing them down over her hips as fire began returning to her eyes.

“Repeat after me; I will not break.” I demanded. Ripping the thin, netted fabric which barely covered her pussy.

“I will not break!” I repeated when she didn’t speak, allowing my more dominant nature to the surface. I needed her to fight this instead of drowning in it. “Say it!” I snapped when she just looked down at me.

“I...will...not...” her eyes widened as my hand gripped her arse and yanked her towards me.

“Stronger!” I growled, holding her firmly against my front and staring deep into her eyes.

“I will not break.” She finally repeated, a flush staining her pale cheeks a delicious shade of pale pink. “I will not break.” She repeated, her words coming out stronger each time.

“That’s right. You’re my ray of sunshine in a world of darkness, don’t let him take that from you.” I implored, searching her eyes before standing on my tiptoes and brushing my lips over hers.

“His voice...” Charleene began as my lips released hers.

“Sshhhh, forget about Him for now,” I told her, knowing we’d be going over the whole evening once Tilly turned back up. Now was time to take care of her needs.

Chapter Eight

Why does crazy seem to follow me around?- Charleene

Dina’s sudden switch from demanding back to gentle took me by surprise as she led me over to the tub and helped ease me beneath the warm water. Once it lapped against my collar bone she retreated to the bedroom, giving me privacy so I could organise my own thoughts. Running my hand absently through the water, above my stomach, I let my eyes close for a second. Red eyes stared at me, as his voice repeated over and over, ‘you’re the one.’ Bolting upright and sloshing water all over the floor, I barely kept my scream lodged in my throat as my dreams over the years rushed forwards and similar words joined his from tonight; ‘you’re not the one,’ the voice in

my dreams, his voice, had said seconds before he would sink his teeth into my throat.

“Charleene? Babe? I’m here, you’re safe.” Dina’s voice penetrated my thoughts, and like she was my own personal beacon, I followed it back to the here and now. Her cool hands gripped my cheeks and her gaze bore into me.

“He’s been in my dreams.” I told her, no longer able to deny the truth I’d wanted to.

“What?” Dina asked, a frown appearing between her eyebrows.

“Him. The...” I gulped, noisily swallowing my fear that they even existed, “the vampire from tonight, I’ve heard his voice in my dreams for years.”

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Dina fell backwards onto her arse, which at any other time would have been hilarious, especially combined with the shocked look on her face, but right now her reaction only heightened my own sense of peril.

“How have I been dreaming of someone I’ve never met?” I asked, needing someone to make all of this make sense in some way, because I was at a loss and nearing the edge of my sanity.

“I don’t know,” she answered, “what does he do in your dreams?” Dina’s voice was calm but her eyes wrinkled at the edges in concern.

“It’s always dark and I never see him, he talks a lot before...before he rips out my throat.” My voice climbed higher and higher; becoming less like my normal tone and more like a distressed pigeon by the time I finished explaining what happened in my dreams. “I recognised his slimy voice, but couldn’t place it at first and then just before we ran it hit me like a ton of bricks; he’s the man I’ve feared for so long.”

“And you’re sure it’s the same person you met tonight?” Dina asked.

“His voice has haunted me since I was twelve.” I snapped back at her.

“Ok, ok,” Dina raised her hands up in surrender and scooted closer to the bath. “Keep breathing, slow and steady,” she went on, placing one of her hands on the rim and raising her shoulders up and down for me to copy. “That’s it,” she praised, making me all warm and fuzzy as a small smile teased my lips and I eased back into the bath.

I liked her praise, it took the edge off of the raging emotions swirling inside me and

helped me focus. Sinking beneath the water I laid my head on the plastic bath bottom. Allowing the water to muffle the world, I gave myself a little more time to calm down. I lay there, my feet sticking out the bottom of the bath, just staring up at the spotlights in the ceiling as they rippled and wavered with the water. I kept my head under, until my lungs burned for oxygen and my mind calmed to the point where I could think without the need to scream.

Closing my eyes I let my face breach the water and drip from my face, as hushed voices drew my attention. I was alone in the bathroom, with the door closed, its wood blocking whoever was talking in the other room. Quickly washing, I was grateful to find a thick white bathrobe hanging on the closed door. Wrapping my long hair in a smaller towel, I used the longer towel to dry my body, taking my time until I felt ready to face what would happen next. Drawing in a long breath I held it for a count of five, before releasing it and grabbing the bathrobe. Once I was certain I looked presentable, well as presentable as you could be in a dressing gown, I stepped forward and pulled open the bathroom door.

“She’s not our problem to fix.” A woman’s voice that I’d never heard before filled the room as I stepped into it. Even without being privy to the rest of their conversation, I couldn’t help but feel that the words were about myself. Running my eyes around the room I took in the petite woman with dark hair and stunning green eyes, who was currently facing off with Dina. An older woman with greying hair sat at the small desk, watching their interaction with cold calculating eyes.

“I’m not leaving her to face this alone, Tilly.” Dina shouted back, not noticing that I’d entered the room yet.

“You don’t have a choice—” The woman, Tilly, told her sternly before Dina cut her off.

“We’ve been doing nothing, but chase this damn rogue for months, Tilly. Getting no

closer to finding out who he was until tonight. If he's going to be after Charleene, then you can take whatever orders you're about to utter and shove them up your—"

"Ok, let's all just calm down," I interrupted, not fully understanding what was going on but not wanting to witness another fight tonight. My words drew the older woman's gaze my way and an uncomfortable weight began pressing down on my mind. What now? I thought, my eyes narrowing as they stared at the strange woman's grey eyes, while part of my mind concentrated on making the sudden pressure stop.

Let me in! A voice demanded inside my head.

No! I screamed silently, imagining myself shoving the other voice from my head, as my mouth moved, "What the hell was that?" I gasped as, with a pop, the pressure disappeared.

"A test child." The woman's voice was neither kind nor angry, but a monotone, like she cared little about the effect her words would have. It was the same as the one that had just been in my head.

"How the heck..." I trailed off. Speaking inside people's heads wasn't possible. Instead I focused on her spoken words. "A test for what?" I asked, my gaze not leaving hers. Her head tilted to one side, gazing at me for a few minutes before she spoke again.

"To see if what, this one," she gestured with a lazy wave at Tilly before continuing, "says is true." Her cryptic words gave nothing away, and confused me even further.

"And what was that?" I asked, raising an eyebrow at the woman's lack of interest or sense. She was evasive and frustrating, but I managed to keep my voice calm.

"That you are a Witch, with no training." I scoffed at her words. Me, a witch? I

laughed at the absurd notion as blue lightning dancing around my fingers flashed through my mind.

“I’m no Witch,” I denied, not wanting to believe I was anything other than the human I’d been up until tonight.

“You are, but you have been trained by someone. Now tell me who.” She demanded, and the pressure on my mind returned, harder this time, more like a spike being drilled into my brain.

“Leave me alone!” I screamed at the grandmotherly looking woman, while imagining a strong wind sweeping through my mind, tossing anything that shouldn’t be there away.

“See, trained.” She taunted, her head tilting again as her shrewd gaze analysed me from head to foot and back again. “If you had no training you wouldn’t be able to keep me from your thoughts, now who has trained you!”

Her demands for information kindled my anger. “No. One!” I told her, enunciating each word slowly and carefully, in case she was hard of hearing or something, because she obviously wasn’t listening to me.

“What Coven do you belong to?” she continued as though going down a list of questions.

“What’s a coven?” I stated firmly, keeping my imaginary wind swirling, if it kept that pressure from returning I’d keep it going until she left.

“Why are you here?” her questions went on, and with each one my anger was rising.

“For university.” I snapped.

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“Who taught you to shield your mind?”

“No. One!” My voice was clipped and my eyes narrowed on the woman before me. Who was this crazy lady and what was with the twenty questions? The tingles began in my finger tips, tickling them at first.

“Where are you from?” the tingling grew, moving up my arm slowly as she asked another question.

“Scarborough.” I managed to answer, as the tingles grew further, distracting me and feeling more like pins and needles.

“Who is your Coven?” This question fried what remained of my patience and before I could comprehend what was happening I let out an angry breath, my hands rose from my sides, coated in dancing blue tendrils and then a snapping blue ball flew across the room. Leaving a black scorch mark in the cream wall beside the old lady’s head. The woman stared at my arms and finally her blasé facade faded; leaving disbelief and a smidgen of fear in its wake. “Who are you?” she asked, staring at my arms as much as I was.

“I’m...I’m...” I couldn’t answer, because in all honesty, in this moment I didn’t know who I was.

“Child, who is your Coven?” the woman asked again.

“I’ve never had a Coven, whatever that is. I was adopted as a baby, then returned to social services when I was thirteen.”

She drew in a shocked breath and her face softened slightly, “What happened to your Coven?”

I didn’t think her question was aimed at myself, so I gave no response, instead trying to figure out what the heck was happening to me. The blue ribbons still danced around my fingers, no longer buzzing but lazily arcing as I stretched my fingers apart. “Dina, what’s happening to me?” I whispered, not trusting anyone else in the room but her.

“You need to calm down, your magic,” she nodded at my fingertips, “is reacting to your emotions.”

“Right, because that makes so much sense,” I deadpanned at her, “tie magic to emotions. Because emotions are such a stable thing.” I was trying to lighten the mood and put myself at ease but when Grandma lady tutted, my temper flared and the electric danced wildly.

“Unlike human children, we teach ours to regulate their emotions from a young age. It stops outbursts such as this from happening.” She tittered, raising her head like she was superior to me in some way.

“Ok, so let’s say I believe that this is actually happening and not just some very strange dream, who the heck are you?” I asked the woman.

“Is that not real enough for you to believe?” the woman asked instead of giving me a straight answer, as she gestured at my still power infused hands.

“She’s the Crone of the York Coven of Witches,” Dina explained quickly, coming to my side, “and she is very respected in our world.”

Focusing on Dina and her alone, I let each word sink in. “Ok, so let’s say I believe in

all of this...nonsense. You all believe that I'm a witch,"

"There is no doubt you are a witch, child," the Crone said, waving her hands at my own, "and a powerful one at that. Now tell me what you are doing unannounced in my City?"

"Well Grandma, that one's easy," I snarked at her, but got no further as a sudden wind flung me backwards, slamming my back into the wall beside the bathroom door. My head snapped back and forth like a rag doll.

"You will show me the respect I deserve. I may be a Grandma, as you put it, but I do not appreciate being scoffed at, young lady."

"And I don't appreciate being called a child." I retaliated, letting her know just how little respect I had for her. To me respect was earned, not given freely or demanded, and this woman had given me no reason to respect her since she'd opened her mouth.

"If you are to be taken under my Coven's protection, you will respect your elders. You are a child in the eyes of our Coven. If what you say is true and you've never been taught, then your powers are undisciplined and therefore like a child."

"I'm twenty-one years old and have been on my own since I turned thirteen, when no one wanted a troubled teen. So do not lecture me on being a child. I do not belong to your Coven, I never will, and I am not a bloody witch." I denied again. My mind was having trouble believing any of this was actually real and kept expecting someone to jump out shouting 'got ya,' as they played the greatest joke on me. No one did and three pairs of eyes looked at me in concern, disbelief and anger.

"Denying the truth will not make it go away." The Crone muttered, shaking her head at me before turning to face Tilly, "She is too old to learn our ways. There is a Coven out there, somewhere, missing a child. Find them, they will have no choice but to

take charge of her insolence and learning.”

“Will you stop discussing my future as though I’m not even here,” I snapped at them both as Tilly opened her mouth to answer, “I am no Coven’s ‘lost child’” I told them both, almost snorting at the thought of someone missing me, “up until I was thirteen, I had a nice family, not a Coven. That was until my night terrors became too much and forced them to return me.” I said, feeling the stab of their abandonment all over again and the magic in my fingertips finally faded.

“What night terrors?” The Crone asked, raising an eyebrow at the sadness I couldn’t hide from my voice.

“She’s dreamt of the rogue,” Dina explained for me when I didn’t answer.

“And when did your dreams begin?” She asked, glaring at me.

“Shortly after I turned twelve.” I answered,

“And what did you dream of?”

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“It was always the same darkness and his voice, before my throat was ripped out.”

“And you’d never met this rogue until this evening, correct?”

“No, I’d always thought they were just messed up night terrors.” My eyes widened as I realised she knew more about my damn dreams than I did.

“Foresight? No, it can’t be.” The Crone muttered to herself, her eyes narrowing on me again as she once again assessed me.

“Foresight hasn’t been gifted to the witches since the Scottish witch trials.” Tilly said, looking shocked as her eyes ran over me.

“No, it has not. It was a gift we’d thought had died out,” The Crone said, her tone clipped.

“Why are you talking as if any of this is normal?” I asked.

“Because to us, it is normal,” Tilly said gently, addressing me for the first time, “and in time it will become normal to you.”

“Take her to the High Council in London, they may have some insight into who she belongs to.” The Crone said dismissively, before striding to the hotel door and leaving.

“Urrrggg,” I groaned in frustration and flopped down on my back on the bed, “will someone please explain what universe I’ve fallen into and how I get back to my

regular life?” I asked no one in particular and the resounding silence that answered terrified me. “I will get back to normal, won’t I?” I asked, my voice wobbling a little.

The bed dipped beside me and when I turned my head I met Dina’s dark eyes as she said, “this has always been your normal, you just didn’t know it.” Her voice was gentle and each word was spoken slowly, yet my head still shook and tears gathered in my eyes.

“No, no, no,” I muttered.

“I know we’re ripping your world from beneath your feet but you really are a witch. I don’t know how you came to be in the human care system, but you’ve always been and always will be a Witch, Charleene.”

“I’ve always known I was different, I mean why else would no one want me, when they took the other children around me. I’d always blamed it on my terrors.” I hiccupped and let my tears fall as I wondered if all this time, no one had wanted me because on some level they’d known what I was. “Would they, humans I mean, have been able to tell what I was?” I asked, dreading to have my fears confirmed.

“All humans suspect that creatures exist and their guts tell them when we are near.” Tilly confirmed. “It is highly likely that when your powers awakened at twelve and your terrors began, then the humans around you will have instinctively known something was different about you.”

“Fan-bloody-tastic, everyone always said I was a freak and they were right.” I grumbled, allowing myself to wallow in my own self-despair for a few moments.

“You’re not a freak.” Dina snapped at me, taking me by surprise. “Just because you are different, does not make you a freak.”

“I know you’re right, but at this moment I feel like a pretty big freak.”

“Dina has already filled me in on what she overheard, but what did the rogue say to you this evening?” Tilly asked, “Charleene, what did he say?” she repeated when I didn’t answer.

“He kept going on about how I was the one he’d been searching for and that he’d been looking for a long time.” I summarised, wracking my brain for what he’d said to me.

“Take her to London. Tonight. Get her out of this city.” Tilly ordered, dragging me from my tumbling thoughts.

“What? I’m not going anywhere.” I informed her, propping myself up on my elbows to show her just how serious I was. “I have a life here, a job, my studies, and friends.”

“I’m not giving you a choice. If you stay here, she’ll be distracted,” she explained pointing at Dina, who nodded in agreement, “and you are now a target.”

“But—” I began.

“No buts about it. Dina is taking you to London, while I hunt this bastard down and put an end to his witch hunt.”

Chapter Nine

How is it that suddenly my life is no longer my own to control? - Charleene.

As it turns out, there is no arguing with two surly vampires. No matter what I’d said, I still found myself bundled into a low black sports car and being driven out of York, shortly after the sun had set this evening. Dina’s hand rubbed up and down my thigh

as I huffed out another deep sigh at the unfairness of this whole situation. I hadn't asked for any of this and now my life was in tatters.

"We'll find out who abandoned you as a baby." Dina said suddenly, interpreting my sullen mood with the wrong reason.

"I don't care who it was. They obviously didn't want me, I've never lost any sleep over them and I'm not about to start now." I told her.

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“Then what’s wrong?” she asked, her voice curious as she switched gears and replaced her hand on my thigh again.

“All of this,” I said, waving my hand at the car but meaning how I was now being whisked away.

“We’re just trying to protect and help you,” she told me again, “your magic can be dangerous, to you and those around you, especially the humans you care for. The oldest of our kind reside in London, they’ll be able to help you.” Her tone was so earnest, that I considered what she was telling me. Maybe she was right, but leaving everything I knew to jump into the unknown still felt all kinds of wrong.

“And what if they, like The Crone of York, have no idea where I’ve come from?” I asked, needing to know what would happen.

“Then we’ll ask the London Coven to teach you control. Then, in time, you’ll be able to return to your life here if you wish.”

“Huh,” I shrugged, not believing I’d have a life left to return to, “what’s your Coven like?” I asked, needing to change the subject before I slid into a pit of despair that I wasn’t sure I’d be able to climb out of.

“It’s magnificent,” Dina said, her brow scrunching when I looked over at her.

“But?” I prompted when she didn’t continue her sentence.

She met my gaze briefly with a small smile, “they’re a bit stuffy and believe in

outdated ideals,” she told me honestly.

“Like?” I asked, wondering just how much she’d tell me about them.

“Like species shouldn’t intermingle, even though they work closely with the other Supers, we aren’t allowed more than a professional relationship with each other.”

“They sound a bit two-faced,” I said, too tired to filter my responses. I’d expected Dina to get defensive once the words left my mouth but instead she laughed.

“They are and it drives me nuts.” She agreed, still smiling. I let the conversation drop at that, closing my eyes and trying to block out the world in an attempt to come to terms with the direction my life had suddenly taken.

I hadn’t realised I’d fallen asleep until Dina was gently shaking me awake. Jerking, I glanced around the small car, reminding myself of where I was. “It’s ok Charleene, we’re here.” Dina’s voice explained, as she watched me carefully.

“And where, exactly, is here?” I asked back, seeing nothing but countryside surrounding us.

“We’re just off the Barnet Way, near London. About half an hour away from where the Coven resides on the borders of Hampstead Heath,” Dina said patiently, “I thought you might wish to be awake before I drove us there.”

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I tried to get my brain to catch up, but it was lagging as I nodded and Dina started the car again. Looking out the window I was surprised as the countryside we’d been surrounded by suddenly gave way to a busy road. The noise of the cars was jarring as we re-joined the busy traffic and I watched in awe as I got my first look at a part of London. I’d never been to the capital before, never really had any inclination to see it, since it was on telly enough. The green

space we'd just been in soon turned into houses that never ended, and we followed a constant stream of traffic towards our final destination. Just over half an hour later we exited the busy motorway, turning onto a quieter road and I got my first look at the Vampire's Territory.

As we left the motorway behind an uncomfortable tingle ran down my spine and the road before me seemed to waver, like a path on a really hot day does. Then I found myself beneath tall trees, filled with autumn leaves. Massive houses with their own gated driveways lined the road and I couldn't stop my mouth from dropping open at the sight of them. We kept on driving down the long road, which was named Bishops Avenue from the signs I'd seen as we drove. Dina ignored all the streets leading off, as I marvelled at the huge houses.

I was still angry at Dina and Tilly, however I couldn't argue with their logic. "Who lives here?" I wondered aloud, unable to help myself.

"Witches mainly, and some of the more aloof vampires." Dina answered, flicking me a small smile as I showed an interest.

"Next you'll be telling me that Werewolves also exist," I half joked as another grand house went by.

"Well—" Dina began.

"Nope, no. I don't want to know." I told her, my eyes widening. "Just how much don't humans know about the world they lived in."

"Humans know very little about the truth of the Supers that share their world," Dina answered my unintentional question, "if they did, do you think we would be allowed to live freely?"

She made a good point. Humans—it was still strange thinking of myself as separate from them— were not the type to handle being threatened well. With that depressing thought I lapsed into silence as we continued driving towards Dina's Coven.

It didn't take long for the scenery in front of us to change and I could see a green field begin to open up at the end of the road. The houses also changed, becoming closer together and nearer to the pavement. Some had even been turned into shops and by the time we reached the end there was little space between the houses and people were milling about going from shop to shop.

“How do you keep all of this from humans?” I asked.

“The witches use a glamour on this section of the road so the human's see abandoned and derelict buildings. While we live here secretly.” Dina's voice was very matter of fact, as though she was discussing the weather instead of a secret group of people.

“Magic hides all of this?” My mouth hung open as I stared over at her and missed as she turned off the road, until the sudden dimness lengthened the shadows in the car.

“Yes, multiple witches pool their magics into the border, creating a protective bubble over our section of London.”

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“That's mental,” I murmured, taking in the underground car park we'd turned into. It looked like any other but there was a small booth, manned by two men, who scrambled to push past each other in their haste to get to Dina's car as it slowed to a stop.

“Adrina, you're back.” The blonde haired man asked, his lips tipping up in a smirk as she left the car.

“Mikalous, you still down here?” Dina quipped back at him, her tone more of a growl than what I was used to, making him lose the smirk, “I'd have thought by now you would have earned your spot back amongst the hunters by now.” She glared at the man as I shrunk back into my seat.

“As grumpy as usual I see,” the second man mused, his gaze moving past Dina and locking onto myself, “and you've brought a snack.”

His words drew my attention to him as he leaned further around Dina's body and I noticed the small white points resting on his bottom lip, as his eyes flashed from a murky green to bright red.

“Touch her and I'll happily send you to your maker, Thomas,” Dina growled, moving her body to block my view of the men and theirs of me.

“Jeez,touchy much,” Thomas said, to which Dina didn't answer, before I heard the clink of metal on metal and she turned to face me.

“Come on Charleene, let's get you settled.” Her tone softened slightly, less of a growl

to her words, as she addressed me. Unable to do anything but nod, I unclipped my seatbelt, and with fear pooling in my gut, pushed open my car door. “Don't you dare scratch my paintwork.” Dina growled at Thomas and Mikalous, pinning them both with a glare as I tentatively moved around the car and stood at her back.

Grabbing my hand in hers, she tugged me away from the two vampires, who stared after us wearing very different expressions. Thomas watched us with a calculating look in his eyes that I didn't like, while Mikalous looked at us with confusion, before a wide pillar blocked my view of them.

“Pay them no notice, they're working down here in the car park as a punishment.” Dina explained, making me wonder what they'd done to be punished for.

Dina tugged me towards a metal lift, her steps brisk before she jabbed the 'G' button and enclosed us in the small silver box. The mirror on the back wall showed me a stranger looking back at me. My eyes were shadowed, my blonde hair frizzy and my clothes rumpled. I looked nothing like my usual self and that bothered me as we stepped out into a bright, gleaming foyer. People milled about, some going to the long desk, with shining gold panelling and black lettering that announced it as 'reception.' While others either lounged on the comfy looking seating or left out the revolving front door.

It reminded me of the pictures I'd seen of posh hotels that I'd never had the money to afford to stay in. Dropping Dina's hand I spun around slowly on the spot, gazing at everything in turn. A grand chandelier hung from the scalloped ceiling. Sunlight streamed in through the floor to ceiling plate glass windows, hitting the jewels in the chandelier and making rainbows dance upon the white and silver veined marble floor.

My mouth hit the floor as I watched bell-hops push gold framed trolleys with luggage to and from the four lifts that were along the wall next to reception. Each person pushing them were dressed the same in smart black uniforms with silver thread

depicting a logo, which I guessed belonged to the hotel.

“Are you coming?” Dina’s amused tone broke into my appreciation of the beautiful building around us and I noticed she’d continued walking towards the large desk.

“What? Are we staying here?” I whispered. Flabbergasted that I was standing in such a fine place let alone going to be staying here.

“Yes, this is the only hotel here.” Dina responded and from the crease between her brows she didn’t understand my awe.

“But it’s too grand a place for me.” I said, drawing next to her and glancing around again. When I looked at her again she was watching me with a mixture of confusion and concern.

“It’s a hotel Charleene, how can it be too grand for you to stay in?” she asked.

“Look at this place,” I said in response, waving my hand at the lavish decoration around us, “it has a god-damn chandelier, then there’s me.” I finished in a self-conscious hiss.

“There’s nothing wrong with you, you’re beautiful and just as deserving as anyone to stay in nice places.” Dina stated, cupping my cheek in her hand. My breaths stalled for a moment at her honest tone, and my brain struggled with the word beautiful being applied to me.

“But I’m nobody special,” I whispered, fixing my gaze on the marble floor beneath my feet.

A soft finger gently tipped my face up and Dina’s dark brown eyes met my own. They searched them for something before they crinkled at the edges, “One day you’ll see

yourself as others do and when you do, you're going to surprise yourself.” Her kind words brought tears to my eyes but I refused to let them spill.

“Thanks but you don't need to lie, I know who...” My words trailed off as I realised that statement was no longer true. I didn't know myself did I? Trying to smile back at her and obviously not succeeding by Dina's increased frown, I sucked my feelings down and shoved them as deep as I could, “Come on then, show me more of this fancy pants hotel.”

Dina scrutinised my face for a minute or two more before taking my hand again and leading me to the reception desk and the blonde haired woman behind it.

“Do you have a reservation?” she sneered, giving me the once over and obviously finding me lacking in some way. Her forest green eyes then flicked to Dina beside me and they widened before she got herself under control.

“I don't need one,” Dina retorted, making the woman's face turn chalk white.

“No, of course not. Let me check if your usual suite is available.” The woman—Deliha, her name tag proclaimed— stumbled over her own words in her haste to get them out.

Dina didn't acknowledge her with a response, instead turning towards myself, “I'll get you settled, then I need to check in with the Coven.” I glanced around warily as she spoke about the Coven so openly. Noticing my unease, she smiled, “it's ok everyone in here is a Super.”

My heart rate slowed a little as I understood that no one was going to shriek or run away. “Ok,” I mumbled, still shaken by the receptionist's appraisal.

Deliha had us checked in quickly, as though her haste would make up for her

previous blunder, and then we were, well Dina was striding, meanwhile I was more waddling quickly, towards the bank of lifts.

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With a cheery ding, that was the complete opposite to how I was currently feeling, I stepped into a lift filled with so much gold, that it could only be described as ostentatious. The gold numbers on the buttons gleamed in the soft light inside the lift. A full floor to ceiling mirror, with gold framing, showed how bedraggled I looked after spending hours in a car. The floor itself looked like white marble with gold veins. The ride up was so smooth I didn't even realise we'd moved until an overly perky woman's voice announced our floor.

Dina gave me a small encouraging poke in the back as the doors slid soundlessly open and my feet refused to move. Every self-conscious thought I'd ever had flooded my mind, telling me I wasn't good enough to be in a place like this. Flashing her an unamused look, I finally convinced myself to step out of the lift and into a cream hallway with a thick soft carpet.

“There are two suites on this floor, the one we'll be staying in for now and one other that's currently empty.” Dina explained as she walked towards a pale wood door.

“Right, so we essentially have this floor to ourselves,” I confirmed, needing to fill the quiet hall with some sound.

“Yes, so you can relax, while I go speak with the Elders.” Dina gave me a reassuring look, as she slipped a key card into the device next to the door.

“I'll try,” I told her, while resigning myself to the fact that this was now my life, I might as well attempt to enjoy it.

A small beep signalled the door unlocking and when Dina pushed it open, my mouth

dropped to the floor.

“You'll catch flies if you keep your mouth open.” Dina laughed, making my mouth snap shut, as she stepped inside with me following. “Through this door you'll find a fully stocked kitchenette, and that door over there,” she pointed to a door on the right handside of the room, “is your room, where you'll find a connecting ensuite bathroom.”

I zoned out at the words “your room” and found myself already moving towards where she had indicated. Carefully opening the door, I stumbled a little at the size of the massive king sized bed. It was big enough to fit three of me in it with extra room left over.

The duvet was navy blue, and when I ran my hands over it I found it was made from the softest cotton. Each pillow, and there were too many to count, had the hotel's insignia embroidered on them in silver thread. The room itself was decorated in cream walls and a deep blue carpet that I could already feel my feet sinking into. There was a tall wardrobe and a tall chest of drawers with five drawers. Far too much space for the meagre collection of clothes I'd managed to ram into a bag; they'd all fit into two drawers, tops.

“Dina!” I shouted wondering if my clothes were still in her car.

“Yes?” Dina answered, making me jump as she appeared behind me. “Sorry,” she said contritely as I turned with my hand pressed above my heart.

“Erm, it's ok just not used to that little trick yet,” I told her honestly referring to how quick she could move.

“What did you shout for?” she asked brushing over the subject.

“Oh, yes, what will happen with my clothes?” I asked, remembering why I'd called her.

“A member of the staff will bring them up for us,” she answered as a bell tinkled through the rooms, “that's probably them now and some food I ordered for you.”

I slowly followed behind Dina as she went and answered the door, letting in four staff members. One held my bag and Dina's suitcase, while two others pushed in matching silver trolleys with silver covered dishes on them. The fourth person held cutlery and...were they cloth napkins?Gosh I've really gone up in the world, I thought as he laid them out on a small table next to the window.

“I didn't know what you would want so I ordered a few different dishes for you to choose from.” Dina said sheepishly, as she took our belongings from the man who'd brought them up.

“And what happens to the dishes I don't choose?” I asked, hating the idea that they would go to waste.

“They'll be donated to a local shelter, Miss.” My server stated, “We are proud to support our local communities and dislike unnecessary food waste.” He explained further, pulling out a chair for me.

“Wow, that's fantastic.” I was stunned; many human establishments weren't as helpful with their waste.

“Right, enjoy your meal, I'll be back soon.” Dina said, putting a dampener on my good mood that was slowly returning.

“Where are you off to?” I asked, sitting at the table.

“To speak with the Coven and update them on what happened in York and...” she trailed off.

“And me.” I filled in, nodding at her when the server placed one of the silver domed dishes before me and lifted the lid.

Chapter Ten

How can leaving one person spark such fear and uncertainty? -Dina

Giving Charleene one last look and hearing her sinful moan as she tried the soup I'd picked out for her, I couldn't stop the small smile from gracing my lips as I closed the door softly. Turning my thoughts to Coven politics, that I'd thankfully been away from while hunting the rogue, I felt my mood turn sour. I hated having to navigate the factions and all the gossiping. I was much more comfortable being out hunting than dealing with the simpering fools who never left the Coven or Hampstead's borders.

My foot tapped silently against the hallway carpet as I waited not that patiently for the lift. I'd only been away from Charleene for mere seconds, minutes at most and I felt ansty. She'd had a lot to deal with in the last forty-eight hours, and I found myself worrying about what all of these revelations were doing to her mind. She'd grown up a human, and had the narrow mindedness that automatically rejected any hint of the supernatural. Then add to that, the fact that she didn't want to come here. I kept waiting for her to break.

She consumed my thoughts as, on autopilot, I rode the lift back down to the lobby and stepped out into the weak autumn sunlight. Noise bombarded my sensitive hearing as folk called to one another in greeting, or held their own conversations. The odd human or two stopped, raising their phones and snapping pictures of what they thought was an abandoned mansion, instead of the hotel Vitae Aeterna. After the Scottish and English witch hunts, the witches had developed their glamour magic, to

cleverly hide us all from humans. There was a fundamental difference in a supernatural's DNA given to us by the Fae that had created our races. The witches' glamour recognises those genes, allowing us to see the truth that humans couldn't.

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Shaking off my wayward thoughts, I stepped onto the crowded street and turned in the direction of London's Coven. The Elders had resided in a mansion at the bottom of Bishop's Ave, bordering the huge park of Hampstead Heath, for centuries. The mansion had been added to as needed and as such now spanned just under 240,000sq feet and held around three hundred rooms.

“So the rumours are true, you're home.” His voice made my steps falter, as I thought to myself, what now?

Turning my head I addressed him, “yes I'm home, not that it's any business of yours, Clarence.” I said, letting a little anger turn my voice cold. Since finding me, he'd presumed that because we shared the same twat of a Sire, that he—as the eldest—was entitled to know all of my comings and goings.

“Don't be like that Adrina, we are family after all.” He purred, stepping into my path and forcing me to crane my neck to look at him. He was only 5ft 8 but my short stature meant that this close I'd get a crick in my neck before long.

“No, the same maniac Sired and abandoned us, that doesn't make us family.” I told him, staring straight into his dark green eyes, making them flick to red as I went to step around him.

“I hope one day you'll reconsider that stance Adrina,” he almost growled as his hand wrapped around the top of my arm. Clarence had found me at the London Coven just over two years ago and had refused to leave me alone ever since, unless I was away hunting. Apparently he'd been gathering up our Sire's discarded children when he abandoned them, but he'd not known about me. Well not until I'd bumped into him

up in Edinburgh.

“And I hope that one day you'll leave me alone.” I deadpanned right back, yanking my arm free from him and striding away.

I had no idea why he was so interested in my joining his little band of rejects, because ultimately that's what we were, Alasdair's rejects. I'd had a family once, one I loved in my own way, and I wasn't interested in having another. I was happy enough with the small few I called friends and my new life as a huntress. Shaking my head at his foolish nonsense I quickened my pace, eager to see the Elders and get back to Charleene.

The Coven's mansion loomed over me. It was a gorgeous building, a mixture of styles throughout the centuries as they'd added to it. I took another deep breath preparing myself for a lengthy wait, the Elders never did anything fast. Having had the luxury of so much time behind them, they had no interest in rushing anything, including seeing a returned huntress. Curtains twitched in the upper windows and I knew my peaceful time would be coming to an end sooner than I'd want. The main entrance doors opened, as I pushed through the silent wrought iron gates and walked calmly up the long gravel drive. My feet crunched with each step, the sound loud in the quiet surrounding the mansion. I firmly fixed my scowl in place as I drew closer to the open door and met Bethany's smiling face.

She was the Coven's most overzealous gossip and was unashamed about it, so it didn't surprise me that she would be first to the door. Bethany was somewhere around six hundred years old and barely set foot outside the Coven's walls, yet she was always hungry to hear about what was happening in the world.

“Adrina, you're back, did you find the rogue?” her high pitched voice, grated against my ears as I brushed past her.

“We did.” I answered in a clipped tone, when she shut the door behind me and I saw Antonious’ familiar face. He was scowling at Bethany, much like myself, but for very different reasons.

Antonious was a Constant; a human that is fed vampire blood in small measures to be kept alive in order to serve the one they are bonded to. It was an outdated practice and one that was no longer tolerated, because the human bonded through blood loses part of themselves. Until, like Antonious, they only live to serve and please the one who created them. Hence his scowl at Bethany, she’d interrupted the duties he’d been tasked with, i.e, answering the door, maintaining the mansion and greeting guests to the coven.

“I can not believe you found him. Was it dangerous? Did he fight? Has he been dealt with? He isn’t coming here is he?” She rattled off in quick succession, either not noticing or ignoring Antonious’ glare.

Offering him a small smile, I took my jacket off and held it out for him to take. Hopefully that would pacify the desires that he was completing his duties and not make him take a crazy turn on Bethany. “I’ll address all of that with the Elders,” I told Bethany, before turning back to Antonious, “are they in residence?” I asked the formality, knowing they wouldn’t be anywhere else.

Antonious’ face softened a little as he answered in his usual quiet, raspy tone. “Yes, Huntress, however they are currently in a meeting.”

It was his standard response, but I nodded anyway. “Can you take me to them?”

“Yes Huntress,” he said, stepping past me, my jacket placed carefully over his arm, “this way please.” He motioned towards the grand staircase, before shuffling his feet in their direction, however we didn’t go up the red carpeted steps. Instead he led me down the side of them to another door.

I followed his stooped back, wondering how long I was going to have to wait for my own audience and Bethany, not taking the hint, followed. Her questions continued even when both me and Antonious ignored them. He led us through the door into a parlour of sorts, it had high ceilings and each wall was adorned with some of history's greatest works of art—originals of course. Chairs of various sizes and styles dotted about the space, and two large but unlit fireplaces dominated the two opposing walls at either end of the room.

There were no windows in this central room, which was perfect for our kind as even though sunlight wouldn't kill us, we much preferred the night. The darkness was gentler on our sensitive eyes and had made it easier to hide and hunt before the invention of blood bags came about. It was probably why humans thought we only came out at night.

Conversations faltered as we stepped inside and pale faces watched us make our way through. Thankfully Bethany peeled off to join a gaggle of other women and their heads bowed together before Antonious and I had left the room.

“Thank God, she's gone,” I muttered, gaining a soft croak of a laugh from the man in front of me. We wound through the mansion, passing painting after painting and many closed doors until we reached the corridor that housed the council chamber.

“You may wait here, I will let them know you are here Adrina.” Antonious rasped, bowing slightly in respect.

“Thank you Antonious,” I managed to say before he let himself inside the room and left me to my own devices. Sitting down on the chair closest to the door, I waited.

“Huntress Adrina,” Antonious' rasp made me jump when he returned almost immediately, “The Elders will see you now.” He continued, surprising me even more.

“Thank you Antonious,” I replied, standing and approaching the door.

I could count on one hand the times I’d been inside this imposing room. The first had been when Tilly had brought me to the Coven and the second had been when I’d passed the training to become a Huntress. Offering Antonious a small head nod, I strode confidently inside for the fifth time in my immortal life.

The room was circular, without windows and with a raised podium at one end. In the centre was a small drain, which hadn’t been used in at least a century, that I knew off. The walls and ceiling were all painted in navy blue to emulate the night sky, and low powered lamps which burned a dull orange, instead of the harsh white of modern electric lights, were dotted around. The council, two female vampires and three male, sat in their chairs above those who came to see them, reminding us that they were the hierarchy. Shadows obscured their faces so you couldn’t read their expressions.

“Elders.” I said upon reaching the centre of the room, and dropping to one knee, with my head bowed.

“Huntress Adrina, the Council recognises you,” Elder Bertrand answered in a soft voice.

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“What do you have to report?” Elder Constance sneered, her high-pitched voice echoing her condescension around the room. For as long as I’d been a vampire there was something about that woman I despised. I couldn’t tell if it was the way she looked down her nose at everyone, or her snotty tone, but something about her grated on me the wrong way.

Raising to my feet, I looked up at the Elders and I recounted everything that had happened in York. When I mentioned Charleene, her powers and the interest the rogue seemed to have in her, there were a couple of mumbled grumbles, but nobody interrupted my account.

“So it is as we feared, the rogue is not working alone,” Elder Micheal stated after I finished. “This is troubling news.”

“It is Elder,” I responded, keeping my tone respectful and low.

“Not as troubling as an untrained Witch being left to wander around, unchecked and unknown.” Elder Constance chimed in, making me want to growl at her condescending tone.

“I have brought Charleene here to Hampstead,” I informed them, against my better judgement, I could not hide her from them.

“She must be brought before us.” Constance declared, to grumbles from the other Elders.

“She is the Witch's problem, not ours.” Elder Reginia spoke, in a voice devoid of

emotion. I'd always liked Reginia, she was the wisest woman I'd met in both my lifetimes. She was more prone to reading books than wanting to deal with the Coven's incessant need for gossip and thought through everything before making a decision.

"She is a threat to us all and must be dealt with." Constance argued, raising my hackles. I reminded myself to remain calm; I could not allow the Council to believe I felt anything for a witch, it was forbidden.

"It is troubling how she has managed to grow without the witch's knowledge," Elder Cain pondered aloud. Cain kept himself to himself around the Coven, he was one of the eldest of our kind and as such preferred his own company over anyone else's.

"Yes, very," Bertrand interjected, "you have given us much to consider Huntress Adrina. Please let Antonious know which rooms you are staying in at Hotel Vitae Aeterna." He dismissed me as the Council grumbled amongst themselves.

Scowling deeper than I had on entering I bowed deeply, before turning on my heel and striding towards the door.

"And Adrina," Constance's voice made my feet pause, two steps from the door, "Make sure the Witch is versed in our rules and that she knows no magic is to be used within our borders." Her sneering voice made my anger boil, however turning I allowed none of my emotions to show as I bowed and answered.

"Of course Elder Constance," I replied politely and continued to leave.

Antonious was waiting for me on the other side, and with the kindest smile he could muster, he gestured for me to return the way we'd come. Neither of us spoke as we returned to the dim entrance way, or as he went to retrieve my jacket from where it had been stored during my interview with the Council. "We're staying in suite

seventy-two,” I informed him as requested before starting out into the weak sunshine and breathing a sigh of relief that my time in the Coven had been brief.

“Very well, Huntress Adrina,” Antonious’ voice followed me as he shut the door behind me.

Chapter Eleven

How can life feel so perfect and strange at the same time? -Charleene.

Three days had gone by seamlessly while I’d eaten the best food I’d ever tasted and Dina had explained more about how the supernatural world worked. From the laws which governed her kind, to how a Witch’s coven worked and had even included a brief summary of how the Vampire’s believed each creature had been created. It was all quite fascinating, and the more I found out, the more excitement replaced my anger. I softened towards Dina a little more, understanding how in the little time we’d actually known each other she hadn’t been able to tell me anything about this unbelievable world. I was starting to return to my more usual sunshiny self. That was, until a stooped man with greying hair tied at the base of his skull with a black ribbon and wrinkles arrived at the door to our suite this morning.

He hadn’t stayed long, just long enough to hand Dina a letter and utter a single sentence, “They’re ready for her now.” I didn’t know if I’d been supposed to hear them, with how quiet his voice was, but they sounded ominous enough and when Dina turned back to face the room after he left, she was frowning.

“What did he mean?” I asked her.

“The Council wants to see you,” she answered distractedly, looking down at the cream coloured letter in her hand.

“And the Council are who exactly?” I probed not liking the sound of their title.

“It’s made up of five of our Coven’s eldest vampires: Bertrand, Micheal, Cain, Constance and Reginia. They govern all of the United Kingdom’s Vampires.” She finished, meeting my gaze and crossing to the table where I’d been eating some amazing American style pancakes with Maple Syrup and bacon.

“Well they sound like a hoot to have at a party, but why do they wish to see me? I’m not a vampire.” I joked, trying to raise her spirits a little. I’d been enjoying the more fun loving than scowly Dina, and didn’t want her to leave just yet.

“They wish to see you because somehow you’ve grown up not knowing you were a witch.” Dina explained, slipping back into her seat and ripping open the letter she still held.

“Oh and will they help me?” I asked, not liking the seriousness of her tone, as she unfolded the letter and began reading it.

“It looks that way,” Dina said after reading the letter carefully and laying it down before me.

Charleene Murry,

You are hereby summoned to appear before the Council of Five. You shall be escorted by Adrina McDougal, Huntress of the London Coven, and shall be assessed by; The Maiden, Mother and Crone of England’s most prestigious and oldest Witch Coven. Please be present at the Council Chambers before noon on the sixth of November.

The Council of Five.

There were five swirling signatures on the bottom of the small letter. “And there’s no ignoring this?” I asked, not really hoping. The need to know the person I should have been was beginning to gnaw at my mind. I wanted to know who’d abandoned me as a child and I wanted to know why.

“No, if you do, they’ll hunt us down.” Dina answered, making me smile.

“Us?” I asked.

“Yes, us. Because if you choose to run, I’ll go with you.” She all but whispered and looked around furtively, “I’ve become strangely attached to you.” She continued making my smile grow wider.

“As I have of you.” I told her, feeling emboldened by her words, “So what do I wear to meet the Council of Five?” I said, wiggling my fingers as I said their name, which drew a snort of a laugh from Dina.

“Something smart.” My face fell at those words. All I’d packed into my bag was a couple of pairs of jeans, five t-shirts and some underwear. All of which needed washing. “We can go shopping if you’d like?” Dina said, watching my face carefully.

“Really?” I asked, feeling like we’d been cooped up in these rooms for weeks instead of days.

“Yes, really. I’m sure the rest of Bishop’s Ave has heard about you being here and

are dying to get a glimpse. Gossip spreads fast around here and no-one is a bigger gossip than Jonathan.”

“Who?” I asked with a smile.

“Jonathan, the head concierge, who’s been waiting on us since we arrived.” Dina laughed.

“Ohhhh,” my mouth made an ‘o’ shape as I let the word draw out between us, “so shopping?” I said, returning to the main task at hand and bouncing in my seat.

“Not until you’ve finished your pancakes, Jonathan will have my head if they’re not all eaten, let alone the Chef.” She looked aghast at the very thought of the Chef seeing my plate returned barely touched, made me giggle as I hurriedly lifted another forkful to my mouth.

Shovelling in my stack of delicious pancakes, I had them finished in about ten minutes and with my stomach fit to bursting, I rushed to my room for my last lot of clean clothes. Quickly dressing, I dragged a brush through my hair, before securing it in a high ponytail. Going back to the main room, I couldn't sit still as excitement bubbled through me. Instead I packed my small bag, triple checking that I'd included my purse as I waited for Dina to join me.

I was just in the process of checking my bag again when she walked into the room. She was wearing black skinny jeans which made her legs look longer and a floaty black, short sleeved shirt. “Aren't you going to be cold?” I asked, eyeing the short sleeves sceptically.

“No, I don't feel the cold or heat from the weather, but if it makes you feel better I'll put my jacket on.” Dina smiled and winked at me, “are you ready?”

“Yes, please,” I said, slinging my bag strap over my shoulder and bouncing on my tiptoes like an excited child. It had been a while since I'd gone clothes shopping for myself, instead of saving every spare penny I had for rent, food or books for my courses. Having no family to lean back on made a person fiercely independent and in my case had made me adhere to a very strict budget which hadn't included unnecessary clothes.

I peppered Dina with questions about the types of shops they had here in Bishops Ave, as the lift made its silent descent to the hotel lobby. She answered each of them patiently, even as we walked through the lobby and out the revolving glass doors. Weak sunshine peered through the clouds, making the day seem warm for November and I was already regretting putting my thick jacket on. People were already milling about, going in and out of shops even though it was still quite early.

Eyes followed us as we walked, putting me a little on edge at the unwanted attention. “Why are they staring?” I asked, as another couple of people watched us.

“News travels fast around here, and they've all heard about the unknown witch who's staying at the hotel.” Dina whispered back, not making me feel any better.

Gratefully, a few buildings later Dina indicated a small shop front, its painted sign declared it to be ‘Barbara's Bazaar’ and Dina held the door open for us to go inside. Other than the woman behind the till, it was blessedly empty and I was able to browse through their selection of clothes without being bothered. It had an interesting selection of big named brands and small homemade stuff which I'd always loved. Flicking through the racks I found a heap of clothes to try on, including a cute looking shirt and long black floaty skirt which Dina said would be perfect for my meeting with the Council.

Grinning like a mad woman I took my haul to the till, already cringing at what I thought would be a mahoosive bill. The woman behind the till looked to be in her late

fifties, her brown hair streaked with silver strands and her smile kind as she rang everything through.

“You new here Deary?” she asked.

“Yes, is it that obvious?” I gasped back at her.

“We're a tight knit community here, so we know when someone's new. However no regular would be gnawing their top lip off like you are, at my prices.” Her smile grew as her pale blue eyes met my own. They crinkled at the edges, “that will be £30 Lovey.”

My mouth fell open at how little she'd asked for. I had at least seven full outfits. “What?”

She laughed at my shock before taking pity on me and explaining, “we're a close community, we believe that everyone deserves to be able to clothe, feed and house themselves, no matter their financial circumstances. Those who can afford more, pay more, so those who can't don't have to.”

Her kind words made tears gather in my eyes. If everyone had the same view on life and those around them, maybe life wouldn't be so hard for most people. “T...t...thank you.” I stammered, handing over thirty pounds. “Sorry, what's your name again?” I asked, realising I'd never asked.

“I'm Deborah, and you?”

“Charleene,” I told her as she handed over the bulging bags.

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“Well merry met Charleene, and may we meet again.” Deborah said, with a smile and a wink.

“Same to you,” I smiled back, before nodding my head and joining Dina at the door.

“Do you want to go back or continue looking around?” she asked when I drew close and pushed open the door with its cheery bell.

“I would love to look around some more if we can,” I replied, beaming across at her.

The sun beat down on us as we casually meandered from shop to shop, until we reached the giant mansion at the bottom. It stood proud at the top of a gravel driveway and stretched from right to left, dominating in its grand beauty. Each section looked like it had been added at different times, using whatever style had been favoured at that time. Until the patchwork of different coloured bricks and styles merged to make an architectural masterpiece. Manicured gardens surrounded the house, palace, whatever you'd call it, almost giving it an English cottage feel as riots of coloured plants took over the neat beds they'd been planted in.

“That's the London Vampire Coven.” Dina informed me as I stood gaping at it.

“It's...it's...massive,” I finished, the word not really doing the building justice.

“It is,” Dina agreed, before nudging my shoulder with her own to get me moving again.

Flashing her a smile I followed her nudges and seconds later we followed the paved

path beyond the building, where my mouth dropped open again. Before us was a huge green space, with majestic trees and a winding path. The only thing separating the busy road from the park was a small fence with a gate in the centre. “What's this?” I asked, mystified.

“It's Hampstead Heath National Park.” Dina explained.

“It's beautiful,” I said in wonder, my gaze flicking from the street behind us, to the park and back again, “is it warded like the rest?”

“No, once we pass through the gate, we return to the regular human world.” Dina explained as she leant against the fence beside the gate. “Do you want to take a walk around it or go back to the hotel?”

Indecision weighed on me as I gazed longingly into the park, but the wind rustled the bags I was holding, finally making my decision for me. “Maybe another time, when we don't have so many bags with us.” I answered, dragging myself away from so much green and turning back the way we'd come. I gave the huge mansion another appraising look as we passed by, my mind pondering what the meeting would be like tomorrow.

It had just passed lunch-time when we returned to the hotel and my stomach announced it was hungry by filling the lift with a massive rumble that even had Dina stifling a laugh behind her hand. Taking my bags into my room, I wasn't surprised to hear Dina begin talking and ordering lunch. With aching cheeks from the smile I couldn't shake, I emptied each bag and organised my new clothes into the wardrobe, before flopping backwards on the bed with a happy sigh. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so free from responsibilities. Closing my eyes on another sigh I let myself drift towards sleep.

“Charleene? Babe?” Dina's soft voice made me stir enough to crack open one eye-lid

and look at her. She stood in the doorway, her hip and shoulder leaning on the wooden frame, with a small smile playing on her lips. She looked beautiful. “Lunch is here,” she informed me, pushing off the doorframe and turning back into the main room of our joint suite.

Shaking my head I let myself wonder if giving her a second chance would be so bad. I’d had a fantastic morning, she’d been so patient while I’d darted in and out of shop after shop, and spending time with her was easy. I never felt like I needed to fill any silences with words or that I wasn’t good enough for her. Smiling like a goon with my mind made up, I stretched and went to see what Dina had ordered for lunch.

The afternoon passed pleasantly. I left Dina at the small table speaking on the phone checking in with Tilly and her hunt in York, and grabbed a small blueleather bound book from the tall thin bookshelf. ‘Romeo & Juliette,’ the shiny silver title informed me as I settled on the sofa. The dusty scent rushed up my nose, making me smile, as I carefully opened the old pages and began reading. I was just up to my favourite part when Mercutio curses Tybalt and Romeo, when Dina’s hand landed softly on my shoulder, making me jump and yelp, seconds before a knock came from the door.

With my hand pressed to my chest, I reluctantly placed the book down, marking my place with a thin coster, as Dina went to answer it. She stepped back to allow a young lad who was pushing the silver wheeled trolley I now associated with hotel room service inside. He was halfway towards the dining table when I leaped from my seat, startling the poor lad in my haste. My mouth watered at the scent of melted cheese, rich tomato bolognese sauce, beef and herbs, and like a woman possessed I stared intently at the domed tray he placed before one of the chairs. Sliding into the seat and tapping my fingers on my thigh, I waited for him to place cutlery down and remove the lid. My barely there patience was rewarded with the most delicious looking lasagne I’d ever seen.

Without waiting I grabbed the knife and fork, carefully cutting off a small section and

placing it into my mouth with a sinful moan. The cheesy goodness coated my tongue as it revelled in the tastes of the beef mixing with tomato, thyme, basil and oregano. Quickly cutting off another mouthful, I almost came in my pants when the heavy scent of garlic joined the cacophony of delicious smells and the lad placed down two long thick slabs of homemade garlic bread that were dripping garlic butter.

“The food here is going to make me fat,” I mumbled at Dina around another mouthful of lasagne and garlic bread. I was in heaven.

Her amused chuckle was my only answer as she watched me eat my food in delight. Once my plate was wiped clean, she handed me the last plate on the trolley with a devilish wink before sitting back in the chair opposite, watching me as I lifted the lid. Tears filled my eyes as I stared down at the four perfect, tiny Italian Cannelloni which sat on the plate dusted in icing sugar and filled with creamcheese icing. My eyes flicked up and back down quickly, “how did you know?” I gasped, feeling suddenly like I was going to cry.

“Know what?” she asked, genuinely looking shocked at my intense reaction to the dessert.

“That Cannelloni is my favourite?” I managed to get out through my closing throat.

“I didn’t.” She answered, her brows rising and her eyes widening, “I just asked them to surprise you with something sweet and light for dessert.”

Lifting one of the thin pastry rolls to my mouth I closed my eyes and savoured the crisp, buttery pastry and the sharp tangy lemon cream cheese icing as it coated my tongue.

“If you keep making noises like that I’m going to...” My eyes snapped open at Dina’s words and almost made another obscenely inappropriate noise from the heat

she was looking at me with. Slowly my tongue swept out capturing an errant blob of the strawberry cream cheese icing from my bottom lip and I watched her eyes darken as I let a low moan slip past my lips.

“You’re going to do what?” I whispered, reaching for another of the amazing desserts. But before my fingers could touch the pastry, Dina was around my side of the table, with it between her own fingers. I gasped as she gently smothered my bottom lip in the icing, before pressing the cannoli into my mouth.

“Bite.” She demanded quietly. Following her orders silently, my teeth bit through the delicious treat. The sharp crunch of the pastry breaking seemed almost too loud in the room, as Dina watched me intently. “Show me how much you like it.” She growled as I stopped my eyes from rolling back in my head. Giving in, I let my tongue dart out capturing the leftover cream and moaning as my thighs clasped together. “Good Girl,” Dina praised, making the heat that had been pooling low in my belly shoot south as a moan that had nothing to do with the food left my mouth.

When my eyes opened again I couldn’t drag them away from hers. My top teeth pressed against my bottom lip as dirty thoughts of crushing my lips to hers raced through my mind. Just as I was about to lean forward, following those thoughts, a loud bang split the heavy silence apart.

“What was that?” I gasped, my hand pressing over my racing heart and my eyes darting frantically around as another loud bang came from outside. With a soft growl, Dina scraped her hand—the one that moments before had fed me cannoli—through her hair and went to the window.

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“Fireworks.” She answered, her voice gruff and husky. Mystified, I left my dessert and joined her at the window, bumping her with my shoulder in my haste. Another bright firework exploded with a bang, quickly followed by another and another. My smile grew as I watched the rainbow colours light up the night sky.

“I’d forgotten all about bonfire night.” I whispered, turning my face to gaze at the beautiful women beside me.

“So had I,” she said, her gaze riveted on the window. Reaching my hand towards her, my fingertips grazed her cheek, gaining her attention. Dina’s cheek was cool, as she leaned into my touch for the briefest moment, before her next words crushed my heart, “this can’t happen.”

Chapter Twelve

To feel like an insect beneath a microscope is a very weird feeling indeed. -Charleene

Stretching my body, I went back over what I could have done wrong yesterday evening to make Dina pull away from me as she did. It was like I’d burnt her, but I couldn’t understand why, and when I’d asked she’d paced for a few moments before speeding away and slamming her bedroom door behind her. Now, as dawn turned into day, I was frustrated and confused, however I had my meeting with the Council of Five today. Groaning, I rolled over, snatching up my mobile that I’d barely touched since arriving and glared down at the time. Eight o’clock. I had hours before my meeting with nothing to do but stew over last night.

Busying myself with getting ready, I took the best and longest shower I’d ever had.

My ensuite had the most technical facilities I'd ever seen, you could even control it with your phone. A rainfall shower head took over most of the shower cubicle's ceiling and then three other shower heads were placed around the large glass cubicle that massaged every part of me with jets of water while I sang my lungs out. Feeling more alert and refreshed I grabbed two fluffy towels, wrapping one around my body and the other around my now clean and strawberry smelling hair. Smiling, I was still humming some advert tune as I stepped into my room, where I found Dina sitting patiently on my bed with her foot wagging. Ignoring her I strode over to the wardrobe, taking my sweet time to choose the outfit she'd helped me pick yesterday for my meeting.

"Are you not speaking to me?" Dina's voice came from the doorway behind me, sapping away some of my good mood.

"Are you going to explain what happened last night?" I asked back, slowly inching my new black tights up my legs.

"No," she answered in a surly tone as I grabbed my black panties and bra set.

"Then I'm not speaking to you." I replied, pulling them on.

Once I was fully dressed in the smart black pencil skirt that encased my legs to just below my knees and the not too tight black shirt, I walked back into the bedroom, making a point not to glance at Dina as I wanted to. Instead I slipped my feet into my black ballet flats, feeling her eyes watching me as I moved around the room. Collecting my phone from the pillow and sitting before the vanity, I caught a glimpse of indecision on her face in the mirror before turning my full attention to the mess that was my hair. Huffing out a frustrated breath, I grabbed the hairdryer a little more forcefully than I'd intended, and went to work fixing it into loose waves that fell down my back. Once it was pinned in place, I decided to leave my face free of make-up and applied a couple of squirts of my favourite Jimmy Choo perfume, savouring

the three small squirts. I never over used it, making it last the whole year before treating myself to a new bottle.

Giving myself a once over in the full length mirror and happy that I looked at least somewhat presentable, I continued ignoring the seething vampire, before ordering breakfast. The morning dragged by. I ate my pancakes, the best I'd ever tasted, and pondered what the Council would ask me. The silence between me and Dina deepened further with every minute that passed. Every so often she would let out a growl, as though frustrated, before returning to glaring at the wall. I was almost ready to break it when she announced it was time to leave, ending any chance of us repairing what was broken until after my meeting. Nevertheless, the closer we came to the coven building, the more determined I became of getting to the bottom of our spat.

Watching the pavement pass beneath my feet I almost let out a scream when Dina tapped my shoulder, letting me know we'd arrived at the Coven building. It still looked magnificent, in the pitiful noon sun and darkening clouds, but something squirmed uneasily in my stomach, making me fearful as I looked at the dark empty windows. I knew it was just my own anxiety but I felt unseen eyes watching me, judging me even, as I walked up the gravel driveway. I also wondered if I'd even come out of this beautiful house alive. Shuddering I flicked a glance across at Dina, surprised to see a frown marring her brow as she stared ahead.

Wanting to ask what she was thinking but not knowing how to break our silence, I opened my mouth and closed it a few times before giving up and returning to my own thoughts instead. The door swung open as my foot landed on the first of the three wide steps leading up to it, revealing a tall man with grey hair and wrinkles. His faded green eyes crinkled at the corners when he looked at me, but I wouldn't call the thin smile he offered friendly or warm in any way.

"Welcome home Adrina," he greeted Dina beside me, using the same name Tilly had

back in York.

“Antonious,” she greeted back, giving him a small nod as he stepped aside, “this is Charleene Murry, she has a meeting with the Council.”

“Yes, the Unknown Witch,” he confirmed, his voice devoid of any emotion but stiff politeness. “Please follow me.”

Glancing at Dina with questioning eyes, my feet refused to step across the threshold, it was as though they knew something my head didn't. “You'll be safe here.” Dina reassured me, watching my struggle from within the house and holding out her hand to me. Giving her an uncertain nod and gripping her hand tightly my feet finally moved, letting me step inside and back in time.

The walls were pale wood panelling that reached almost to the impressively high ceiling, before a small stretch of bare wall was painted in an off cream colour that had gone out of fashion with the Stuarts. As I followed Dina through the small entrance way, my eyes widened at the large staircase before me that was carved from dark wood, with a blood red carpet running down the middle of it. In here the walls reminded me of a school trip I'd taken to Dalmeny House, with their regency style paintings and furniture. I was still staring in wonder as Dina gently tugged on my hand, getting me to follow them into yet another room, through a door that sat in the shadows of the staircase.

It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the brighter natural light which flooded this new room after the dim barely lit entrance rooms, but when they did I found myself wanting to duck behind Dina as she dropped my hand. Multiple pale faces turned towards us as I walked through the door. The women wore dresses from different periods in English history, each looking just as beautiful as the next, and the men wore similar suits in a mish mash of styles. However they all had a similar waxy quality to their bluish-white skin and their pupils flashed bright red as I passed by. A

shudder raced down my spine from their unnatural stares, reminding me that I'd just stepped into a predator's den, where I would be the prey if they chose. Dina's shoulders straightened and she stood a little taller as we made our way through and even though I couldn't see her face I knew she was glaring at each vampire as they flinched back and found something other than me to fix their gazes on.

I didn't begin breathing again until we stepped through another door into an empty corridor and my lungs felt like they were about to explode as my heart raced a million miles a minute. I could still feel their eyes until I heard the door close softly behind me.

"This way please," Antonious requested as he led us down a corridor lined with portraits of gorgeous people.

"That was...an experience," I muttered under my breath, knowing that Dina would hear it.

"Just ignore them, they don't get out much and definitely do not know how to behave like regular people." Dina explained, making me smile a little.

"What should I expect?" I asked, not wanting to stop now that she was talking to me again.

"They will examine you and the witches will have questions regarding what you can remember of your life. Do not lie to them as they will most certainly have warded the room to detect lies and half-truths."

"Ok," I responded, her warning doing little to comfort me. But I suppose she was merely trying to prepare me, which was in a way, sort of comforting. Antonious set a fast pace that belied his age as we wound through the building and stopped before an unassuming door.

“I will let the Council know you have arrived,” he told us— well told Dina as he didn’t even glance at me— and then stepped through said door, leaving me and Dina alone for the first time since we’d entered the Coven.

“So this is your home, it’s very... big,” I struggled to put a word on just what the Coven building was and ‘big’ wasn’t entirely adequate.

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“It is, but I much prefer to be out in the real world than cooped up here.” She said in a clipped tone, biting off each word as she watched the door like a hawk.

“Can you hear what’s going on in there?” I asked, nodding my head towards the door when she glanced at me.

“No, most of the rooms in the Coven are heavily sound-proofed for privacy, but this one is also warded to keep the information discussed inside, within its four walls.” She quickly explained and just as the last word left her lips the door was slowly pushed open.

“You may enter,” Antonious drawled, his eyes flashing to my face and away again.

“Thank you, Antonious,” Dina said, before striding into the room.

“Thank you,” I managed to whisper following on her heels.

The room was spacious, easily two rooms combined, with a row of windows high up that allowed natural light into the room while also elongating the shadows. As I stepped inside my gaze was drawn immediately to the raised platform, which had been built to look like part of the wall. Halfway up—just enough that I had to crane my head back to see them—sat five people. Two women and three men all gazed down at me with varying expressions. One of the women looked at me like I was something unpleasant on the bottom of her shoe, while the other looked pale, even for a vampire, as she looked me over repeatedly with wide eyes. Puzzled by her look of shock I moved my eyes to the men. The blonde one looked bored, as if this meeting was too tedious for him to care. The dark haired one looked at me with narrowed, assessing

eyes and the third smiled down at me in an almost grandfatherly kind way.

Taking a deep breath, I continued to where Dina had stopped and dropped to one knee in the centre of the room. I was just about to duplicate her position when someone with an old wavering voice spoke; drawing my attention to three other women in the room.

“This is the unknown child?” The grandmotherly voice asked. She had grey hair that was tied back in a low bun. Some of the strands had dared to escape and fluttered around her face. Her eyes were dark and from this distance I couldn’t discern if they were actually black or just a very dark brown, but it was her lips that held my attention. They were turned down in a sneer that I didn’t like the look of.

“Yes, I am She.” I told them, not hiding my unhappy tone at being addressed in such a way. I saw Dina’s head begin to turn my way, out the corner of my eye, before she quickly returned to staring holes into the wooden floor.

“Come forward Child,” said the second woman, who looked to be in her forties. She had blonde hair that already had grey strands glittering amongst them and her smile was not exactly kind, but at least she didn’t look displeased with my very presence. Yet her voice still held a note of condescension that rubbed me up the wrong way.

Remaining rooted to the floor, I looked at the last woman sitting below the Council of Five on the regular, antique, chairs. She was younger than the other two but still had the same blonde hair and dark eyes. Her face, although slimmer than the other two, still bore an uncanny resemblance. “It is unwise to test them,” she said in a whisper, her voice as light as air, and her face warmer than her predecessors. Her smile also seemed genuine as it creased her eyes.

Nodding my head at the younger woman, I followed the command and stepped forward, leaving Dina behind. When I was four steps from them I stopped and met

each of their eyes. “I have had no knowledge while growing up that this world,” I paused and gestured around the room, “even existed. Can you tell me why that is?”

I needed to know why I’d been abandoned as a baby. “We do not know why.” The old lady said, who I presumed was the “Crone,” I’d done a little research on witch hierarchy last night.

“We would like to attempt to find out why,” the second woman continued and I realised that this must be how they spoke and was already turning to the younger witch for the end of this speech.

“Where were you first abandoned?” her question was said softly but it still stung.

“Scotland,” I told her, trying not to fidget, while they each looked at me.

“And what is your first memory?” the Crone asked.

“Erm,” I stalled, forcing myself to remember as far back as I could. I’d just passed my seventh birthday party when I felt a prickle against my mind.

“What was that?!” I shouted, my eyes flicking from one woman to the next waiting for any of them to answer.

“We were trying to watch your memories with you,” The one who would be formally addressed as the Mother of the trio explained, her brow pinched together.

“What do you mean?”

“Together we can focus our mental energy and view images when a person remembers them.” She paused, glancing at the other two women briefly before continuing, “but with you we saw nothing.”

“What does that mean?” I asked in confusion.

“You are protected by powerful and old magicks,” the Crone took over the explanation. Instead of asking anymore questions, my eyes moved back to the Mother.

“We have not felt this magickal signature in a long time,”

Then the Maiden of the group spoke, “you are part of something bigger.” Her voice wobbled slightly on the end of her sentence and something squirmed in my stomach again, a foreboding that my life would never be simple again.

“Do you know who abandoned me?” I asked.

“No.” The Crone answered.

Chapter Thirteen

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Interesting and friend are two words that should not go together -Dina

Charleene's meeting with the Council had gone better than I'd expected, even if she hadn't been overly respectful to the London Coven's Witches, she'd shown them how strong she was. However, the meeting had also raised more questions than it had answered, leaving us both in limbo as we awaited more news. The Council Elders had agreed with the Witches that they needed to look further into Charleene's origins, but that could take days if not weeks, so again we'd be left with nothing to do but wait. I'd managed to put more distance between us over the last two days, the gap becoming a chasm as Tilly's words in York kept ringing in my head. A relationship between myself and a witch would be condemned by all in the Vampire community, it just wasn't done. I also knew that the witches wouldn't be happy with a powerful witch loving a woman, let alone a vampire one, who couldn't give Charleene any children to carry on her line.

Glancing over, I tried to surreptitiously watch Charleene as she read another book with her legs curled up beneath her on the small loveseat and a blanket around her shoulders. She looked vulnerable, lost in the pages, her face calm as her eyes traced each line. It was in the quiet moments like this that I wished to be able to reach out, to comfort her, love her. Yet every time I went to open my mouth and attempt to fix the gap between us, Tilly's voice reminded me why I shouldn't. Opening my mouth yet again, my phone beeped with a message, interrupting what would have been a colossal mistake. It was better that she hated me, whatever I had felt growing for her in my heart was doomed to fail. So it was much better to deal with the heartbreak now, before we'd grown further attached.

Tilly:Heading back to London.

The message was short and to the point much like Tilly was, giving away nothing.

Me: Did you deal with the rogue?

I responded, my heart beating double time as I dared to hope that at least Charleene would be safe from the sadistic bastard who'd threatened her.

Tilly: No, he seems to have either left York or gone to ground. But I found some interesting new friends.

My heart sank like a stone in my stomach; Charleene was still being hunted. I'd seen the manic look in the rogue's eyes as he'd looked at her, he wouldn't be giving up anytime soon.

"What's wrong?" Charleene's sweet voice interrupted my spiralling thoughts, drawing my attention to where she still sat on the loveseat with her brown eyes staring at me in concern.

"Tilly's on her way here." I told her, not wanting to worry her anymore. She had enough to deal with without needing to know that monster was still alive and after her.

"Oh, isn't that a good thing?" she asked, her tone innocent and a little guarded.

"It might be." I replied, turning my glare back to the phone in my hand, I wondered just what Tilly had meant by "interesting new friends."

Charleene's frustrated sigh had my head whipping back in her direction just in time to see her turn back to the book she was holding. A frown pulled her eyebrows down and I ached to ask what was troubling her. Instead I left her alone and flopped down on the overly large bed in my own room. Why couldn't she have been just a regular

human? I found myself lamenting. We'd have been able to explore whatever had been growing between us if she had been. Closing my eyes I pushed away the intrusive thoughts that told me it was wrong and imagined what our life could have been like.

We were in one of the many houses that I had scattered across the UK. Charleene's long hair tickled my nose as she slept peacefully with her head on my shoulder. Smiling, I let myself gaze at her face, memorising the freckles that dusted her nose in random splodges. Her brow furrowed as she dreamt, making her look even more adorable than normal and a soft snore escaped her lips. Tracing my finger down her cheek, I tried to capture this moment in my mind. Her blue eyes blinked open, finding mine, as a drowsy smile turned her lips up. They looked like a stormy sea.

"Good morning," she said, her voice sweet and missing any of the anger that had been in it recently.

"Morning," I smiled down at her, my finger running over her bottom lip, "did you sleep well?" I asked, like we did this every morning.

"I'd have slept better if you hadn't been staring at me." She laughed, the sound like small bells tinkling.

"I can't help it, you're breath-taking," I found myself saying as my head lowered to hers and I pressed a soft kiss to her perfect lips. Losing myself in the kiss I ran my hand across her stomach, then up to cup one of her large breasts in my hand, eliciting a pleasurable moan that vibrated against my mouth.

Rubbing my finger over her nipple, my smile grew as she pushed her chest up, eager for more. Giving her what she wanted, I gently pinched her nipple between my thumb and forefinger, tweaking it as my tongue swept across her lips. She tasted of strawberries, from the chapstick she favoured and I wanted—no needed— more. Forcing my tongue between her lips I savoured the feel of her tongue gliding along

my own as she gave herself over to me and my touch...

A loud knocking broke into my daydream, yanking me back to the reality where me and Charleene couldn't be together.

"Are you ok?" Charleene's voice made me jump and guilt stole through me, that I'd been imagining doing such dirty things to her, when in reality I was causing her pain.

"I'm fine," I shouted back, wondering what noises I may have made that she'd felt the need to come and knock on my door.

"Can we talk?" Her question was quiet but my hearing caught it anyway. She deserved answers, I knew that it was unfair of me to give her the cold shoulder without one. But what was I to say? My feelings for her were unlike anything I'd ever felt before, yet the laws of my own kind stood in the way of her happiness. She wouldn't understand that.

"Fine," I finally found myself answering and pushed up off of the bed to let her inside. Standing back from the door I allowed her in, making sure not to touch her as my hands and heart wanted to. I could smell her strawberry scent clinging to her, reminding me of my daydream, as she walked passed. She looked around, examining my room that looked as if no one was even staying inside it. What can I say, I like order. Everything should be in its place, all nice and neat. It was how I'd lived my life until I met the bundle of chaos that was Charleene Murry.

Charleene's fingers taped against her leg, betraying her nerves as I appraised her. She approached the bed, running her fingers over the soft duvet. My mind conjured the image of her sprawled over its top, screaming as my tongue lapped at her wet pussy. Shaking away the image I coughed, clearing my suddenly parched throat.

"What can I help you with?" I asked keeping the distance between us.

“Why are you being like this?” she asked, taking no prisoners and letting me see the hurt I was causing her.

“Like what?” I played dumb, knowing full well what she was referring to.

“Like a heartless bitch.” She threw back at me, perching on the edge of the bed and frowning up at me.

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“Because I am one.” I said, making my heart break a little more as tears gathered in her beautiful blue ones.

“Bollocks,” she spat back at me, suddenly standing and striding over, until she was pressing up against my chest. I forced myself to take even breaths, so as to sell the lie more believably.

“I’m the monster beneath the bed Charleene,” I snapped, needing to make her not want anything to do with me. Backing her towards the wall might not have been the best choice in hindsight. Charleene’s eyes narrowed at my words, “I’m not the hero in your story.” I finished as her back hit the wall.

“What if I want you to be?” her words were whispered and her eyes which looked like storm clouds narrowed.

“I can’t be.” Leaning towards her lips, my daydream flashed in my mind again. What would it be like to press mine to them again, if only for one last time?

“Why?” her question made me realise how close I’d gotten to her and I pulled back, until there was a couple of inches between our faces. “It’s the twenty-first century, Dina, there are no laws against two women being in love anymore.” She implored, clearly having thought about her argument a lot.

It was a great argument, but she didn’t know how the Laws which ruled Supers were different from those of humans, “It’s not because we are women that I can’t be with you.” I whispered, my forehead falling to rest against hers.

“Then what is it?” she asked, staring into my eyes, “please help me understand.”

“Coven Law forbids relationships between Supers,” I explained, my eyes closing so I wouldn’t have to see her reaction. Her sharp intake of breath told me all I needed to know.

“Why?” she demanded, anger shining in her voice and I found I had no answer.

Why was it forbidden for different Supers to love each other? Until now I’d had no reason to question the laws; instead I’d blindly followed every one of them and punished those who’d broken them. “I don’t know.” I finally answered, my brow furrowing.

“If there isn’t a good reason, then why should we deny ourselves this?” Charleene’s question forced my eyes open and I searched hers for the answer.

I...I...I...” my voice started and stopped repeatedly, unable to find the words she wanted to hear, “It’s forbidden.” I finally whispered, drawing back.

“I know you want me,” her voice was firm as she pressed against me, forcing me back a step, “it’s like a burning need in here,” she said touching her chest above her heart, “unlike you, I can’t turn it off and don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to turn it off, but I also can not break our Law,” I said, my voice wobbling slightly over the last part of my sentence. Why couldn’t she see the position she was putting me in?

“Why not? Why is some antiquated Vampire Law that, in my opinion, shouldn’t even exist stopping you?”

I looked deeper into her eyes, my mind racing to find the right words to explain how

three centuries of living and protecting those laws had become an intrinsic part of me and failed. Sighing deeply, I turned my head to the side, unable to keep looking at her shining eyes and seeing the disappointment in them.

“Well, when you figure out if what we could have outweighs your stupid Vampire Laws, please let me know. But right now I can’t keep playing whatever this game is.” Her words cut me deep, fracturing my heart even further. The lump clogging my throat grew as her soft hand caressed my cheek for a second, before she turned on her heel and left me alone, stewing over her words.

The afternoon passed by, the sky turned to dusk, then to night as I laid on the bed thinking over the Vampire Laws and why they’d been created. All of them made sense, as a way to protect our kind, all of them except the one baring Supers from loving each other. I listened as Charleene ordered herself lunch, then tea, but she never came back to my room. I heard the footsteps approaching, soft thuds on the hall carpet, before the knock reverberated through the hotel suite.

With a groan I left the safety of my room and walked quickly to the door, beating Charleene to it. Swinging it open I glared at Tilly, who stood on the other side, her dark hair up in its usual high ponytail and her forest green eyes crinkling at the corners.

“It’s nice to see you too,” she laughed, pushing me out of the way and striding inside. “You look well Charleene.” she greeted my stunned companion, making her way over to the untouched bar.

“What are you doing here?” I growled, knowing my temper had nothing to do with Tilly’s presence but all to do with not being able to have what I wanted most. I was like a damn toddler, all but stamping my foot and Tilly noticed. Her brow raised at my demand, before her eyes narrowed flashing between me and Charleene.

“You two haven’t?” she asked, turning to pour herself a drink of the expensive golden whisky.

“No!” I snapped, knowing what the question was actually asking, “we haven’t crossed...” I paused searching for the right words before continuing, “...any more lines.”

“Good,” Tilly sighed, drinking a healthy mouthful of her drink.

“Why shouldn’t we?!” Charleene demanded, crossing her arms stubbornly and fixing Tilly with her own glare.

“Because if you had, I’d have no choice but to drag you both before the Elders and that wouldn’t be helpful for either of you.” Tilly’s voice was cold, and professional.

“Urrrggg, stupid old vampires.” Charleene cursed, throwing her hands in the air and stamping over to the loveseat.

“Why are you here?” I asked Tilly, drawing her gaze and attention.

“I just got some new friends settled,” Tilly explained, nonchalantly.

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“New friends?” I pushed, my eyes narrowing.

“Two Fae I found wandering around York,” her words reminded me of the human women with red hair, who’d smelt of Ancient things, and her dark knight with pointed eartips.

“And you brought them here?” I questioned, trying to understand why Tilly thought they needed to be here, instead of back with their own kind.

“Yes, the woman was letting off some pretty powerful magic, and she doesn’t even know what she is, so obviously I couldn’t leave them running amok.” She explained, and it did make sense, however something inside me screamed when I thought of that dark haired Shadow Fae being anywhere near Charleene.

I stared at Tilly incredulously. I couldn’t believe that she’d not only stumbled across them, but brought them here. Ancients were a thing of the past and they should stay where they belonged. Nothing good would come of them meddling on Earth; it hadn’t been the last time they’d been here. The Elders’ enjoyed teaching all new vampires about the Shadow Fae who’d created our race eon’s ago before abandoning us.

“We’d been nothing more than an experiment to them.” I snapped at the room and instantly regretted my outburst when I saw Charleene flinch. Looking over at her, she looked confused. “The Shadow Fae created our kind, they mixed their own blood and dark magic with that of humans, turning those who survived into Vampires,” I explained giving her a brief history lesson, “then after growing bored they abandoned us, giving no explanation or even returning to see what would happen to us.”

“That may have been the case back then, however this Fae is different,” Tilly said breaking my story short, “they aren’t Shadow Fae, Adrina, and she needs our help.” I knew she was trying to calm me down, but the rage I felt at her bringing their kind to Hamstead wouldn’t cool. “She doesn’t even truly know what she is.”

“What do you mean?” Charleene’s sweet voice asked timidly.

“She has no memory of being anything other than human,” Tilly told her gently.

“Like me?” Charleene ventured hesitantly.

“No!” I snapped.

While Tilly said, “Yes.” Our voices overlapped.

Glaring at the woman who’d been my closest friend for over three hundred years, I shook my head in disappointment and walked over to where Charleene now perched on the edge of her seat. Sinking down on the balls of my feet to meet her eyes, “She’s nothing like you—” I began, getting halfway through my sentence, before Charleene cut me off.

“Of course she’s like me, Dina! It wasn’t that long ago I thought I was just a human woman, trying to make her way in life and now here I am. In your Vampire Coven’s grandest hotel, waiting to see if they can find out what Witch Coven I belong to. How is that any different?” Charleene snapped at me, losing her patience.

“Well...” when she put it that way, I could see the similarities, but it didn’t change the fact that they would put her in even more danger than she was already in.

“Anyhow...” Tilly began, drawing both of our attention her way, “the Elders are reconvening this evening and you two are to attend.”

“Have they found something?” Charleene asked and I couldn’t tell if it was hope or fear that made her voice tremble.

“They wouldn’t say, just that they wish to discuss it with you Charleene,” Tilly’s voice was calm and neutral, but her eyes wrinkled slightly at the corners, making me wary of what tonight’s meeting would bring.

Chapter Fourteen

Do I hate those that created and abandoned us, because it comes too close to my own past? -Dina

Still angry that Tilly had chosen to bring the damn fae to Hampstead, I waited for Charleene to get changed, glaring at Tilly as she drank another glass of whisky. “Why would you bring them here?” I asked again, glancing at Charleene’s door.

“Because she is untrained and needs about as much help as Charleene does.” Tilly answered glibly, “why is this bothering you so much?” she fired back, quirking an eyebrow at me, but before I could answer Charleene returned.

“Ready to go?” I asked, wondering why the Fae’s presence seemed to rankle me so much.

“Yep,” Charleene answered, her happy tone at odds with how her finger tapped incessantly on her leg.

“It will be ok,” I said, moving swiftly to her side and shoving my own issues deep down.

“I know, I’m just scared.” Charleene admitted meeting my eyes.

“Of what?” I asked with a frown. Didn’t she want to know more about herself and where she’d come from?

“What if they don’t know where I came from or who’s Coven I belong to? What if I was a mistake that they want to forget?” Her questions came out in a rush of verbal diarrhoea, making my lips twitch in a smile until her last question, “what if I’m not good enough for whoever abandoned me?”

“Then it’s their loss,” I told her anger colouring my tone, “you are perfect.”

Charleene’s stormy sea eyes met mine, shimmering with unshed tears at my bold declaration. “So I’m perfect enough for them but not for you?” she said with a small sniffle, before her eyes hardened, “Good to know.”

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It was like her words had slapped me around the face and it took me a moment or two to remember how to walk again. Following Charleene and Tilly from the room, I made sure the door clicked shut behind us all and entered the lift in silence mulling over Charleene's words. I could see why she'd think such a thing, and even though it wasn't true, I didn't correct her. It would be better for us both in the long run, I reminded myself as my heart throbbed. I remained silent as Antonious let us inside and escorted us all to the Council's chamber. Even Tilly's reproachful look didn't loosen my tongue, when we waited to be allowed inside the council room.

"You can go inside," Antonious said to Tilly, nodding his head at me and Charleene as we also filed past him.

Following Tilly across the floor I stopped just behind her and dropped seamlessly into a low crouch, one leg bent with my knee resting on the hard floor and my head bowed.

"Good evening Elders," Tilly said respectfully, acknowledging their standing.

"Good evening Huntress Matilda, it is a joyous occasion to have our children home." Elder Cain replied in his bored monotone.

"If only she had done her job properly," Elder Constance sneered. I could hear the condescension dripping in her tone and could imagine the sneer her thin lips would be pursed in.

"I attempted to find the rogue vampire, I scoured the whole of York city looking for him," Tilly explained, "he has gone to ground and I fear that someone in the magical

community is hiding him.”

“Why so?” Elder Bertrand asked.

“I and my team of Hunters and Huntresses are highly skilled at finding those who can’t or don’t want to be found. This vampire is managing to remain undetectable. There is no trace of his scent. I’ve spoken to the York Coven of Witches and they are unable to find him also.” She kept her voice toneless, answering each of their questions about the rogue.

“That is very troubling,” Elder Bertrand responded and I could picture his steeped fingers turning white as he kept his wise, calm, elderly facade in place. He was the Elder I liked dealing with the most, not that any of them were particularly pleasant if you crossed their rules, but he’d always seemed the most patient and kind.

“Huntress Adrina, what are your thoughts on this...rogue?” Elder Reginia suddenly questioned, forcing me to be a part of their deliberations.

“He is clever but also not working alone,” I answered, rising from the floor and meeting her brown eyes. “He stated in our interaction...”

“You interacted with the rogue but failed to kill him?” Constance questioned, making my eyes flash to face in time to see eyes pinch together into slits and her lips flatten into an unimpressed thin.

“I was protecting both Charleene and an unknown Fae woman.” I explained, knowing I’d already told them about this during my first report. “He stated that his Master would put us all in our places.” I said, quoting the bastard we couldn’t catch.

“That still does not explain why he is not already dead.” Constance snapped, rising a little from her seat.

“He went into the River Ouse and I had to choose between following him or protecting the two women with me,” I explained calmly, not allowing the simmering anger to reflect in my voice or person.

“You should have chosen—” Constance screeched before Reginia interrupted.

“Adrina chose correctly. Above all else, we protect those who can not protect themselves.” Her tone was clipped, but her ire wasn’t aimed at me. No, it was aimed at the Elder on the end of her row.

Charleene fidgetted, drawing my gaze from the Elders above to the woman standing beside me. She was nervous, I could see from the sweat beading on her brow and the way she was chewing the inside of her cheek. Glancing down I found her fingers tapping out a repetitive rhythm against her leg as she waited for the Council to address her. I wanted nothing more than to wrap my arms around her, to reassure her, but under the eyes of the Council I needed to keep my distance.

Tilly took over explaining about the rogue and the Fae she’d brought to London, but I couldn’t drag my eyes away from Charleene. She’d stolen my focus from the first time I’d caught her scent and had yet to let me go. Even now, I shirked my duty and found myself questioning the laws I’d upheld for so long. I was supposed to be listening as my superior gave her statement, but I hadn’t heard a word of what Tilly had said.

“Charleene Murry,” Elder Bertrand called, gaining my full attention in an instant. My eyes flashed up to the Elders, who watched Charleene intently as she answered.

“Yes?” she said, her voice wobbling a little as her nerves got the best of her.

“When I first saw you, I could not believe my own eyes,” Elder Reginia said softly, “you have your Great Grandmother’s eyes and cheek bones.” Her smile was genuine

as she looked down at Charleene.

“What do you mean?” Charleene asked.

“I met your Great Grandmother when she was around your own age. She came to me, imploring me to pay heed to a prophecy that she and her Coven feared would come to pass.”

“What does any of that have to do with me?” Charleene wondered aloud and when I looked over at her she was frowning up at Elder Reginia in confusion.

“I strongly believe that your family is the head of the Nicnevin Coven in Scotland.” Reginia told her.

“So have you contacted them?” I found my own voice asking, drawing the Council’s gaze as well as Tilly’s angry one.

“And why is that your question to ask?” Constance probed, her sharp gaze watching me closely. Turning to look at her, I kicked my brain into actually thinking, before opening my mouth to respond.

“Adrina has grown close to Charleene, while escorting her to London, she is invested in Charleene finding her family.” Tilly spoke smoothly, covering for my blunder of showing too much interest.

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“Matilda is correct, I only wish to see Charleene find her people, so they can aid her in understanding her emerging magic.” I continued, keeping my voice toneless as they would expect. I was known around the Coven as being unapproachable and unfeeling. Carefully observing each Elder I watched, satisfied, as they each bought what we’d said. All of them except Constance, who’s eyes narrowed suspiciously at me.

“Well, we would have reached out to them, however no one has had any contact with the Nicnevin Coven in years.” Reginia answered.

“Why would they have given me up for adoption as a baby?” Charleene asked, and I kept my eyes firmly on the Council, even though they wanted to stray to Charleene. Constance was still glaring at me.

“We do not know.” Reginia answered, “we are concerned that the Nicnevin Coven has been uncontactable for so long, and since you have questions that only they could answer, we would like one of our Hunters to accompany you to Scotland. So that you can find them and restore communications between us.”

“And how am I supposed to find a Coven that one; doesn’t want anything to do with me and two; doesn’t seem to want to be found?” Charleene asked.

“By blood.” Elder Cain stated, as though it was the most simple thing in the world, but even I was confused by what he meant. “You are connected to the Coven via your familial blood. All you need to do is get close and they will find you.” He explained.

“So you want me to scour the whole of Scotland until the Nicnevin witches find me?”

Charleene questioned, her voice rising a few octaves in disbelief.

“That is correct young lady.” Elder Cain’s voice didn’t waver as he answered, his face didn’t even twitch. “You are excused, alongside Huntress Adrina.”

I bowed low again and waited for Charleene to pass by, before following her from the room and leaving Tilly alone with the Council of Five.

I remained in the living area of our suite, until well past midnight for Tilly to softly knock at the door. Checking that Charleene was still curled up on her side fast asleep, I went and let Tilly inside. “What did the Council decide?” I asked before she’d even taken a step through the doorway.

“The Council have decided, with my input, that you would be the best to send with Charleene,” Tilly paused, giving me an assessing look, “how deep are you Adrina?” She asked with a knowing look.

“I’ve been keeping my distance,” I told her, keeping eye contact.

“That wasn’t what I was asking and you know it.”

“That’s a conversation to drink with.” I said, offering my old friend a small smile.

Turning towards the small bar and going to pour us both a healthy amount of whiskey. The strong smoky scent burnt my nose, but damn did it both smell and taste divine. We couldn’t get drunk, as our metabolism burnt off the alcohol too fast, but this wasn’t going to be an easy conversation.

“I’ve fallen for her, but have been pushing her away,” I said honestly, staring down at the amber liquid in the glass I held too tightly. “I’m causing her pain, Tilly, and I’m not even sure why I need to do that. Why can’t Super’s form stronger bonds? We

work with witches all the time, why would it be so wrong to fall in love with one?" I could no longer keep the questions inside and if I trusted anyone it was Tilly. She had never let me down, even this evening she had covered my faux pas with Charleene.

"It's all for the best, Adrina. We may not understand the Laws but they exist for a reason." Tilly told me, ever the voice of reason.

"What else did the Council say?" I wondered aloud wanting to change the subject from myself.

"The Fae are also to go with you and Charleene to Scotland." Tilly said, avoiding my gaze.

"What?!" I said, my voice rising.

"The Council believe that there may be a hidden 'gateway,' as they put it, up in Scotland. One that can send the Fae back to where they belong." Tilly's brow raised, showing me how much she believed what the Council had told her, "your secondary task is to find it and make sure they return, before destroying said 'gateway' for good."

"So I'm a glorified babysitter now," I laughed humorlessly.

"It would seem so, but at least you'll also get to aid Charleene in finding out who she should have been." Tilly laughed back, clinking her glass with my own before downing the rest of her drink. I watched as she walked towards the door, opened it and turned back towards me. "You will inform our new friends of the decision to take them to Scotland."

"Oh no, that's your job not mine." I said, shaking my head.

“You’re all going to be travelling together, I think you should make friends before you all leave.” Tilly said, “They’re in suite two-o-three.”

I watched in shock as she let the door close behind her and wondered what I’d done in a past life to deserve all the shit this life had decided to throw my way.

Doing as Tilly had bid, I left Charleene to have breakfast in peace and found myself striding down the small corridor to room two hundred and three. There were two doors on this floor—unlike the connected suite which me and Charleene currently resided in. I could hear their voices before I even reached the door Tilly had told me about. The male one sounded different to when I’d last seen him in York. It was lighter; almost joyous even as he responded to the woman’s familiar voice, why was he different? I pondered, flinging open the door. Inside wasn’t the tall, dark haired Fae I’d met in York but a tall blonde one instead, with hazel eyes that assessed me. Ignoring him, I headed straight for the red haired female I recognised.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I snapped, leaning over her and getting in her face where she sat on the sofa. She stumbled to reorientate herself, and after a moment of staring at me with wide eyes, finished her sentence.

“...waiting.” She said, continuing the last part of her argument and answering my own question at the same time. Confused, I glared down at her and when she growled low in her chest, my patience almost snapped, but her next words made me pause, “We’ve been here for days now.”

“For what?” I snarled.

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“For Tilly,” she said back, her shoulders shaking with the effort she was putting in to keep them ramrod straight under my intense stare.

“Ladies,” the blonde one interjected, drawing both of our attention to him.

“Stay out of this Jace,” the red head growled.

At the same time I snapped out, “What?”

Why would he feel the need to state we were both ladies? It was pretty obvious. Jace—as the red head addressed him—paled and held up his hands in surrender, before quickly turning on his heel.

“I’ll leave you to it, just don’t destroy the room,” he said, glancing over his shoulder with a wry smile, before leaving and shutting the door behind him.

“Who the hell are you?” the red head, who’s name I still hadn’t bothered to ask for, shouted at me, leaning a little closer.

“Dina,” I told her, slightly distracted from my anger at her question, before asking one of my own, “how do you know Tilly?” I asked in a slightly less angry tone and moved out of her personal space.

“She found us, not the other way around, and I don’t really know her.” The woman answered. Her voice was firm, no trace of a lie. I scrutinised her, my mind racing over all the reasons Tilly would have brought them here to the Coven, it couldn’t just be because they needed help. We didn’t take in any old stray magical creatures.

“What did you do?” I found myself accusing, and watched as my words got a rise out of her.

“Nothing!” She shouted, before continuing with a more sheepish look, “well I might have used magic.”

“What the fuck,” I mumbled, more confused than ever. It must have been powerful magic to have drawn Tilly’s attention away from the rogue. Running a hand through my short hair, I pulled on a few strands, trying to ground myself as I asked my next question, “just who the fuck are you?”

Instead of answering the woman shrugged, like it was no big deal or it was as Tilly had said; she genuinely had no clue how to answer, and began nervously pacing. I watched, wanting nothing more than to shake her, as she went to the window and looked outside. “How do you keep it all from them?” she asked, changing the subject.

“What?” I asked, genuinely not understanding her random question.

“The humans.” She explained further, “All they see are run down mansions, how do you do it?”

“Witches,” I found myself saying, watching as she watched the people below in fascination, reminding me a little of the wonder Charleene’s eyes had shown on seeing Hampstead for the first time. “You really are clueless aren’t you?” I asked, unable to help myself from groaning again at the complications she was bringing to mine, and by extension, Charleene’s life. Frustrated, I ran my hands through my short strands, as she watched me instead of the street below.

“Guess I am.” She answered in a sad, sarcastic tone, returning her gaze to the street outside and letting loose a sigh. “I have no idea who I really am, I dream of fantastical things, I can shoot elements from my hands...well sometimes I can,” she

said, staring down at her hands, a small frown marring her brows. “All of you seem to know more about me than I do, but none of you can tell me anything without hurting me.” I watch her shoulders hunch under the weight of what she’s telling me and pity floods through me when she turns her water gaze to meet mine over her shoulder. “Can you imagine how that feels?” I couldn’t tell if her question was for me or rhetorical so I remained silent, watching her like a hawk. “Of course you don’t,” she scoffed.

How can she really know so little about herself? I wondered silently, pacing the room. And what did she mean by us not being able to tell her anything? My mind whirled with each new question and even though my anger over them being here had not fully dissipated it was certainly cooling slightly.

“When will Tilly be back?” she said, interrupting my thoughts and turning towards where I paced. Her eyes narrowed a little and I suddenly felt like she could read my mind as I grew even more frustrated at Tilly.

“When she is,” I told her, waving my hand vaguely through the air without so much as a pause in my stride. She seemed almost a little too eager to have Tilly return, “Why?” I found myself questioning aloud.

“Because I need answers,” she said evasively, her eyes jumping about the room. “You know what I am.” she stated, meeting my dark eyes.

“Yes.”

“You know I don’t.”

“Yes.” It was like a game of twenty questions with the most boring answers, where was she going with this? I asked myself, tilting my head to the side.

“I need help.” She all but whispered in a broken and frustrated tone, “Tilly says there’s a young witch that might be able to help.”

Her words are like a bullet hitting me in the heart, but instead of giving away any of my own feelings I just nodded and remained silent, trying to get said feelings back under control.

“Tilly always says too much,” I growled, the need to protect Charleene from everything rearing its head, making me want to snap this confused, sad Fae’s neck. “But I’m sorry, we can’t help you,” I told her. Succinctly severing any thoughts or hopes she may have had pertaining to my little witch.

My little witch? Where had that thought come from, Charleene wasn’t anyone’s, or little, and after my antics she certainly didn’t belong to me. I’ve already forgotten the Fae behind me as I stalk towards the door, but her enraged voice had my feet freezing.

“Can’t or won’t!?” She shouted, seconds before flames erupted, blocking me from leaving through the door. What the hell does she think she’s doing? I briefly wondered as my own anger roared to life. Spinning, I used all of my vampire speed, until my face was almost smashed against hers, barely refraining from the desire to headbutt her.

“Can’t.” I seethed, my nostrils flaring both in anger and at the scent of charring wood. “Charleene can’t control her emerging powers, so she can’t help you with whatever you need her for. She’s got enough to worry about without your problems as well!” My words made the fire behind me roar louder, and when I glanced behind me, the flames leapt higher. “I won’t let you hurt her,” I threatened, my voice no louder than a whisper as my eyes narrowed into slits. This was who Tilly wanted to travel with us to Scotland? An unstable Fae? I didn’t want Charleene in the same hotel as her, let alone in the same car.

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My words seemed to break something inside the girl as her flames disappeared, leaving nothing but scorched carpet in their wake, and her face crumpled before she turned back to the window. I almost missed her next words, “No-one will help us.” She hiccuped, scrubbing her hand across her cheek and I realised she was crying.

Great dum-nut you made the highly volatile Fae cry, my mind snarked at me and I already regretted my next words before they even left my mouth, “Well I didn’t say that now did I?” My voice rang calmly through the room, making her pause and her shoulders tighten.

“What?” she asked, a note of caution making her voice wobble. She turned slowly, making even more pity flood through me at the tears still falling down her cheek and that pesky conscience piped up again.

“We’re going to search for Charleene’s Coven,” I went on, not really wanting to invite her along, but knowing Tilly would just command it of me anyway. Walking back to the now flame free door I paused, staring back, appraising her before issuing my next demand, “You’re coming with us, be ready at 8am.” I said, slamming the door closed behind me.

Chapter Fifteen

Can you really know yourself, if you have no clue about your past? -Charleene

Last night had given me much to think about concerning my life, my past, the family I’d never wanted to know and Dina’s feelings for me. Getting back to the hotel I’d been quiet, thinking over the implications of what I’d learnt, even excusing myself to

go to bed early. However, after getting changed and tucking myself into the ridiculously comfy bed, sleep eluded me. I was still awake, with my back to the door, when Tilly returned. I kept my breathing slow and steady when I heard Dina's steps approach my still open door and should have probably made it known I was still awake, but I was interested to hear what they would discuss without me there.

I was still flabbergasted by her words, she'd admitted she was falling for me, but her kind's laws were forcing her to push me away. My heart hurt for how conflicted she was between her duty and her heart. I'd always thought that when I fell in love it would be simple, but I was beginning to see that it was messy and unkind. Tears had tracked unbidden down my cheeks on hearing how she truly felt, my heart hurt for the pain this situation was causing us both. As I listened more to their conversation, sleep had slipped further away and I'd still been mulling over their hushed conversation into the early hours of the morning.

So it was no surprise that Dina had already been gone by the time I woke again, I assumed she'd gone to inform the Fae of our plans, like Tilly had commanded. It was late afternoon when Dina finally came storming back through our door, muttering angrily beneath her breath. Offering her a small smile, I continued returning the growing stack of books to their shelf. When the silence grew too heavy I decided to break it, "You ok?" I asked.

"I suppose so, how are you feeling this morning?" she responded, turning my own question against me as she continued pacing.

"I feel strange," I admitted before trailing off, not knowing how else to sum-up all I was thinking, "So Scotland." I tried again to find a topic of conversation for us and stumbled, not knowing what else to say.

"It's going to be a long drive," she muttered almost under her breath, giving me a whiff of smoke as she paced past me.

“Why?” I asked, not letting on that I knew the cause of her anger and what was going to be happening from eavesdropping last night.

“I don’t understand why they have to come with us, that woman is an accident waiting to happen.” Dina grumbled more to herself than me, but I listened anyway.

“They can’t be that bad?” I sympathised, trying to be diplomatic.

“She set a door on fire in a temper tantrum, all because she can’t control her magic.” Dina explained, meeting my eyes. My face paled slightly at the thought of sharing a car with someone who could conjure fire out of thin air.

“I would like to meet them, properly I mean.” The words came out without me thinking too much about them, and from the look that crossed Dina’s face it had been the wrong thing to say.

“You’re not going anywhere near her, she’s too dangerous!” Dina snapped, taking me aback with the anger emanating off of her. Lifting my hands in surrender, I started planning how to slip out of the suite anyway, they couldn’t be as bad as she was making out. Were they?

With my thoughts busy making a plan, we lapsed back into silence. Dina continued pacing and muttering every now and then.

“Do you think the hotel would mind if I borrowed a book?” I found myself asking, as I selected another classic; *Pride and Prejudice*, from the shelf.

“What?” Dina said distractedly, glancing over at me.

“If I start reading this book can I borrow it?” I repeated.

“I don’t know, but if not, they can always charge me for a new one,” she said, the barest hint of a smile turning her lips up, when I squealed in delight and grabbed the book. Almost running to the sofa, I let the afternoon pass us by and got lost in the world of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy.

My eyes were gritty and dry when they opened, long before the sun rose. It was much harder to convince myself to slip out of the nice warm bed with the early morning chill biting at any exposed skin. I hopped more than walked to the ensuite bathroom, rubbing at the rising goosebumps on my arms the whole way. Stepping under the warm shower spray was like heaven, easing out my tense muscles, while warming me up and making me feel slightly more awake and human. Dressing in my comfiest pair of jeans and my favourite t-shirt that told the world exactly what I thought of it, I grabbed my phone.

Was five in the morning an acceptable time to order breakfast? I wondered, staring at the message icon that was still on the screen. Lily had been messaging me since I’d left York, but not knowing what to say most of the time, I’d been sporadic in replying to her. Leaving her newest message unread, I sauntered into what I was beginning to call the living room of the suite. It seemed funny giving it a name now that we were leaving again. Dina was nowhere to be found and her bedroom door was thankfully shut. Leaving the note I’d written last night for her, I tiptoed with my hightops in hand to the door. Not knowing how hard it would be to sneak past a Vampire with uber sensitive hearing, I mostly, just hoped that she was otherwise distracted.

Successfully making it to the door without her coming to see what I was doing and closing it quietly behind me, I let out the breath I’d been holding and slipped my feet into my shoes. Clutching one of our two keycards in hand, I forced myself to walk slowly to the lift before calling it and riding it all the way down to reception. I didn’t know where in the hotel room 203 was, I realised, stepping out into the deserted reception area.

It still took my breath away how the giant chandelier sparkled. Cautiously approaching the long reception desk, I waited for a member of staff to arrive, constantly glancing over my shoulder at the lifts. Expecting Dina to appear at any second and foil my plans to meet the Fae woman who'd helped me that night under the bridge in York. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but I still remembered her kind smile and the way she'd grabbed me when my feet had frozen.

"Is everything ok Miss?" a young man dressed in the hotel's smart back uniform asked, startling me and making me yelp before I got myself back under control.

"Yes, thank you. Is there anywhere that I can get coffee at this time?" I asked the young man who quickly came to see what I wanted. "I know that it's early."

"We can make you anything you need, Miss." Julian—his gold name tag told me—responded politely, not mentioning the early hour or my being down here.

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“That would be great, thank you,” I sputtered out feeling self-conscious, as he looked at me politely and I realised I hadn’t told him what I wanted. “Could I please get a caramel latte?” I asked toying with the glass top of the desk.

“Certainly Miss, would you like to take a seat and I’ll bring it over when it’s ready?” Julian replied with a kind smile, “Could I take your room number, so I can add the extra charges.”

“Oh, yes, I’m in suite number three hundred and twenty.” Smiling back, I waited as he typed on the computer next to him and went to find a seat I could hide in when Julian told me that it had all been sorted.

Picking a deep, high backed wing chair facing the huge ornate fireplace, I fished my phone from my back pocket and opened Lily’s latest text as I sat down.

Lily: Missing you. Last night the Grange dorms threw a massive party. How long are you visiting London for?

Staring down at the text, and seeing that uni life was continuing for Lily, I felt a pang of missing out. Rationally I knew it hadn’t been safe for me to stay in York, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t allowed to pine for the life I’d been making there. Wiping away a stray tear I decided it was still far too early to message back and resolved to reply later, when I wasn’t feeling as emotionally unstable.

“Sorry to interrupt Miss,” Julian said, holding out a large glass cup containing my latte.

“Oh no, thank you so much,” I said, trying to smile up at him and failing from the sympathetic look that crossed his face.

“Are you sure everything is ok?” He asked again, placing my drink on the small table beside the chair.

“It is, I’m just missing home.” I said with a small snuffle, feeling sorry for myself.

“Homesickness is a horrible thing,” he commiserated, “I hope your day improves, and if you need anything else please just let me know.” Julian asserted, before leaving me alone with my thoughts and returning to the reception desk.

Staring into space, I imagined briefly what my life would have been like if none of this had ever happened to me. I would still be a student, trying to find my place in the world, but would I have been happy? Was I even happy now? I asked myself. There had been moments over the last couple of weeks, where I’d been happy, happier than I’d been most of my time in York. Dina was definitely a major part of that, I realised, even if things between us were now strained. Sighing heavily, I let myself think about the good times we’d had, attempting to find some of my usual good spirits.

The reception area slowly came to life as I sat in my chair, sipping the delicious caramel latte and people watching. I invented small stories about what each person was planning to do with their day; some were dressed in smart suits and blouses, telling me they were heading out to work. Others wore casual clothes making me think they were going for a day of new adventures. Smiling at the latest silly story I’d made up in my head, I was surprised when my phone vibrated on my leg. Glancing down I saw the text message icon and quickly opened my phone to see the nickname I’d assigned to Dina’s contact.

Mysterious Girl: How’s your walk?

Remembering what I'd written in my note, I quickly typed out a response.

Me:Enjoying aimlessly wandering. It's beautiful here ??

Mysterious Girl:Ok, stay safe.

Her response surprised me, I'd been expecting her to demand to know exactly where I was. Frowning down at my phone, I was pondering how best to respond when my eyes caught on the small digits in the top left hand corner. Surely seven was an acceptable time to call on someone. Chewing my cheek, I grabbed my long since empty glass cup and headed over to where Julian was checking out another guest and waited. Once he was free I stepped up to the desk and flashed him a much more natural, if shy, smile. "How can I help you Miss?" He enquired without missing a beat.

"Could you please direct me to room Two-O-Three? My friends arrived a few days ago, and I'd like to greet them but I keep getting turned around." I hoped my nervous babble didn't dissuade him from helping me. I had no idea how hotels as fancy as this one would deal with someone asking for directions to a room that clearly wasn't their own.

Julian's eyes studied me for a moment, before he explained I needed to take the elevator up to the second floor, where signs would point me in the correct direction.

"Great, thank you, Julian," I said in a rush, turning towards the lifts, I paused wondering if I should take coffee. After a moment's hesitation I turned back to Julian who was still watching me with a polite smile. "Would it be possible to get two black coffees in to-go cups?" I asked.

"Of course Miss," Julian replied, adding the two drinks to Dina's room. "Would you like some milk and sugar to go with them?" he asked after ringing through my order

to whoever made the drinks.

“That would be fantastic, thank you.” Smiling, I moved to the side, out of the way in case any other guest wanted to use the reception desk and tapped my foot anxiously as I waited for the two coffees.

With both coffees warming my hands I awkwardly pressed my key card, held between my fingers, to the little black square and called the lift closest to the reception desk. Stepping inside the empty lift when the doors dinged open, the key card slipped from my precarious grip, falling to the floor as I pressed the shiny gold number two button.

Considering how best to retrieve the card without spilling my coffees, I was both surprised and grateful when someone called, “Hold the Lift!” Jamming my pinky finger on the icon that would keep the doors open, I smiled at the short man with red hair as he ran onto the lift. “Thank you.” He gasped trying to catch his breath.

“What floor?” I asked politely, nodding at the array of gold numbered buttons.

“Five please.” Pressing the button and not sure how to ask if he would pass me my key card, I glanced back down at it, once again wondering how to pick it up. “Would you like me to grab that for you? Or do you just want to stare at it some more?” The man laughed, following my gaze to the floor of the lift as it began its smooth ascent.

“If you wouldn’t mind, that would be very helpful,” I laughed back. He passed me the card, as the doors opened onto the second floor. “Thank you again.” I muttered, stepping out into the hall.

“Have a good day,” the man said back, tipping an imaginary hat in my direction, making me giggle as the lift doors closed, hiding him from view. With my good mood returned I followed the golden signs to find rooms two-o-three and two-o-two

in their own little corridor. Standing before room two-o-three, I wondered if this was really a good idea or if I should just return to my own rooms. However the door swung open, making the decision for me.

My mouth dropped open at the gorgeous, tanned man who stood framed in the doorway. I may prefer women, but even I could appreciate his beauty as he flashed me a dazzling smile of white teeth. My eyes travelled down and warmth filled my cheeks as they tracked over his bare chest and six pack, until they stopped on the white fluffy towel hanging low on his hips. Embarrassed, I began apologising, "Sorry, sorry," I repeated backing away from the door, "I must have the wrong room," I stammered out, turning for the door that would take me back to the lifts.

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“What room were you looking for?” his voice was smooth, caressing my ears in a melodic way.

“2...203” I stuttered, flustered and embarrassed about how I was reacting to him.

“Nope, you got the right room alright,” he said, glancing at the room number on the door and back to me with his brows raised, “I’m guessing you weren’t expecting to find me behind it though?” he laughed, but I couldn’t tell if he was joking or being serious.

So I went with honesty, “No,” I told him, my cheeks on fire.

“Who were you expecting?” he said, obviously taking pity on me, as I stood frozen like a deer in someone’s headlights.

“A woman about my height with red hair,” I managed to get out after a couple of calming breaths, maybe I’d just heard the wrong room number.

“Ah, your looking for Ally?” He said, his tone becoming more suspicious and less friendly, “and just exactly who are you?”

“Erm...I met her in York, a while back, we’re not exactly friends, but I’ve been told we’ll be travelling together today, to Scotland, and I just wanted to introduce myself, I’m Charleene...” I rushed out, not knowing why I was telling him all of this, but also unable to stop myself from rattling off so much information either. Significantly more embarrassed I pushed open the door, intending to run straight through it and back to my own rooms, but his voice stopped me.

“She’s next door,” he told me, flashing another award winning smile, “I’m Jace by the way.”

“Erm..nice to meet you...I think?” I answered my brow furrowing in confusion at his sudden switch in attitude.

“Is one of them for me?” he inquired, nodding at the cups in my hand. In a daze, nodding I passed him what would have been my own second coffee of the day. “Thank you Charleene, now if you’ll excuse me I best be getting ready.” He said before taking a sip of the now cooled coffee. When I still didn’t move he spoke again, “I’ll be along shortly, but I think I’ll let you wake sleeping beauty next door.” And with a mischievous wink, he shut his door leaving me standing in the small hallway, not knowing if I was coming or going.

What a strange guy, I thought to myself staring at his closed door for much longer than was probably polite, before moving to the one beside his, and knocking.

No one answered my first knock, so I brought my closed fist down harder, knocking again louder this time. Still there was no response. Was she really staying in this room, or was that guy just messing with me? I thought, banging on the door for the fifth time.

“What bloody time do you call this?” a woman’s voice shouted, making me flinch as she yanked open the door between us. My smile dropped at the look of thunder on her face. She was definitely the same woman from beneath the bridge, her red hair was unruly and messy from sleep but still recognisable with its bright colour.

“Erm...I thought you might like some coffee?” I said quietly and quickly, holding up the last cup of coffee, and dropping my gaze to the floor.

Chapter Sixteen

When life gives you lemons and all that jazz. -Charleene

There were a couple of moments where neither of us spoke, me staring at the carpet and her presumably staring at the top of my head.

“Oh, sorry,” she said after what felt like an hour, but had probably only been a couple of seconds. Her tone changed in an instant, reminding me more of the kind, helpful woman I’d met previously instead of the grumpy bear she’d just been.

“It’s ok, it is early,” I mumbled at the floor. Taking a deep breath and finding the courage I used to wield in York as a waitress, I pulled my face up and met her eyes again, “I’m Charleene, we met in York briefly. Dina says you’re coming with us today?”

Instead of being the strong statement I’d wanted, my words sounded more like a question even to my own ears, making me blush as my lips turned up in a hesitant smile and I shuffled from foot to foot waiting for her to answer.

“I guess we are,” she responded smiling back, “is coffee still an option?”

Smiling wider, my head bobbed up and down, as I thrust the last cup at her.

“I didn’t know how you take it, so I brought milk and sugar.” Digging into the pockets of my coat, I didn’t even notice she’d moved from the door until she spoke again.

“Come in, Jace should arrive soon,” she explained kindly, before closing the door behind me.

“Yeah, he said as much when I gave him his cup,” I said, finding my cheeks heating as a deeper blush stained them. Why couldn’t I get my shit together around these two? I

berated silently, mentally kicking myself for acting like a complete idiot.

“It’s ok you know, he has that effect on all women,” she says, offering me a conspiratorial smile, like it was a normal occurrence to have women blushing over her friend.

“It’s not that, I’m not...” I choked out in a squeak, before deciding just to let the subject drop as I walked over to join her at the sofa. Finally finding all the packets of sugar and milk I’d rammed into my pocket, I tipped them onto the low coffee table between the two sofas.

Her laugh surprised me and I found myself frowning over at her, wondering what I’d done that was so funny. “What did you do, steal all their condiments?” she said in explanation, making me snort a small laugh as I looked over the mountain of condiments.

“Maybe,” I agreed, slipping my coat off. Another burst of laughter came from the woman opposite me as she read the slogan on my shirt, ‘Fuck this life’ it read and summed up exactly how I’d felt this morning when getting ready. At least she has a sense of humour, I thought, wondering what to say next as the silence grew between us.

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“Dina says your Fae?” I suddenly blurted, before slapping my hand over my mouth, as though the action could take back the words. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.” I quickly apologised, shaking my head at myself.

“It’s ok and yes, apparently I am,” she replied with a kind smile, glossing over my sudden loss of social skills.

“Apparently?” I asked, picking up on the word and her uncertainty. I knew Tilly had said she knew nothing of her past, but I hadn’t expected her to be as unsure as I was.

“I don’t really remember being anything other than human,” she explained, making me look closer at her.

And because I can’t seem to control my damn mouth, I say, “You look human, no pointy ears or...” I pause lifting up to see her back, “...wings, unless you're hiding them.” I wondered aloud. Looking back at her face as I sat down, I’m taken aback at her look of shock and realised I’d probably been too forward again.

“Not that I know of,” Ally says back, with a small smile, “and you’re a witch?” she asked, turning the tables on me, her eyes squinting as she looked me over from head to foot.

“Apparently I am...I mean I’ve used magic once but that’s completely new to me and...”

“Scary,” she says at the same time I finally found the word I was looking for to explain how I was feeling. For a moment we just looked at each other before laughter

spluttered from deep in my chest and she followed suit.

“Well looks like you two are going to be great friends,” Jace’s voice interrupted our giggle-fest, making me realise we were no longer alone in the room as he shoved my shoulder and sat next to me on the sofa.

Glancing around as I reigned in my laughter, I realised Dina and Tilly had also joined us. Meeting Dina’s eyes, I wondered if she’s mad or relieved from her raised eyebrow.

“Great,” she exclaims, perching on the coffee table, and the hard look on her face softened a little when she next glanced at me.

“When do we leave?” Ally’s voice dragged me away from getting lost in Dina's dark depths. Looking back at her I watched in amusement as her eyes bounced between Dina and Tilly, waiting for one of them to answer.

“In an hour, we can take your car.” Dina answered, looking away from me and meeting Ally’s gaze.

“What?” she sighs, her eyebrows rising in question as Dina opened her mouth and closed it again without saying a word.

“Nothing, you should get your things together,” Dina demanded instead, “you too blondie.” She said, looking at the golden man beside me.

“I’m all packed Beautiful,” Jace retorted confidently, smiling over at my surly companion. I almost burst out laughing again as Dina pinned him with an unimpressed look, that had it falling quickly from his face.

“You’re wasting your time on that one,” Tilly giggles, taking pity on the guy, as she

motions towards Dina with just her eyes.

Jace's hazel eyes flicked from my face to Dina's and back again as he realised why and relaxed back into the sofa, a softer smile replacing the one he lost.

"Good to know," he commented, his tone respectful.

"Ally, are you just going to stand there or actually go get packed and ready?" He suddenly threw at the red-haired woman.

"Yeah, won't be long," she mumbled, already backing towards the door which I assumed led to her hotel bedroom and disappearing from view. Nobody spoke, until the shower started and Jace left to grab his own bag. I sit, my foot tapping on the plush carpet, waiting for the lecture I can feel coming.

"Why are you here?" Dina asked, her voice low and distant, "I thought you were having a walk to clear your head?"

I know that's what I'd said in my note and to be honest, I hadn't intended to stay here as long as I had. But I'd found Ally to be a breath of fresh air that I didn't know I needed. She didn't seem to mind my questions, and if I was being totally honest, she seemed to understand what I was going through more than Dina or Tilly ever could.

"I wanted to meet them," I responded lamely, knowing my answer would raise more questions than it answered, but it was honest.

Dina let out a frustrated sigh, shaking her head at me, but let the subject drop. None of us spoke while we waited for the Fae to rejoin us. Jace came back first, pushing open the door and dropping his bag beside it before striding over to where Dina still perched on the coffee table.

“I don’t know what you said to Ally yesterday, but watch yourself.” Jace threatened, leaning over her and pinning her with a look I could only describe as hostile. A look she matched, as she pushed herself to her feet. Rising on her tiptoes, she comically attempted to get into his face, and I smothered a giggle behind my hand. Jace is over 6ft tall and Dina’s the shortest in the room.

“She better keep herself under control.” Dina spat venomously, referring to Ally’s outburst when they’d last spoken.

The shower shutting off made both of them step back, even though daggers were still flying from their eyes as they glared at each other.

It’s going to be a long drive,I thought to myself as Ally stepped back into the room. The scent of apples surrounded her as she carried a small bag with her.

“So where are we going first?” she asked, breaking what I can only assume is an awkward silence.

“Scotland.” I answer quietly.

“Ok,” she said, looking at each of us in turn as though trying to figure out what she’s missed. “When do we leave?”

“Now, if you’re ready,” Dina snapped, clearly still angry even though this latest argument had nothing to do with the poor girl.

To her credit Ally just nods in response, unfazed by the angry vampire as she asks another question that I was also curious to know the answer to, “And how long is it to Edinburgh?”

“About eight hours,” Dina answered quickly.

“That’s a long drive,” Ally commented, a sad look flashing across her face before she hid it with a smile.

“We’ll have breaks,” I found myself interjecting uncertainty, not really sure if Dina had planned any rest stops on our journey.

Glancing at the woman in question, I waited with the others for her answer, “Sure,” she promised gently.

That is until Jace’s voice pipes up, “And what’s in Edinburgh?”

“Hopefully information,” Tilly took over explaining, as Dina’s nostrils flared, and motioned for us all to get moving by wafting her hands from us to the door.

“And how does this help us find Lilah exactly?” Ally asked, her grip tightening on her bag.

Who’s this Lilah, I thought, silently watching Ally as she walked past me, and what does she mean to the Fae?

“Once we’ve found the Coven, we can ask them to scry for her.” Dina stated, like it was the most simple thing as we all filed from the hotel room.

“And why would this Coven help us? It’s not like they know us.” Ally pointed out.

“Trust me, everyone wants your kind gone from Earth,” Dina grumbles.

“Why?” Ally queried, her eyes widening.

Stopping before the lift, I waited to see if anyone was going to answer her question and just when I thought no one would, Dina did, “Because you cause trouble.”

Ally’s mouth worked, like she wanted to say something before thinking better of it and thankfully the dinging of the lift doors opening stopped all conversation. None of us spoke again until we were standing outside. I barely paid Jace any attention as he bounced up and down beside me, my attention fixed on Ally and the small frown she’s wearing.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, startling her when she didn’t realise I’d moved to her side.

“Nothing” she muttered, giving me a small smile, jumping into the front passenger seat.

I waited for Dina to reach us, grateful when I saw that she carried not only her own

bag, but mine too, that I'd forgotten to pack in my hurry to meet Ally. Giving her a grateful smile as she went round the back of the car and placed them both in the boot, I lowered myself into the back seat, and shuffled over to the opposite side, giving Dina plenty of room alongside me and putting me behind the driver's seat which Jace had already claimed. I didn't pay much attention, instead staring out the window, as Dina gave Jace the address for our first rest stop. Lost in my thoughts, I ignored everyone as we made our way towards the closest motorway.

Dina's angry growl grabbed my attention, "So what powers do you have?"

"Um, I dunno," Ally answered, shrugging.

"Well we know you have fire and you mentioned something about air at the hotel," Dina snorted, trying to smother a laugh, making Ally look back at her in surprise as I also looked at her in shock. "What else have you used?"

"Alyssa has loads of powers," Jacin suddenly interjected, "She's been trained in all types of combat, magical and physical. She just doesn't remember any of it."

"Well that's helpful," Dina remarked, sarcastically stating what I knew I was thinking.

"She just needs to train, it's more than your defective witch can do." Jace remarked back snidely, making me shrink back into my seat, hoping it would swallow me whole.

He's not wrong, what good am I? I wondered.

"She needs to learn that's all," Dina sniped back, "Charleene's had no training, it's not like she was made to forget."

“And Ally just needs to train,” Jace fired back confidently.

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“Just like I do?” I found myself saying, surprising not only myself but everyone else in the car, as I reminded them I’m still here. “I need to learn how to protect myself.”

Ally’s eyes scanned me briefly as Dina puffed out her chest, ready to stab someone by the violent twist to her mouth and how her eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

“Damn right you do.” Ally stated with a sympathetic smile, that made me wonder what is going through her mind when she looks at me. I followed Ally's eyes as they shifted to Dina and her eyes rolled, “what? She needs to learn about herself as much as I do, you won’t always be there to protect her.”

Dina considered Ally’s words before reluctantly agreeing, “Fine!”

Unable to contain the squeal that comes from my mouth, I manage to refrain from taking my seat belt off and hugging her as she agrees that I could train with Ally. Not that I really understood what training would actually look like, but I was still excited to try.

“So how’s this going to work? Where would we even train them both?” Dina’s questions tempered some of my excitement.

“They’d need to be protected, but I don’t think we can afford to wait. What about your...friends?” Jace asked sceptically, meeting Dina’s eyes in the mirror.

“Will He be able to find me again?” Ally suddenly blurts out, confusing the hell out of me as she begins a completely new conversation with Jace.

“No, at least I don’t think so.” Jace mumbles as I look out the window, giving them as much privacy as I can manage, whilst also being in the same car as them.

“What have you done Jace?” Ally asked him, a cautious note to her voice.

He glanced across at her as she stared at him, before returning his eyes back to the road. “Protected you.”

“What if I don’t want protecting from him?” I’m beginning to feel a little awkward as Ally’s voice rises to a shout and I wonder just who they’re discussing.

“Tough, you don’t want him around Ally, he’s not good for you.”

“That’s my decision to make, not yours!” she shouts back at him, her fists clenching.

“No it’s not, you can’t be trusted when it comes to Him!” Jace responds quickly, not missing a beat as I finally find the courage to interrupt.

“Who’s He?” I ask, wanting to diffuse the tension rising between them.

“No one!” They both snarled back.

“Okaaay,” I muttered softly, glancing across at Dina who looked just as confused as I was pretty sure I did.

Chapter Seventeen

How can two hours feel like eternity- Dina

The drive so far had already been exhausting, and we’d only just set off. However, between the Fae arguing and discussing things I wasn’t aware of, as if they were

alone, I was ready for it to be over. My phone buzzed in my pocket, drawing my attention away from their conversation. Pulling it out, I glared down at Tilly's name, "What the hell?" I snapped, drawing everyone but Jace's attention. Swiping my thumb across the green icon, I gave no preamble as I answered, "What's going on?"

"I've just been informed that the rogue's surfaced again," Tilly said quietly, making all the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, "It looks like he's heading down towards London, from what my scouts can tell me. They're tracking him as we speak."

"Ok, we'll be careful, thank you for letting me know," I tell her, not wanting to get into a lengthy discussion on the matter, glancing over at Charleene I meet her worried gaze.

"Stay safe Adrina, I don't know who's helping him but they must be powerful to have kept him hidden this long," Tilly reminds me, before I can hang-up.

"I will, bye." I say curtly, making sure nothing shows on my face as worry sets in. If we can make it to Kirby Hall before he finds us, we might have a chance of evading him. Gladys isn't stupid, she has every protection spell known to witches placed around the old house she calls home.

"Who was it?" Charleene's voice interrupted my thoughts. Meeting her wide eyes, I wanted nothing more than for this to all be over. For her to be safe instead of being hunted.

"No one important," I said quickly, reaching out and cupping her cheek with my hand. Life was so unfair. What did the bastard want with her? I wondered, gazing into her stormy eyes.

"Don't lie to me Dina, I'm not a child," Charleene fired back, reading something in

my gaze and pushing away from me. I ignored Ally's sighs, figuring out just how much to tell Charleene. I didn't want her panicking but she was getting too good at reading me it seemed.

"The Rogue has moved away from York, it looks like he's stalking you, Charleene."

"Who?" Jace interrupted as Charleene's face paled, making her look ill.

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“The vampire from under the bridge?” Ally questioned, showing that she remembered him just as well as we did.

“How?” Charleene whispered, her frightened eyes not leaving mine.

“We don’t know, he must have help...” I told her honestly, before she interrupted.

“Why? Who am I to be worth all of this trouble and effort?”

“We’re going to find out babe.” I state, grabbing her hand and squeezing, “the Coven thinks you’re powerful. Maybe that’s why he’s after you?”

“What if he catches me before we find the Nicnevin Coven?” Charleene whispered brokenly.

“I won’t let that happen!” I told her, unable to even contemplate anything else happening.

“But what if?” Charleene asked again on a sob that almost tore me in two.

“Ssshhhh, I’ll die before I let that bastard touch you.” I watched as tears gathered in her eyes, but she tried putting on a brave face for us all.

“We’ll help too,” Ally suddenly declared with a quick glance across at Jace, before she continued, “And you’ll be able to protect yourself before long, Jace will knock us both into shape.”

“Damn right I will,” Jace confirmed confidently.

“And I have contacts up in Scotland who can help hide us and look for your Coven,” I told them all, grateful for their input as Charleene’s shoulders lost some of their tension.

“Hey it could be worse,” Ally said from the front seat, drawing both of our gazes.

“How?” Charleene whispers.

“You could be in love with the man hunting you,” she said, as though not really thinking about what she’s saying. Ally glances warily at Jace, but before he can say anything Charleene’s voice fills the car.

“That’s true, is that what’s happening to you?” She asked, a little colour filling her cheeks, and gaining Ally’s attention.

“You don’t love him Ally, you don’t know him. If you did you’d hate him.” Jace interrupted, disregarding Charleene’s question, his voice filled with anger about whoever they were discussing. If I had to guess, I think it was in regards to the Shadow Fae who’d protected Ally from me back in York. But if the Shadow Fae had protected Ally, why would Jace look murderous anytime he came up?

“Maybe,” Ally agreed, cutting the conversation short as my own thoughts turned to how I could best protect Charleene from the Rogue hunting her.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn’t realise Charleene and Ally had fallen asleep until Ally’s soft snore filled the car and monopolised my attention. The sound of it wasn’t particularly loud, but irritated me either way. I still hadn’t forgiven the Council or Tilly for turning me into the babysitter of the errant Fae, but I also couldn’t argue that the faster they left, the better off we’d all be. Their appearance here could only mean

bad things, and my churning gut told me that Charleene and I were going to be placed smack bang in the middle of their drama.

Huffing out a sigh, I turned my head watching as cars flashed past, wondering where they might be headed. Thinking about nothing in particular, memories of my human life invaded my head. I remembered listening to my baby sister singing on our small front porch, or helping Mother with the washing. Things I hadn't thought of in a very long time, because they'd become too painful.

At first I hadn't really understood what I'd become, when I'd followed Alasdair from my family's porch and into the dark night. He'd taken me to another house on the edge of town, one that had been abandoned for a long time. Ever since Widow Ava had died when I was around seven. I'd just stepped over the threshold when my neck had been torn open and his heavy hand had covered my mouth, smothering my screams until only the two of us could hear them. It hadn't taken long for blood loss to claim my consciousness, however before the darkness claimed me I felt something soft press heavily against my lips and wetness coated my mouth with an iron tang.

When I'd woken, my throat felt tight and my mouth was so dry like it was full of sand. Rushing from the pile of sheets I'd been laid on, I ran for the door wanting to get outside to the well and sate my thirst. My hand had just closed over the round handle when Alasdair's laugh made me freeze.

"Going out there will do you no good child," he'd scoffed, drawing my attention to him as my head whipped around. His unnaturally grey eyes had looked me up and down as a cruel smile turned his lips up.

"I need to go home. Mother and Pa will be wondering where I am." I'd managed to whisper through the dryness.

"Aye, they are lass, but you canne go near them now." He'd laughed, cold and cruel.

The car swerved to the left, pulling me from the old memory, but Alasdair's laugh rang in my mind, still haunting me to this day. Shaking my head as though that would clear all thoughts of my sadistic sire, I wished more than anything I would one day stumble upon him so I could end his sorry existence. Glancing out the car windows, I wondered where Jace was going, we weren't meant to stop until we reached Gladys' house and safety.

"Where are we going?!" I growled, not liking surprises and letting it show in my voice as Ally's soft snore filled the car as her head turned away from my harsh tone.

"To grab some food, you might not need to eat but the rest of us will," he explained as the big yellow 'M' for McDonald's rose above the treeline, "and you don't want to be trapped inside a car with a hangry Ally, trust me." He joked, his head jerking in her direction before quickly turning back to the road.

"Fair enough, order Charleene whatever you're getting Ally," I grumbled.

Jace ordered food and drinks for all three of them as I sat silently in the back. I'd never needed to go through one of these drive-thrus the humans were so fond of, but even I couldn't argue against their efficiency. No more than twenty minutes later we were merging back into traffic on the motorway, after Jace had inhaled his own food.

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“You don’t like us much do you,” Jace suddenly stated, his eyes glancing at me in the rear-view mirror, now that I sat in the middle seat with Charleene’s head resting on my shoulder.

“Is it that obvious?” I said sarcastically, knowing I hadn’t kept my dislike of them hidden. His full belly laugh startled me, what had been so funny about that? I wondered.

“As much as you don’t like it, Ally’s right. Charleene needs to be able to protect herself just as much as Ally does.” His calm, reasonable tone didn’t help my temper much, as I considered his words.

“How?” I finally growled, keeping my voice as low as possible so as not to wake the others. “They’re both too powerful to be trained together with no protections.”

“I know that, but they have to learn.” His tone was gruff as he too kept his voice low but I still caught the growl of frustration on his words.

I hadn’t seen Charleene express much of her magic, in fact since we’d left York she hadn’t shown any trace of it. However from what I had witnessed, she had powerful magic trapped inside her and after being restrained for so many years, it was going to come out with a bang.

“It will be like lighting a beacon, the moment we let either of them use their magic, have you considered that, you moron?” I told him, freeing the frustrated thought.

“I have, but what other option do we have?” I know he’s right even if I want to argue

with him and protect the woman sleeping beside me, “they need their powers active and reliable, if either of them are to survive what’s hunting them.”

“I know, we’ll have to keep moving, be careful and vigilant.” I mumbled, speaking the thoughts flashing through my mind as I contemplated just how bad training these two was going to be.

“You can stop secretly listening-in now Ally,” Jace laughed, his head turning towards her, as I glared daggers at the back of his head. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough,” she answered sheepishly, rubbing at her eyes. “How long was I out for?”

“Only about an hour,” I told her, watching as her nose wrinkled.

“Hey no fair, you guys ate while I slept?” she accused angrily, making me smile at how well Jace knew her. I don’t even know which of us started laughing first but I found myself joining in when she pouted at the side of Jace’s face.

“We did but don’t worry, I’ve got you covered Ally,” Jace explained, nodding at the floor near her feet.

“Okay, you’re forgiven,” she mumbled before taking a massive bite of the wrap she'd pulled from the bag. “So where are we going next?” she asked, her words muffled by the food she was chewing.

“We’ll be stopping soon, so Jace can have a break from driving,” I informed her, gratefully thinking of being able to get out of this car even if it was just for an hour or two at Gladys’ house.

“Mmmm-hummm,” was her only answer as she turned her head to the window for a couple of moments, clearly enjoying her food. I’d almost thought her questions were

done, when she asked another, “And where will we be stopping?”

“Kirby Hall, near Northampton,” I responded distractedly, as Ally bit into a hash brown into her mouth at once, as she turned to look at me. My eyes narrowed at her suspiciously, as her eyes flicked over Charleene’s sleeping face before returning to mine, with a strange smile that was both kind of sweet and surprised at the same time. Not looking away, I wait for whatever retort I can see swimming in her too dark eyes. How had she passed as human for so long? I wondered. “I know someone there who can help hide us for a short time.”

“Who?” she asked hesitantly, her brow furrowing and a look of panic crossing her face before she got it under control.

“An old friend.” I said, trying for some reason to calm the Fae’s nerves.

“Whose an old friend?” Charleene’s voice asked into my ear as her head left my shoulder, yawning. She gave me her sternest look, which I found more adorable than threatening, however I’d be the last to tell her that as her nose twitched, “and is that food I smell?”

Without saying a word I leaned down, my fingers closing on the brown paper bag Jace gave me at the rest stop and passing it over. I wasn’t expecting the excited and almost ear-piercing screech Charleene issued in response to the food. Baffled, we all stare at her wearing bemused smiles as she pulls out a cold apple pie, before taking tiny bites, trying not to drop any crumbs.

“Do you really eat dessert before your main?” Ally scoffed, seemingly finding it incredibly funny to watch as Charleene ate the pastry with unfiltered delight.

“Damn right I do,” I watched as a smile brightened her face as she responded to Ally, then her gaze swung to me. “So who’s an old friend?” She repeats.

“Gladys Kingsbrook is.” I replied, my brow furrowing, as I thought of the complicated history between me and the witch. I hadn’t always been able to call her my friend, but they didn’t need to know that.

“And how will Gladys be able to protect us from mystery vampires and...” Ally’s voice trailed off, the rest of her sentence forgotten as Jace’s shoulders stiffened beside her.

“She’s a Witch, not a very powerful one, elementally, but she’s brilliant with protection charms and spells. I want her to train you both in them while we’re with her,” I said, drawing Fae’s attention from her friend. Strangely, the more time I was spending with the irritating male, the more I found we had a lot in common.

“Oookayyy,” she muttered, making me realise I’d been staring at Jace’s head.

“Do you really think she’ll be able to teach me?” Charleene’s timid question had my head whipping her way, as she nervously picked apart the Egg McMuffin that Jace had ordered— instead of a breakfast wrap— to pieces in her lap.

“Eat.” I demanded sternly, staring at her, waiting until she put some of it in her mouth before continuing. “Yes, she should Babe. It’sHerI’m not sure she’ll be able to teach,” I say nodding in the fae’s direction and hoping no one picked up on the pet name that had just slipped out.

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“Why not?” Ally questioned, her eyes narrowing as they met mine.

“Because your magic is completely different to Charleene’s.” I said flatly, not thinking she would need any more explanation than that. She was Fae and their magic, although similar to Witches, was also completely different. While Charleene had been on her ‘walk’ this morning, I’d been to the Coven and had Antonious find any and all information they held on the Fae. I’d wanted to be prepared as well as I could be, before letting Charleene anywhere near them.

“It’s ok Ally, I can teach you when we’re at a safe place,” Jace interjected, trying to calm his friend's temper, which had risen in regards to my simple statement.

“Ok,” she finally grumbled, turning back to the window and giving me the back of her head.

“How long’s it gunna take to get us to this Gladys person?” Charleene asked, filling the awkward silence.

“About another hour or so.” Jace and I say in unison, drawing identical groans from the two of them.

Chapter Eighteen

Protectiveness comes easily when I look at her, even while battling my conflicting feelings -Dina

The car lapsed into silence as Ally turned her face back towards the window,

effectively cutting off any further conversation. Movement caught the corner of my eye as Charleene began picking at the side of her thumb, pulling at the skin over and over. Without thinking about it my hand snapped out, covering both of hers and squeezing them gently to stop her from making herself bleed.

“What’s wrong?” I mumbled, keeping my voice quiet, so as not to disturb the two Fae.

“It makes no sense Dina,” She said back in a whisper, “Who am I, for that Vampire to be so insistent?” Her question was valid; it was very strange that he hadn’t just moved on to a new target and left her alone.

“I don’t know, babe,” I told her honestly, instantly regretting it when a tear rolled down her cheek. “It could be that his ‘master’ is looking for something specific, or it could just be that you escaped him and his bloodlust is calling for him to dominate you.” I quickly rambled, reasoning it out for myself at the same time. “All we know is that nothing this rogue has done so far has made any sense.”

“What do you mean?” Her question was timid and showed how scared she was.

“Normally a rogue who is on a killing spree doesn’t hide their actions, because they just don’t care. The bloodlust takes over their rational minds, forcing them to take more and more lives in the quest for sating the thirst raging within them.” I said, quickly explaining what we usually dealt with in blood-addled rogues. “However, this one has been very clever; we don’t know how long he has been killing or where he began. The only reason we’ve found him now is because he’s become cocky and sloppy.”

“But why now?” Charleene asked, her eyes wide and locked on mine.

“We don’t know, the only contact we’ve had with him was when he cornered you in

York.” I told her, frustration over mine and Tilly’s failings when chasing the bastard bubbling to the surface. Charleene offered me a small smile, that barely turned her lips up at the corners and didn’t reach her eyes, before pulling her hands from mine and losing herself within her thoughts as the miles flashed by.

Paying no attention to anyone, I pondered everything I knew of the rogue. He first came to the Council’s attention six months ago, when the Scottish papers in Glasgow began reporting about four different murders where all the victims had lost all of their blood. After the third victim, news began being covered in the UK media; at first it was small sections in the big newspapers then, after the fourth victim, the news programmes had picked it up and they suddenly stopped. Tilly and I had been sent to Glasgow to see what we could figure out about the murders, and to see if we could determine if it was a sick human responsible for the killings or a supernatural being.

Glasgow had been a bust, neither of our contacts in the Glaswegian police force could tell us if the murderer was human or super. All they knew was that the bodies had been found in different areas of the city, with their throats cut but no blood had been detected on their clothing. Nothing connected the victims.

Four weeks later, Tilly received a phone call from her contact in the Edinburgh police force: a student had gone missing, turning our attention south. Low and behold, a day later, the student’s body had been found, with their throat slit and again completely drained of blood. Puzzled, we headed there hoping to catch whoever it was in the action, yet we couldn’t find him. Witches in the city scried for the perpetrator with no luck, we searched the streets every night for a week, until two more bodies later we were no closer and they stopped again.

“Where’s all the traffic?” Ally’s voice dragged me from my thoughts. Glancing around I recognised the long winding drive, lined with tall trees and breathed a sigh of relief. “Is it protected?” Her voice continued, making me wonder just how she knew, noticing the curious glance Jace gave her.

“Yes, its reality is protected like in Hampsted Alyssa, it’s how you’ll both stay hidden from our pursuers.” I answered, frowning over at the red-haired woman.

“So what the general public see isn’t what we’ll see, right?” Charleene asked, drawing my attention from the strange fae.

“Correct,” I answered.

“Oh thank God, because I was thinking how can a person live in a bunch of ruins in England of all places.” Charleene’s response almost has me cracking a smile, at her naivety when it came to anything supernatural. After three hundred years her innocence was refreshing, allowing me to see our world with new eyes.

“Wait, this place is a ruin?” Ally shouted in surprise, turning in her seat so she could look at Charleene.

“Yeah,” she answered, passing her smartphone over so Ally could see the pictures she’d obviously been looking at.

“Impressive,” Ally stated after a few moments and handing the phone back, before flashing me a curious look, “and your friend Gladys owns all of this?”

“Technically the National Trust owns it, Gladys rents Kirby Hall out to them and receives a cut of the profits.” I rambled, my gaze fixed on the house as it came into view at the end of the lane. The route I’d taken would keep us away from any early tourists and take us to the back of Kirby Hall. I watched Charleene’s mouth drop open as she got her first look at the pale stoned building. Even I had to admit it was impressive, and had been since it’d been built. My foot tapped on the car floor as Jace drew his car to a stop next to Gladys’ tiny black Fiat.

“Is everyone you know rich as hell?” Charleene asked, her wide eyes pinned on

Kirby Hall as she stretched, arching her back and pushing her breasts out, making me swallow as desire punched me in the stomach.

The sound of hurried footsteps inside the house distracted me as I replied, pushing down the surge of desire, “Not everyone.”

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“Adrina!!” Gladys’ shrill voice filled the small courtyard around us, “what are you doing here?”

“Gladys,” I said, speeding towards her. She’s possibly the only person I know who’s smaller than me, however, that doesn’t stop her from dragging me into a tight hug. “We needed a safe place to rest for an hour or two.” I explained when she stepped back and her gaze focused on my companions.

“And who are your friends Drina?” She asked, her brows pulling together in a confused frown.

“That’s Alyssa and Jace,” I said in a low voice, indicating each of them in turn, before walking back to the car and Charleene’s side, “and this is Charleene.” My voice sounded different even to my own ears as I said her name. Gladys gave me an unimpressed look, her eyes fixed on the way our fingers entwined together.

“Well you better all come in, I’ve got breakfast, come on,” she instructed in her no-nonsense-voice, already striding to the house and propping the door open for us all. Tugging on Charleene’s hand that I still clasped tightly we followed, and from the raised eyebrow Gladys threw at me, I knew she’d be demanding to know what has happened soon. She’d known me long enough now, to know that I didn’t hold hands with anyone and I certainly didn’t bring people on my sparse visits. The Fae came soon after and I began leading the way as Gladys closed the door behind Ally.

“Wow.” Ally muttered as Gladys rejoined the front of our group.

At the same time Charleene said, “You’re so lucky to live here.” Her voice was quiet

as she marvelled at the decor around her.

“Yep, it’s a shame that not everyone gets to see Kirby Hall in all its splendour but...” Gladys responded, trailing off and even I’m interested to know what else she was about to say, however she never continues the sentence.

“It’s beautiful,” Charleene complimented, not missing a beat, prodding Gladys to say something else and lose the far away look in her eyes.

“Elizabethan elegance in all its finest.” I heard her pride in the building in each word she uttered.

Gladys lead us into the kitchen she knows I hate. It has a long, black marble worktop, that flows seamlessly into a built-in electric hob, then to a massive Victorian, cream porcelain sink. All the while, a giant fridge-freezer hums away in the corner. In the centre of the room is the old Elizabethan wooden table, filled with pockmarks and burns which had built up over time. Around the table, Gladys had placed ten grey bar stools. I could see the look of confusion plastered on Ally’s face and found myself agreeing with her; what the hell had happened to this kitchen.

"How do you live in such a big place?" Ally queried, making Gladys double over with laughter, “What?”

When she finally calmed down Gladys shoot me an amused look, “Drina, have you been exaggerating again?” She asked fondly, pulling out tinfoil wrapped parcels from the oven, “I don’t live here, Alyssa was it?”

Ally nodded, her eyes wide as she stared at my friend’s back and waited for her to continue.

“I live in a small cottage right on the edge of the grounds.” She explained, placing a

package in front of all of us except Dina.

“So why keep this place secret?” Ally blurted, as though she could not stop herself from asking, as she unwrapped the parcel in front of her, revealing a white polystyrene box.

“To protect it over the years.” Gladys answered plainly,

“From who?” Charleene asked, with a mouthful of food.

“Robbers, rich bastards that would want to own it for themselves,” she explained with a shrug, “it’s been in my family for the last couple hundred years or so, and as Witches, it gave us a big enough place to meet.” I watched as Gladys’ green eyes brushed over Charleene. I know she could feel that Charleene’s a witch, I also know how curious Gladys Kingsbrooke is, so her next question didn’t surprise me, “but you should be familiar with Coven practices hmmm?”

What I’m not expecting is how the simple question makes Charleene react. She flinches before shrinking in on herself, almost like a balloon deflating. Wrapping my arm around her shoulders, my brows lower into a frown.

“Charleene doesn’t have a Coven, Gladys, it’s one of the reasons we came here.” I told her.

“No Coven?” Gladys gasps, “what did you do?” she accused, shocking me for a moment when her eyes narrowed into slits at Charleene. Anger surged through me, joined by the fierce need to protect Charleene from Gladys and I wanted to rip her head off as I stared across at my old friend. Opening my mouth, I’m about to tell Gladys just what she can do with her accusations, however Ally’s angry voice beat me to it.

“She did nothing wrong,” she said, her voice firm and unyielding as she pinned Gladys with a look I can’t quite decipher, half derision and half shock if I was to guess, “why would you even jump to that conclusion?”

Gladys’ head snaps towards the Fae with a raised eyebrow and then I feel it. The hairs on my arms began to rise one by one as a static charge began to fill the air around us. I glanced over at Charleene, but other than being pale she didn’t seem to be letting off the magic.

“Because either her Coven is dead or they banished her,” Gladys stated, her voice flat, as she raised a finger and jabbed it at Charleene, “Witches protect our own, so which is it youngling?” she demanded.

“I...I...I don’t know?” Charleene stuttered and her shoulders began to shake.

“Adrina! What have you dragged me into this time, old friend?” Gladys demanded, not taking her eyes off of Ally as the magical current infusing the air grew stronger and stronger. “Why are you travelling with ancient ones and protecting an unknown witch?” Her voice was livid as flames licked across the back of Ally’s hands and I realised it was her magic I could feel building.

Anger coursed through me, anger that I hadn’t felt since I’d been condemned in much the same way by the London Coven for being different from the norm. Never had I thought Gladys would treat another witch in such a way, but here we were and I’d had enough.

“It’s a long story, Gladys,” I stated angrily, slamming my hand down on the scarred table top, making everyone’s eyes bounce to mine, as it shook. “Charleene is part of the Nicnevin coven,” I paused, drawing in a calming breath and holding it for a couple of seconds before continuing and pointing at the two Fae, “and as to those two, they shouldn’t even be here! But they are, so I’ve been tasked with making sure

they leave. And hopefully soon.”

“The Nicnevin Coven?” Gladys questioned, “Drina, they haven’t been seen or heard from in what? Twenty plus years! And you’re right about those two, their kind do not belong here.”

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Charleene's gasp had all of us looking at her, "babe what's wrong?" I questioned, keeping my voice soft so as not to further upset her.

"I'm twenty Dina," Charleene whispered, confusing me, and it's Ally who answered first, making me understand just what had rattled her so much.

"Charleene, just because they've not been seen in your lifetime does not mean they are gone," She stated with conviction.

"Then where are they? And why was I adopted as a small child?" Charleene asked, her voice wobbling, "why did they abandon me if they're alive?"

"I don't know babe," I soothed, nodding at Ally, "but she's right, the High Council would not have sent us searching for them if they were dead. Please don't cry babe."

"Bloody Hecate and all her spirits!" Gladys crowed, almost clapping her hands in joy and making everyone at the table jump, "Adrina, have you finally..."

"Shhhh!" I hurriedly hushed, interrupting her before she could sprout such nonsense as talk about Mates. I saw Ally pale slightly as I glared over at Gladys.

"You're definitely in a heap of trouble Drina," Gladys laughed, shaking her head as she looked over at each of the people sitting at her table, "eat up, you can all tell me just what the hell is going on while we eat. I'm starving."

The stench of salty bacon filled the air as everyone opened their boxes and began eating, and since I'm the only one who doesn't require any food, I took over

explaining everything to Gladys. She um's and ah's along the way but doesn't interrupt me, however once I drew to the end her brows were joined together in a deep frown.

“Ok then. Let's see what I'm working with,” she stated matter of factly, when everyone else finished their sandwiches, returning to my understanding friend. Sighing gratefully, I let Gladys choose how she wanted to continue with no comments, and urged Charleene to follow the tiny woman.

Gladys didn't take long, striding back down the corridor and through the back door, she took us towards where her own cottage nestled, hidden by hedgerows.

“Erm where are we going,” Ally whispered uneasily behind me.

“Calm yourself, Forgotten, we don't need you to explode before we're hidden again.” Gladys demanded, not once breaking her hurried steps.

Charleene dropped back from my side and followed her. I watched as she took Ally's hand in hers, “I'm scared too.” Her words barely reach me. She said them so quietly but I found myself smiling as Ally offered her a small smile in return.

Returning my eyes to Gladys, I follow her lead as she steps over fallen branches and dodge piles of dirt, before passing through a small gap in the hedge. Knowing what lies on the other side I walked straight through, quickly followed by Jace, and finally Ally joined, us pulling Charleene after her.

“Right, let me look at you both properly, stand here.” She motioned for Ally to move to the right, “and you, here Charleene,” Gladys said, pointing to a space about ten steps to Ally's left.

“What do you mean ‘look at us properly’?” Charleene asked timidly, watching

Gladys closely as she shuffled to the indicated spot.

“I’m going to try and see what led you both here, and try to determine the magic waking inside each of you.” Gladys explained, flashing me a warning look as I stepped towards them.

“You want to look into our pasts?” Ally’s voice wobbled on the quietly asked question, and her hands balled into tight fists at her side, betraying her fear and making Jace attempt to step from my side. But I held my hand out, signalling for him to stop, knowing Gladys wouldn’t hurt either of them as she continued explaining herself.

“Yes, Forgotten, I do. You are clearly here for a purpose, and I believe that Charleene here is as much a part of your journey as you are of hers.”

“Why are you calling me that? I have a name you know,” Ally snarked at her.

“Because you are of the Forgotten race, who left so long ago that you are now just a half remembered myth. Humans think you are a mystical race, but we, the supernatural, we know your kind abandoned us many moons ago. So yes, you have a name. But, you are also Forgotten to Witches.” Gladys muttered, confusing the hell out of me. I didn’t even know that Witches remembered the Fae, let alone had a name for them.

“Hhmmm, well do you mind using my name?” Ally said rudely, but I couldn’t blame her. Learning your whole life has been a lie must be just as frustrating for her as it is to Charleene, maybe even more so for the Fae woman.

“Very well Ally,” Gladys conceded with a small nod, “I’ll start with Charleene and then try and see you. Both you ladies be seated, and you two,” Gladys barely glanced at us before she continues, “make yourself scarce.”

Jace bristled beside me at the dismissal, so wrapping my hand firmly around his bicep, I went to forcibly move him from the garden. We'd only be a distraction if we stayed.

"I'll be fine Jace," Ally's voice drew some of the tension from Jace's muscles and made it easier for me to drag him behind me. With one last glance at Charleene, I pushed Jace through the gap and back towards Kirby Manor.

"Will they be ok?" He asked, speaking directly to me for the first time since we left his car.

"Gladys will not harm either of them." I said, confidently taking another step away.

Ten minutes crawled by as we sat in silence when suddenly, with no warning whatsoever, Jace sprang to his feet and darted back through the thin gap. Confused and concerned I followed soon after and the world dropped out from below my feet at what I found as I cleared the gap. My heart began thumping wildly against my chest as I tried to understand what my eyes were seeing. Charleene lay motionless, flattening the green grass below her as her eyes moved frantically behind her closed lids, while Ally lay in a similar position a few steps away from her. Gladys was already bending over Charleene when we entered, and all I could do was wonder what the hell happened.

My world contracted to Charleene and finally, after what felt like forever, I got my feet moving as Jace darted towards Ally.

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“What happened?” I force out past the lump that’s suddenly clogging my very tight throat.

“I’m not certain,” Gladys replied sadly as she continued to check Charleene over.

“What exactly is she?” I shrieked at Jace, interrupting his mantra as he attempted to wake Ally. “Jacin, what type of ancient one is she?”

“It doesn’t matter,” He growled back at me.

“It most definitely does, she’s a ticking time bomb. None of us understand what triggers her, maybe if we knew what race she belongs to, it might help.” I shrieked before turning back to Charleene and blocked out everything else as my heart ripped in two.

Chapter Nineteen

I really want to be a glass half full kind of girl, but when life keeps kicking you, can you remain optimistic?-Charleene

“Right Charleene, please relax this shouldn’t hurt, we are sisters in a fashion. I mean you no harm.” I found myself relaxing with her calm voice, she almost sounded motherly as she reassured me. It took me a few seconds to relax my body, to feel calm and centred. “Close your eyes and find one thought or place that makes you feel safe.”

Following Gladys’ voice I searched my mind for a time when I felt safe, and the only

thought that came to mind was the night me and Dina had been intimate. Just the thought of her lips against my skin had a smile gracing my lips.

“Have you got it?” She asked, making me nod straight away. “Good, now sink into that feeling, let the peace flow through you.” Doing as she bid, I let the memory play out in my mind.

Suddenly, I’d felt warmth spread through me from my head all the way down to my toes and I began breathing deeper with each inhale. A gentle pressure pressed against my mind, but I wasn’t scared of it. It was warm and kind, if a feeling could be that, so I embraced it. “Well done child,” I felt more than heard Gladys’ praise inside my mind as I let her in.

“From the ancient lines will come two children, both hunted, betrayed, and loved. Entwined with forces dark and light, of one world but open to many. One will be our salvation, the other our destruction. As ancients return, battles will wage. For gates long shut will be opened, and bridges long burned will be repaired.” I heard Gladys’ voice this time, she sounded like she was miles away while my eyes remained closed.

I felt when she tried to dig deeper, pressure building inside my mind and just when it started to get painful, my eyes flashed open. Gladys stood above me, holding her head as though in pain; I could still feel her searching inside my mind. Movement to my left almost drew my focus from Gladys and as I realised Ally’s intent to yank her away from me, fear swallowed me. Quickly wondering what would happen if she was ripped from my mind, in terror I screamed at Ally, “Don’t touch her!”

Ally’s outstretched hand whipped back to her chest at my words, “What’s wrong with her?”

Watching Gladys for a few seconds I could feel her begin to withdraw, and without knowing how, I found myself saying, “She’ll be fine, but if you startle her she may

lash out, she's still inside the connection."

"Cryptic much?" Ally muttered, making me question again just how I knew that.

"I can feel her still looking inside, trying to find what's hidden." I said, trying my best to explain what was happening without fully understanding.

"And what's hidden inside of you exactly?"

"I have no idea?" A nervous laugh bubbled from my lips with the words.

"And neither do I. Someone locked you up tight as a baby." Gladys told me with a strange look.

"Why?" I found myself asking, as another mystery presented itself.

"To protect you, to protect us? Only they who placed the lock on you will know," Gladys suggested, her eyes filling with sympathy on my behalf, before she looked over at Ally and noticed that she'd moved closer. "What happened while we were connected?"

I let Ally take the lead as I attempted to understand everything she said while somehow looking into my mind, Gladys' sharp gasp drawing my attention away from my chaotic thoughts.

"You're a child of the prophecy Charleene, that is why someone went to great lengths to hide you." Gladys sounded both mystified and sad, confusing me further as she just makes new questions rise in my mind. What does being a child of 'the prophecy' even mean? Am I good or bad? Did I hurt someone and that's why the coven sent me away?

“But why? And which one am I?” I asked, as my panic climbs higher and higher.

Gladys’ voice was full of sympathy when she spoke, “Only time will tell, but I do know that children suspected of being connected to that prophecy have been killed for centuries by their own covens.” Her words are no comfort as she explained what has happened to children connected to this so-called prophecy.

“I don’t want to destroy anything, I couldn’t, I wouldn’t....” I babbled, word vomiting each thought as it crossed my mind, until Gladys’ voice interrupted me.

“Ssshhh child, what many fear is that the child will not have much choice in what they do. Many coven leaders have passed that fear onto their own children, generation after generation. You have to remember, no-one likes the unknown.”

She began to sound like she’s talking to me from far away, her voice echoey as though I was standing at the end of a tunnel while she stood at the opposite end.

“Plus, you might not even be one of these children.” Ally’s voice sounded so calm as panic attempted to suck me under. Her voice was clear and loud, making me focus on her instead of my whirling thoughts.

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“Maybe not,” Gladys agreed, with a sceptical glance at me, before her eyes fixed on Ally, “Your turn Forg...Ally.” I smiled a little as Gladys corrected herself before saying the wrong name. It seems like Ally has made an impression on her, I thought to myself as Gladys motioned Ally back to where she’d originally told her to sit and I watched as she complied.

“Now relax and find a time or place that makes you feel safe,” Gladys’ voice took on the same calm tone as it had with me and I watched as Ally closed her eyes. “Have you got it?” Gladys asked. I watched amazed as Ally nodded and Gladys’ eyes closed as she stood above her. I felt the air warm and a sense of calm washed over me as Gladys was enclosed in a white glow. Is that real? I thought, seconds before I was shoved backwards.

Blinking my eyes open, I wondered briefly when I’d closed them and couldn’t remember doing so. It took me a moment or two to get my bearings as I stared upwards at the white wisps that danced above me. How pretty, I thought briefly, before turning my head to the side. Blinking, I stared at the world around me wondering, where the heck I was?

Was I even still in Gladys’ garden? I asked myself, staring at everything around me as I pushed up until I was sitting. When had I laid down? Everything looked almost right except it was like someone had used a damp cloth and rubbed away any bright colour. Long white wisps—almost like smoke—drifted around my bare feet and multiplied when they shuffled. It was so similar to the real one, if you could ignore the fact that she was alone and the strange hazy wisps.

“Hello?” I asked softly, afraid to shout too loudly and disrupt the peace and

tranquillity that infused me. “Dina? Ally? Jace?” I called, worried that somehow we'd been separated and they were as lost as I was.

“Merry met Daughter,” a kind, yet confident voice interrupted the quiet. Whipping around, my gaze landed on a young woman who stood behind me. She had long, dirty blonde hair that floated in a wind I couldn't feel and eyes similar in colour to my own. The long grey skirt of her dress floated around her ankles, showing off her bare feet, and she was smiling kindly at me.

“Do I know you?” I asked, confused. Was she the mother who had abandoned me as a baby?

“No, I would think not. But we are connected, you and I.” She answered cryptically, raising more questions in my mind.

“Do you know where my friends are? They were here with me moments ago.” I glanced around, double checking they hadn't magically appeared alongside the woman.

“They did not follow you here,” she told me, her voice calm and quiet.

“What?” My gaze returned to her, as my eyes narrowed in suspicion, “And where is here?” I snapped, while the fingers on my left hand tapped against my thigh.

“You have no need to fear Daughter. No harm will befall you in The Inbetween.”

“The Inbetween? What's that?” My questions made the woman's stoic face change. Her eyebrows lifted and her eyes widened.

“You are a Witch, are you not?” She challenged, taking a slight step back.

“Well, yes, I suppose I am,” I answered, uncertainty making my voice quieter.

“What do you mean?” Her eyes narrowed as she looked me up and down, “you have the aura of Our Witches, however you sound unclear.”

“I was raised a human,” I said honestly, wondering if the woman could tell if I lied and not wanting to chance it, “until a month ago I didn't even know Witches existed.”

By the time I'd finished, the women's eyes were as round as dinner plates and filled with sadness, “Why?”

Her one word question was one I'd asked myself since I'd been old enough to realise I was an orphan. “I don't know.”

Looking closer at the woman before me, I noticed her dress looked to be from a time long ago instead of any current fashion brand.

“Who are you again?” I asked, realising she still hadn't told me.

“I'm Eilidh, I was the first,” she said, with a sad smile that barely turned up the corners of her lips.

“The first what?” I asked as my eyebrows met in the middle at her response.

“The first sacrificed to the prophecy.” She said, her expression never changing, even though her words sounded unbelievable.

“What prophecy?” I pushed, feeling like I already knew what she was referring to, but wanting to hear what she'd say.

“From an ancient line will come twin flames both born and blessed, to set our world

on a different path. Separated their paths will be long and hard, as light turns to dark, love to hate. Familial bonds will be broken but our salvation or destruction will be decided by their hands. Ancients shall herald their arrival as they return to wage new battles upon our fields. Burnt bridges may be remade as gates long closed will open. All will hail the Gatekeeper.”

Eilidh’s voice was hypnotic as she recited a longer version of “the prophecy” than Gladys had told me.

“And how many have come to you here, in...” I paused remembering the term she’d used for wherever this was, “...The Inbetween?” I finished, incredulous that women had been killed over the years, all because one woman claimed they would have a power that would be fearsome.

“You are the fifth who still lives but the thirteenth whose soul is tainted by the prophecy.”

Wow, that's a lot of people. “And were they all female?” I asked, needing to confirm I understood that part of the prophecy like I thought I did.

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“Yes.” Eilidh confirmed, a sad look flashing across her face.

Sadness crashed through me at all those lives cut short, lost before they really got started, “And what Coven did you hail from?” I asked, using the correct term.

“I was the first of the Nicniven's to be sacrificed to save all.” Eilidh commiserated.

“Right, well, I'm going to change it.” I decided, my voice firm as I glanced around the strange place I'd found myself in, “but first I need to understand more about magic, can you help with that?”

Eilidh smiled up at me, “Of course child, that is why I remain here in The Inbetween.”

Nodding at my strange new guide I promised to end the cycle of death in the Witch community.

Chapter Twenty

Things just keep getting stranger and stranger...- Charleene

Eilidh closed her eyes briefly and the world around me began to change. The white wispy ribbons grew stronger, thicker as a harmonious hum filled the air.

“What did you do?” I asked in wonder, staring at our new surroundings. Gone was Gladys' garden, replaced by a circle of tall stones which stood directly in the centre of a small meadow with long grass. It looked wild and deserted, while also having the

air of being used regularly. The sky above was a pale blue and fluffy white clouds drifted lazily on a wind I didn't feel. "Where are we now?"

"This was once my home, the cherished spiritual home of The Nicnevin Witches." Eilidh explained, looking around us with a soft smile and sadness in her eyes. "The Inbetween is not fixed, it can become whatever a person, or in my case a spirit, deems it to be."

"So I could make it however I want?" I questioned, staring at the small girl.

"In time, yes." Eilidh smiled kindly up at me, her grey eyes shining, "Please sit." Doing as she bade, I closed the distance between us and sat with my legs crossed on the ground. I'd expected it to be hard but the grass was spongy and soft beneath me. "What do you know of your own origins?"

"Not much, I was abandoned in Scotland as a baby, then moved to England with my first adoptive parents. Until three weeks ago I had believed I was human and had no idea any of this," I gestured around myself, "existed."

"You'd shown no magical power?" Eilidh asked, her rising brows showing her confusion and surprise.

"Nope, as far as I know the first time I'd used magic was three weeks ago."

"Hmmm," was all Eilidh responded, making me worry I'd done something wrong.

"What?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Normally, a witch or warlock comes into their powers during their thirteenth year, it is very strange that you showed no magical ability until now."

“Gladys, the witch who’s garden I was in before I came here, told me that there was a block placed upon me.” I explained quickly, while wondering if I was broken.

“You’ve been bound, that could explain why your magic is only now waking.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, not understanding.

“It means someone has bound your magic inside of you.” Eilidh stated, a little anger showing in her voice, “it is normally used as a punishment for those who stray from our path of healing and light.”

“Can it be removed?” I asked, feeling violated that someone had done this to me.

“The person who placed it can remove it, but you could break it.” Eilidh told me sadly.

“How would I break it?” I asked, making Eilidh flinch.

“Painfully. You would need to overload the bind by forcing your magic to the surface.” Her young face turned pensive as she watched me mull over her words.

“And overloading this bind would just be painful?” I asked sceptically. There had to be more to it than that, otherwise it wouldn't be much of a deterrent.

“Painful might not have been accurate, agonising would probably be closer.” She replied, her face paling further than it already was, “You'd also have to be strong enough to not lose control over your own magic as well, otherwise...” her words faded off like she couldn't even bear to say the rest.

“Otherwise what?” I probed.

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“You could lose your own mind.” Eilidh whispered.

“Oh.” It seemed like such an insignificant response, but I was at a loss for what else I could say. I needed this bind gone and there was no guarantee we'd even find whoever had placed it on me, so what choice did I have? Making my mind up, I nodded to myself and met Eilidh's eyes, “how do we do this?”

“What happened when your magic showed itself?” she asked, making me think back to the only time I'd ever used magic.

“A Vampire was threatening me and then suddenly I shot blue lightning from my hands.” I babbled, staring down at my hands as I remembered the way my hairs had stood on end and the blue ribbons that danced around my fingers.

“And you've not used any since then?”

“Not that I'm aware of,” I answered honestly, shaking my head at the same time. Watching her carefully, I wondered where her thoughts were taking her.

The sun didn't inch across the blue sky, and there were no clocks here in The Inbetween, so without another way to tell the time I began counting the seconds in my head. On reaching thirty and Eilidh still remained quiet, I finally broke the silence, “what are you thinking?”

“I'm attempting to understand your specific bind, you can not feel your magic, correct?” Her voice was gentle, putting me at ease as I tried to see if anything felt different within me.

Closing my eyes, I thought about where one might find their magic but, after a bit, I still couldn't feel anything unusual. "I don't even know what I would be looking for so I'm going to go with no." I answered honestly.

"Hmmm, so you can instinctually defend yourself and you must have used magic for your living spirit to have reached here—" she began mulling aloud, when I interrupted.

"I'm not sure I did anything to get here," I told her, trying to remember what had happened before I woke up. Only recalling the feeling of falling.

"You get stranger and stranger," Eilidh said, crooking her head to one side as she looked me over from head to foot. "Did the witch you were with send you here?"

"I don't think so, but I was with another who could use magic," I told her, remembering Gladys beginning to read Ally. "Gladys was attempting to read her, I think." My voice sounded hesitant even to my own ears.

"Right, then we should attempt to recreate how you felt when you last used your own magic." Eilidh said, nodding her head in a short, decisive bob.

"And how would we do that?" I asked, biting my lip, unsure if it was even a good idea and not looking forward to feeling as scared as I had that night.

"Concentrate on that night, on how the vampire made you feel," Eilidh's voice was still gentle, but my stomach still rolled at the thought of being at the vampire's mercy. Closing my eyes again I concentrated on how he'd made me feel.

Nervous butterflies swarmed my stomach, making it lurch as I pictured his blood red eyes fixed upon me and the smile he'd shown after scenting me. In my mind I watched as he advanced on me, but I couldn't step back. I was trapped, my feet

frozen to the concrete beside the river Ouse. Shaking my head as he drew closer, my eyes flew open, trying to escape him from my memories and I screamed as electricity surged through me. He was here, standing before me, leering as his hand reached out. Without thinking about it, I let the electricity I could feel build and pool in my hands, “NO!” I screamed, flinging my hands towards the vampire man as blue ribbons exploded from my palms.

“That’s it. Now feel how the magic feels within you, don’t let it fade just yet.” Eilidh’s voice reminded me that the man wasn’t actually here, and as I watched, my magic ran straight through him. Focusing on the magic as it buzzed around my hands, I followed it back up my arms to my heart. It was like my very blood cells held small bolts of electricity and my heart was pulsing with it. Focusing on only that, I felt how the magic came in waves, rising inside my heart and then pulsing through my veins with every heartbeat. But, beneath the almost overwhelming feeling there was something else... it was like the magic was tethered, as though it was coming from somewhere other than myself. Following what I imagined would look like a rope of electricity, I traced it back through my body, down my left leg and back to the Earth beneath my foot.

Without needing to think about it, I switched my focus to my right foot and waited. After a few moments I felt it, the buzzing of the magic still cooking from my hands. It emanated from the Earth beneath my foot, flowing through my veins to my heart before being forced out of my hands. “It comes from the Earth.” I gasped, as a bead of sweat dripped down my temple and I realised how exhausted my body was beginning to feel. Black edged in, swallowing the edges of my vision as Eilidh’s voice came out so loud.

“STOP!” she screamed, breaking the last of my concentration on the magic, and shockingly, it cut off.

Falling back, I let the spongy grass take all of my weight and cushion my head as my

vision wavered and spun. I felt like I'd been on the waltzers for hours on end and my stomach lurched. Managing to turn my head to the side, I felt bile burn up my throat and thought I was going to be sick.

“Breathe.” Eilidh’s voice made my mouth open and I gulped in a lungful of air. “That's it,” she praised when I took another, holding it for the count of five and then releasing it again.

Eventually my head stopped spinning and when I reopened my eyes, the world—inbetween— remained still. Blinking up, I took in Eilidh's bright smile, “it comes from the earth,” I repeated, smiling myself.

“All of our magic comes from the Earth, child” she said. “Take a few moments to recover and we'll go again, if you are going to have any hope of breaking your bind. You will need to be able to keep control over your magic for longer.”

Nodding, I felt a strange emotion rush through me, one that I struggled to name. I felt elated and nervous at the prospect of learning more about the magic laying dormant inside myself and I eagerly awaited Eilidh’s next words.

Chapter Twenty-One

How do you go on when your heart is broken?-Dina

“What are you doing?” I asked Gladys, cradling Charleene's too still and floppy body in my arms.

“Checking her over.” Gladys’ eyes closed briefly as she focused upon her magic, and when they opened again, the look she flashed at me didn’t exactly fill me with confidence.

“Anything?” I ask, not daring to let my hope get too high.

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“I do not know what’s wrong, her body is healthy,” Gladys answered, “but her spirit is missing.”

I paid little attention to the two Fae as Jacin tried desperately to wake Ally, until I heard her damn voice. “What happened?” She asked, confused as Gladys bent closer to Charleene. Gladys’ head also snapped in the Fae’s direction.

“Maybe you could tell us?” she questioned. Not wanting to hear anymore, I stared down at the woman I was falling in love with.

I promise Charleene, if you wake up I'll pull you as close as you'll let me. I thought down at her as her eyes flickered behind her eyelids. Just open your eyes, please? I silently begged as everyone else went on around me. She remained asleep and my heart shattered inside my chest. All I could do was watch her chest rise and fall with each slow, deep breath she took and mimic her actions.

“How do I fix this?” Ally’s words pierce the numbness that surrounded me. The Fae did this! Those four words screamed through my mind before repeating and Gladys’ next words were almost drowned out, but I heard them.

“You can’t,” Gladys said, making my head snap up to glare at her.

“What do you mean I can’t.” Ally asked as my temper finally snaps.

“She bloody well will fix her!” I found myself screaming and drawing everyone’s attention to me and Charleene.

“The only person that can fix Charleene now is herself.” Gladys’ voice was calm and patient, which only angered me more, as it meant I couldn’t do anything to fix what had happened. Forcing myself to swallow down the rage that’s burning inside me, I focussed on Gladys’ next words, “once a person is trapped within their own spirit, they must find their own way back. I can protect her body, but she won’t have long.”

“How long?” I said, my voice nothing more than a growl at this point. I curved protectively over Charleene, pulling her more firmly against myself, bracing for Gladys’ answer.

“Five days, maybe six?” Her words are spoken with kindness and compassion, but all I can hear is the number of days on repeat. So little time, I think to myself, before my practical mind generated the next question I needed answering.

“And what happens if she’s not back by then?” I asked quietly, not really wanting to, but knowing I needed to know what could happen.

“Then she’ll move on from this life and return to the Mother of us all.” Gladys explained, and my heart snapped in two as I began to rock. How can Charleene still be alive but not here? It makes no sense. Shaking my head, I stared down at the woman I’d spent so much time lately pushing away, all because Coven law forbade a relationship between us.

“No, no, no, I can’t lose her Gladys, I can’t not now.” I gasped out, not caring that I was showing those around me just how much I feel for a Witch. Screw Coven Law, I think meeting Gladys eyes.

Gladys bit her lip as though unsure what to say or do, but when she finally spoke a kernel of hope ignited inside me, “I know an old friend who might know something more. But she is strong, and I don’t think her journey ends here. Take heart in that Drina, your Amour is a fighter.”

I nodded almost automatically. I knew Charleene's a fighter, she's been one every day of her life. Carefully, I brushed errant strands of Charleene's soft hair from her face and smiled down at her.

"Keep fighting Babe." I whispered against her ear, before glaring over at Ally and making a demand, "No more magic from you!"

"It's not like I can help it," she grumbled under her breath, but of course I heard it with my vampire hearing.

"I don't care, learn to control it." I snapped, my patience failing completely as I lifted Charleene and started back towards the manor.

Walking briskly, I covered the distance between the clearing and the Manor in half the time it had taken us all to get there. Everyone scrambles to follow, but I didn't care if they were uncomfortable, the only person I gave a damn about right now was Charleene.

"So what do we do now?" Jace asked, and it took me a couple of seconds to realise his question was aimed at myself.

"The same as before. We keep going to Scotland and hope she wakes up." I replied, my voice devoid of any emotion, as my head turned towards Ally on his other side.

"We could stay here for a few days," she suggested, trying to be helpful.

"No, we need to keep you both moving," both me and Jacin said together. Well, at least we can agree on something, I think sarcastically as I used my shoulder to push through the back door of the manor and head for one of the many sitting rooms.

"Why?" Ally asked, and my brow furrowed over yet another argument starting

between the two of them.

“Ally please, just trust us.” Jacin pleaded with her.

“Are you going to tell me the truth?” Jacin didn’t answer her, as I laid Charleene on one of the sofas, making sure she was comfortable. “Well then, you answered your own question. No. I can’t trust you. What are we running from? And don’t say Lysais, he’s the only one that seems willing to tell me the truth.” Ally spat at Jacin, her voice full of pain.

“I don’t know why you ever trusted that piece of...” Jacin growled, letting his own anger get the best of him, before snapping his mouth shut. My anger rose further at their inane bickering. None of it mattered if Charleene didn’t return, I’d kill both of them for bringing this harm to her.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Ally shrieked at him, and my temper snapped in two.

“Will you two stop behaving like children, you’re grown adults for god’s sake.” I shouted at them both. Ally’s face snapped to mine, her mouth open like she’s going to say something to me, but her glare dropped to Charleene, and when it returned, to me her lips turned downward.

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“Sorry,” she mumbled, as I turned my focus back to the woman who held my heart in a deathgrip and swept the few strands of hair from Charleene’s brow. “Where are we going?”

“I know someone who might be able to help Charleene, I mean it's a long shot but he might be able to do something.” Gladys announced, waltzing back into the room. To be honest, I hadn’t even noticed she hadn’t followed us here. The tray in her hands rattles as she walks to the small coffee table.

“Who?” I snarled, not looking up, using my hearing to know what she’s doing.

“Donovan. I think he was up near Doncaster, last I checked in with him.” She answered politely, ignoring my tone completely. Her feet shuffled against the rug and she bumped my shoulder, finally drawing my attention to her and the cup in her hands, “It will keep you calm,” she explained as I opened my mouth to remind her I don’t need warm drinks. Taking it from her, I raised it to my nose and inhaled that iron scent. “Donovan is a warlock specifically trained in the spirit element. If anyone can help Charleene, other than her own Coven of course, it’s him.” She continued to explain.

“Where?” I snapped, taking a sip of the blood she’s handed to me. Since accepting our friendship, Gladys had always kept supplies I may need in stock for my random visits.

“He took over Cusworth Hall a few years back, I think he’s still there. I’ll give him a call while you all finish your drinks.” Gladys said, giving a small squeeze to my shoulder and leaving. Jacin moved to one of the other seats and Ally moved around

the room, but thankfully remained silent as my focus returned to Charleene and I blocked out the rest of the world.

“I’ll be right back,” I whispered in Charleene’s ear as I heard Gladys on the phone in the kitchen. Speaking to no-one, I rose and left the room, needing to know what our next steps would be and to get moving. If this Donovan can help Charleene, then that’s where we’ll go.

Eavesdropping, I listened to Gladys’ conversation with her warlock friend, my shoulders stiff as worry cloaked me and my heart beginning turning back to stone.

“Don’t let this break you, Drina.” Gladys’ kind voice drew me from my dark thoughts. “Donovan’s expecting you all.” She continued, offering me a small smile.

“Thank you.” I replied, turning on my heel to get Charleene.

“Dina, be careful of who you trust with your feelings for the witch, not all are as accepting of what has long been considered wrong.” Gladys’ warning followed me down the hallway and I barely gave Jacin a glance as I scooped Charleene back into my arms.

“We’re leaving.” I informed him as I walked past, knowing he’d get Ally moving.

Gladys gave me one last smile before I strode away, back to Jacin’s car. Walking towards it, I contemplated leaving it and the Fae behind, but something about that choice didn’t seem right. So instead I waited for them, leaning back against the back door.

It didn’t take long for Jacin to follow me outside, but Ally wasn’t with him, “Gladys wanted a word with her in private, she won’t be long,” he informed me, noticing my frown.

“Good,” is all I said as I heard the car locks disengage and turned to open the door, placing Charleene in one of the seats. Once she’s settled I glanced at Kirkby Manor, impatience biting at me as I walked around to the other side. “Where is she!” I growled, unable to help myself as the seconds ticked by.

“She’ll be here soon,” Jacin promised, watching the manor door like a hawk.

“She better be or I’m leaving without you both.” I growled, sliding into the middle seat and manoeuvring Charleene’s head on my shoulder. Even if she’s not in there, she should be comfortable, I think to myself.

“There you are. Get in, Dina’s impatient, she wants to get to this Donovan guy as fast as we can.” Jacin’s voice relaxed me a little as my leg bounced up and down. I swallowed down my feelings, sinking them to the bottom of my heart, as my grip tightened around Charleene and said nothing when I met the sadness in his gaze as he dropped into the driver’s seat. I withdraw into my own thoughts as the engine starts and we drive away.

Chapter Twenty-Two

To break a block you must almost break your mind, sounds like a hoot, not.-
Charleene

We’d spent what felt like days forcing my magic to the surface and seeing how long I could maintain it. Each time I held it longer and longer, until now I could find it easily and Eilidh had finally deemed that I was ready to try and break the damn block which had been placed on me. Excitement with a twinge of trepidation flowed through my body, making it shake as I paced. Either I broke the block or I’d die trying.

“Are you ready?” Eilidh’s sweet voice broke into my doom and gloom thoughts,

dragging me back to the present.

“As ready as I'll ever be.” I replied, trying to give her a small smile but my lips twisted wrong and it came out more like a grimace.

“Ok, I have placed the candles, inside this circle you will be on your own. I can not step across the barrier until you have either succeeded or failed,” she reminded me, pointing out the ring of unlit candles.

She'd explained their need; they were to protect herself and The Inbetween from any magical outburst I may make. We'd found out that my two greatest strengths were with the fire and spirit elements, and I would use a combination of the two to break the block. Hence the protective circle so I couldn't damage my surroundings with my spirit magic. Taking a deep breath I stepped across them, carefully so as not to knock anything over as I sat in the centre with my legs crossed.

“When you are ready, light the candles and I will evoke the protections.” Eilidhsaid.

Drawing in another deep breath, I held it for a few seconds before feeling the heat of my own body and kindling it to ignite the fire magic inside of me. I felt a small flame dance with a comforting warmth in the palm of my hand and letting my fears of failure go, I stared at one of the candle wicks and willed it to light by heating the air around it. The candle burst to life and I imagined all the others following suit. One after, each candle sprang to life and Eilidh's soft voice filled the space around us.

“Hecate I call upon you to bless this space and protect it from harm. I ask that you keep the magick contained within the barrier, until its work is done.” Her voice trailed off, and after a few seconds, the candle flames leapt higher before dying down and with a pop, the magical barrier settled into place around me.

Breathing in a shorter breath, I held it and closed my eyes, turning my focus inward

as Eilidh had coached me. I focused upon—what I imagined—was a silvery thread of magic that surrounded my heart like a protective barrier and willed it to expand. Ever so slowly, my magic listened to me as I thought about it flowing through my veins, until it followed my silent request and I felt a pleasant buzzing filling my whole body. Letting out my held breath slowly, with barely a sound, I imagined that silvery magic coating my whole body in a gentle light, smiling serenely as I felt a comforting cocoon envelop me.

I'm doing it, I thought to myself, trying not to get too giddy as I requested the magick to move higher. Concentrating it around my head, picturing a thick halo resting against my forehead and ringing my head. Evoking my fire magick next, while holding the threads of spirit in place, I entwined the two. Seeing alternating fiery red and sparkling silver threads weaving together like a living snake, before letting it sink through my skull and surround my mind. Eilidh had explained that whoever had bound my magic had bound it within my mind. Keeping it secret from myself and all those around me.

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“Well done Charleene, you should feel—” Her words cut off as a scream ripped from deep in my lungs. Pain like nothing I'd ever felt pierced my mind, and my focus on my magick slipped for a second as tears slipped down my cheeks. “Remember, keep the magicks contained and pressing against your mind.” Eilidh's voice registered, reminding me of what we were doing and why the pain was necessary.

“It will all be worth it,” I thought aloud, concentrating on keeping the magick wrapped around my brain and asking for more.

Willingly, both of my magicks thickened and the pain rose higher, making my teeth grind as I suppressed the urge to scream again. I pictured both magicks thickening further and rushing round my brain, asking it to search and destroy anything which wasn't ours. I don't know how long I spent with my teeth feeling like they would sink back into my gums and my mind like it was on fire, when suddenly my magicks increased the fire, becoming an inferno while spirit fanned the flames higher and faster.

Just when I thought I couldn't hold the magicks any longer, something inside me shifted and shattered as unimaginable pain speared through my entire body, then everything went blissfully dark.

“Hush Child,” A calm balm soothed the pain within me, as I stirred to the motherly voice.

“Mother?” I asked the maternal voice, and received a soft laugh that sounded a little like tinkling bells.

“No, but you are a daughter of mine, as all Witches are my children,” she explained, making my brow furrow as I refused to let my eyes open.

“Who are you?” I wondered aloud, hoping that she'd explain.

“Open your eyes, Daughter of Mine,” she whispered, her voice shifting between the motherly tone, to wavering, to as young as mine, and then back to motherly all in one sentence.

Unable to resist her command my eyes opened, meeting a woman leaning over me. I met her pure silver eyes. She didn't even have black pupils or the whites, they were just swirling molten silver. I would have flinched away, if I wasn't already laying flat on my back with my head cushioned on soft moss instead of the grass I'd expected. Rainbows danced quickly across the sky, making my stomach roll, so I looked back at the woman above me.

“Who are you?” I repeated, my tone sharper than I had intended as I watched her jet black hair float gently, wafting away from the thin oval face that constantly shifted. One second she looked as young as myself, then aged as if she'd grown to forty something, before wrinkles creased her eyes, brow and mouth. Then the cycle would repeat, almost as if she was three people in one body.

“You have been so brave and fearless, Daughter of Mine. I am known as Hecate, the Three Faced Goddess.” Her voice soothed my frayed nerves, even though I knew I should be shaking with fear as I faced off with a Goddess.

“Hecate...the goddess Hecate?” I queried, my eyes widening in shock.

“Yes,” she said, smiling kindly down at me, “I wish to show you something , if you will allow me.”

Her question sounded more of a nice demand and I felt my head bobbing up and down, giving her my permission when my words became lodged like a lump in my throat.

“Thank you Daughter of Mine,” she said, moving soundlessly to kneel above the crown of my head. “You stand upon a crossroads, so to speak, Daughter of Prophecy, and I wish to gift you knowledge of the past to aid your journey forward.”

“Erm okay?” I whispered, not really understanding her words, but something within me trusted her.

Her fingers were soft against my temple, her touch feather soft, “Close your eyes.” She bade me and I automatically complied.

I began to feel silly, as my eyes saw nothing but darkness, “Am I supposed...”

“Hush child, patience is a virtue,” Hecate chuckled.

Her words echoed, bouncing around my mind as light seeped through the darkness and words grew clearer.

“The gates have been closed successfully,” a woman's voice said confidently. “Yours is the last.”

The whiteness faded, leaving me looking at two young women, around my own age. One stood with her back to me, her long dirty blonde hair full of waves, hung above her bum. The other stood facing the first, with flowing chestnut brown hair, a pale face and striking eyes. The violet seemed to glow brighter as her lips turned down at the corners.

“Will I see you again?” The one whose face I couldn't see asked.

“I think not, Gabriella, I fear that the Shadow War is just beginning and I do not know how, or if, it will end.” Her companion replied sadly, reaching out to grasp the other's shoulder. “I will not open the gates until everyone is safe again.”

“We can protect it Serralynn.” Even as her words were being spoken, the pale faced woman began shaking her head.

“Not from this, the cost would be too high if any failed.” Serralynn's voice didn't waver even as she quickly wiped away a tear. “Gabriella, I have already closed every gate, to leave one open would be irresponsible. Your family line will always be Gatekeepers, prepare them well.”

Serralynn gave the woman a tight hug, closing her eyes briefly as though she was wanting to remember this moment. When she pulled back, a shimmering archway blinked into being behind her.

“Not yet Serralynn, please my friend, do not fight this battle alone,” the woman pleaded, her voice breaking as Serralynn stepped backwards.

“Teach your children and their children the way of the Gatekeepers, one day they will reopen.” Serralynn said, before turning on her heel and striding confidently into the rainbow surface. I gasped in surprise as the surface rippled before it disappeared and the other woman turned towards me. I froze, staring at what I thought was my own face. She was almost a carbon copy of myself, except with green eyes instead of blue.

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The woman who looked like me uttered something, but I couldn't hear what she said, as the scene grew hazy. Like thick mists had rolled in off of an unseen sea. Squinting, I tried to see what the woman was doing. The mist cleared, slowly revealing a different scene; the huge standing stones now stood before me. They were the same ones that Eilidh had said belonged to the Nicnevin Witches. Three women all of differing ages, but with similar looks, stood in the centre of the ring whilst I remained outside them.

"I have foreseen it," the youngest of them said, her green eyes piercing against her pale skin. "From an ancient line will come twin flames both born and blessed, to set our world on a different path. Separated their paths will be long and hard as light turns to dark, love to hate. Familial bonds will be broken but our salvation or destruction will be decided by their hands. Ancients shall herald their arrival as they return to wage new battles upon our fields. Burnt bridges may be remade as gates long closed will open. All will hail the Gatekeeper."

"What could it mean?" said the one who I'd seen before, but she looked older now, more middle aged than the young woman.

"It means that a child from our own line will spell death and destruction for us all. We must act to make sure this future never happens," the woman with lines creasing her face and white hair pinned up in a severe looking bun declared. A shiver ran down my back at her words, she uttered them so calmly. "The prophecy must not come to pass. Any babes that could be the one must be put to death. If they do not live then they can not destroy everything." Her words were so cold, and her face didn't even twitch as she discussed killing innocent babies. My heart broke for them as they made this decision.

The fog returned and I lurched forward as though my action would stop time from moving forward. I wanted to tell them how wrong their future actions would be. However, as time moved on without pause, I couldn't see anything but thick white mist, but my heart shattered as I was surrounded by the echoing cries of babies, each one overlapping the last.

My eyes opened and I stared up at the Goddess above, and my cheeks were soaked with tears. My breath hitched as she met my eyes with sadness shining in her own. "My children have suffered because of this prophecy. However, the future is never set in stone. They saw but one path that could be and solidified it's coming with their actions." Her voice shifted with each sentence sounding young, old and motherly all at once.

"Why would they make such a choice?" I found myself asking as Hecate sat back on her heels. Why would anyone think that killing children would be the answer?

"They trusted in their powers too much, and as with all mortals, they feared death and being forgotten." Hecate answered solemnly, "Yet you are here, Daughter of Mine, and I must hope that you will rectify the wrongs of the past."

"I will make sure no more witches are killed." I promised her, knowing no matter what I would make it happen.

"Good." She replied with a small smile, "Merry Met, Daughter of Mine."

With her last words, she rose from the grass and walked away, "WAIT!" I called after her, needing any more advice she could give, "I don't know where to find my so-called Coven."

"Your magick is now free Child, learn to master it and you will be shown the paths that are open to you." Hecate's voice was kind, even if her answer frustrated me,

however before I could ask any more questions my eyes were forced closed and when they reopened, I met Eilidh's worried stare.

"Your back." She breathed with relief, her eyes closing briefly.

Chapter Twenty-Three

She must wake up, I don't know what I'll do if she doesn't... -Dina

I'd not spoken the entire drive, instead my mind had run through all the ways I would kill Ally and consequently Jacin, if Charleene didn't wake. Since finding her laying on the grass in the clearing, I'd realised I would do anything, kill anyone for her. I just hoped that Donovan could do something to bring her back to me because the waiting was eating away at me.

"Nothing," Ally spat, dragging me from my thoughts and back to another of their arguments. Why can't she just get over herself? I thought, down right sick of all the anger and shouting that has been going on between them.

"Well aren't you two at odds," I said, sarcastically, looking at Charleene, wondering where the hell she was and what she was doing.

"So what or Who is waiting for us at Cusworth Hall?" Ally asked.

"Donavon, he comes from an old line of witches, ones gifted with sight and spirit," I explained, "Gladys says he'll be expecting us, take the next left." I informed Jacin, my eyes not leaving Charleene. Jacin followed my directions and I relaxed a little more as, after a few minutes, the car turned onto a secluded road.

"Do all witches have big private homes?" Ally said, interrupting my vigil again. What is it with her and the bloody questions?

“They’re custodians, they don’t own the houses, just keep them safe.” I explained, pretending I’m talking to a small child instead of the adult she should be.

“Keep them hidden from humans, you mean?” she retorted like a smart-ass.

“Safe, hidden, what's the difference? If humans knew of the artefacts inside these buildings, all they’d do is pilfer them. There are enough rich people, ruling over the poor in this world without a care, just waiting to make themselves even richer.” I grumbled back, enlightening her to the state of the world in which we live.

Ally didn’t respond as the road we’re travelling on opened up and Cusworth Hall came into view. The house was impressive, built in the shape of a ‘U’ with three interconnected wings. Glancing at the side of Ally’s face a small laugh escaped me. Her mouth was hanging open and her eyes were as wide as saucers.

“Not what you were expecting?” I asked her, as Jacin pulled up before the huge entrance door.

“Not at all,” she said quietly, still staring up at the house in wonder. Ah to be mortal and seeing everything for the first time again, I thought to myself, a little jealous. I’d seen almost everything in my life as a vampire. Until Charleene entered my life, I’d thought nothing could surprise me.

“What happened to the barrier?” Ally asked innocently.

“It’s a protected building, not hidden,” I stated, standing from the car. Walking around to the other side I unclipped Charleene’s seat belt and continued, “the museum is open to anyone wanting to visit it,” my voice softened as I lifted Charleene out of the back seat.

“You could have just said that earlier, you know?” Jacin admonished me, clearly

upset with how much enjoyment I get out of baiting Ally.

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Giving him a one shoulder shrug, I walked towards Cusworth Hall, wanting to find Donovan as quickly as possible. Ally's feet scrambled on the gravel as she scurried to catch up. I reached the steps leading to the front door when Donovan himself swung it open.

"Ah Adrina, you're here," he said, offering me a compassionate smile, before he eyed Charleene in my arms and his face turned solemn. "Follow me," he instructed, gesturing to the hallway I could barely see behind him. With a grateful nod I walked past him and paused in the open entrance hall. Cusworth Hall is a wonderful place, where humans come to learn about their history. I ignored it all, instead focusing on Donovan himself. He was a small man with a round belly and blue eyes. I'd never met him before, but if Gladys trusted him with this then so would I. That woman had a penchant for collecting trustworthy people.

"Can you help her?" I asked, nodding down at Charleene as he led us through the house, "we're not sure exactly what's happened to her, but Gladys suspects she's gone on a spirit walk, whatever that is." I quickly told him, not wanting to waste another second, and praying to any god that would listen for him to save her.

We were just nearing the end of another hallway on the second floor when Ally's gasp drew our attention. She was standing stock still in the middle of the hall, her eyes wide as she stared at the walls around her. Frowning, I watched as her gaze returned to the three of us watching her, then Donovan waved his hand towards a room and I followed him inside.

A giant bed took up much of the room, with a large set of drawers and comfy looking sitting chair occupying the rest of the space. There was no TV, in fact the only

electrical item in there seemed to be the small chandelier hanging from the ceiling. “Please make yourselves comfortable, I’ll be right back.” Donovan said kindly, his voice little more than a whisper as he nodded towards the bed, and turned to the Fae who were still standing in the hallway.

Laying Charleene down gently, I ran my fingers through my short hair, tugging at it to centre myself as I waited for Donovan to return. I heard him speaking to them as they walked away, further off down the hall, and I felt grateful that he was putting us each in separate rooms.

“Where are you, babe?” I asked aloud, needing to break the oppressive silence that hung in the air, as my eyes returned to Charleene.

She was as white as a ghost and her breathing was still steady. She looked peaceful with her long hair splayed out on the pillows. Other than the flickering of her eyes beneath her eyelids, she shows no other signs of being alive. My heartsank as I perched on the edge of the bed and took her hand in mine. My thumb caressed the back of her hand as Donovan returned.

“She is dear to you.” He stated, and I turned my face towards where he stood in the doorway.

“She’s my whole world.” I told him honestly.

“Strange for a vampire to care so much for a witch,” he observed, stepping closer, “illegal even, for you.”

“I know my own Coven’s laws,” I snapped, narrowing my eyes at him.

“And so you should, Adrina, you uphold them after all.” I went to answer him, but he held up a hand and continued speaking, “Why would you risk death for her?”

“Because she’s worth it.” I replied without thinking, taken aback by my own admission. “She’s my mate.” I admitted aloud for the first time. I’d been pretty sure before all this, but seeing her lifeless on the ground, my heart had stopped beating at the thought that I’d lost her. That was when I’d truly knew what she was to me.

“Well that certainly complicates matters. Mates are a rare thing nowadays and are to be cherished.” Donovan said with a kind smile, “Hecate knows what she is doing after all.”

“It doesn’t bother you that I love her?” I needed to hear him say so.

“No, as a Witch I do not care that you love her, it’s an outdated vampiric law, if you ask me,” he grumbled, closing the distance between him and Charleene.

I moved to the side as he studied her, mumbling under his breath as he took in her pallor and then gripped her wrist in one hand, while placing his index and middle finger against her pulse point. I dared not breathe when he closed his eyes and silence reigned within the room.

“It is as Gladys suspected, Charleene is indeed spirit walking.” Donovan said grimly, opening his eyes to meet mine.

“What does that mean?” I asked, stroking my hand up and down her leg, needing contact with her for comfort.

“Her spirit has left her body, astral projection I think it’s called now,” Donovan informed me, and my heart settled a little more. I’d heard of astral projection before and knew witches who’d done it many times before.

“Can you help her return?” I asked, flicking my eyes to him, where he now sat in the comfy chair next to the bed with his eyes closed.

“Hush, now, and let me see if I can find her.” He said irritably, opening one eye for a second, before closing it again and furrowing his brow in concentration.

The seconds ticked by slowly as his eyes flickered—much like Charleene’s—beneath his eyelids. I began to pace the room, the soft carpet muffling my footsteps as the seconds turned into minutes, which dragged on into almost an hour. I was beginning to worry for his return when suddenly his eyes snapped open and his head flicked to the right. “What happened?” I ask, startled by his sudden animation.

“She’s in danger.” He said, pushing quickly to his feet. Fear flooded through me at his words.

“How can I help her fight?” I gasped, crossing the small space between us quickly and gripping onto his shoulders.

“What?” He asked back, confused.

“You said Charleene’s in danger, how can I help her fight when she’s like that?” I was almost wailing, as panic which, until recently, I hadn’t felt since I was human overtook all rational thought.

“Not her, The Ancient,” Donovan clarified, calming my fear, but stoking my rage as once again the Fae is bringing trouble to our door.

“I’ll bloody kill her!” I snarled starting towards the door, but Donovan’s steady hand on my arm makes me pause.

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“I fear she does not know what she is doing, but I must go help her, otherwise we’ll all be in danger.” He said, attempting to push me back towards the bed, “Stay with her.” And those three words have the desired effect as I give in and slump in the chair he’s vacated.

“I swear Charleene, that Fae girl you like so much, brings one more problem my way and I’ll wring her damn throat.” I grumbled aloud. “She’s been nothing but trouble, and you wouldn’t be where you are now, if not for her.”

Talking to her eased a little of my guilt and pain, making me feel lighter, as if unburdening myself.

“If you wake up, I promise to show you just how much you mean to me. You’re my light in the dark, my sunshine,” I told her, wondering if she could hear me. “I don’t know if you can hear me or not...”

“Her ears can hear you but her mind will take no note.” Startled, I’m on my feet in seconds, turning around to see Donovan standing just inside the room. I was so completely focused upon Charleene that I hadn’t heard him coming. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. To be honest I don’t think I’ve ever managed to get the drop on a Vampire before.” He joked.

A small laugh slipped free and I instantly felt guilty over finding something funny, when nothing else felt right. If I could cry, my face would be soaked, however as a vampire our bodies don’t react the same way they did when we were human.

“It’s ok to feel joy, Adrina, it is in times like these that you must hold onto any

happiness you can.” His eyes were kind and crinkled at the edges when he smiled at me.

All I can do is nod and return to watching over Charleene.

“She is not on our plane,” he said solemnly, confusing the shit out of me.

“Then where is she?” I wondered aloud.

“It is said that Hecate herself created a place using spirit, a place for those who are not yet ready to move on from life.” He explained calmly, “I believe she is there, walking with our Goddess.”

“Will she return?” I asked, fearing what his answer might be.

“Honestly,” he paused, sucking in a deep breath and waiting for me to look up at him. Steeling myself for the worst, I met his eyes. “I don’t know. I’ve never known anyone still living that has spirit walked in that place and survived.”

My heart sank, and my hand flew up to cover my throat as it started making a strange sound and I realised I was sobbing. “No, she must come back.” I pleaded aloud to anyone listening. The day I’d died and been reborn as a vampire was the day I’d turned away from my human faith. However, now I prayed to any and every God, to bring her back to me.

Something wet rolled down my cheek. Surprised, I wiped it with my finger and when I looked down red coated the side of it. Huh, so we can cry, I thought to myself, shocked as I’ve never seen one of our kind cry and in the last three hundred years I’d not felt much, let alone felt anything strong enough to cry over. What have you done to me, Sunshine? I thought staring at the blood tear smeared over my finger.

“There is still hope Adrina, she may yet find her way back to you.” Dovovan said kindly, squeezing my shoulder gently. Sniffing, I looked up at him and offered a weak smile.

“I have to believe she will, or I’ll break.” I told him honestly, wiping away another blood tear that fell.

“Gladys’ spell to preserve her body is a good one. It will hold for another four days, I will also add my own protections on her and a spell to help her find her way back when she is ready.”

“Can you not just bring her back?” I asked selfishly.

“Not without risking myself to the same fate,” he apologised sadly, “Pulling her back before she is ready could also cause damage to her mind.”

Nodding, I picked up her hand in mine and tuned out everything else.

“Everything you love dies.” He drawled down at me, “look at the mess you have made trying to keep this one alive.”

There was blood everywhere, I’d been lost to a frenzy, the bloodlust too great to hold off any longer. Staring up I met his cold, calculating eyes and hate flooded through me. He did this to me, made me into this monster.

“I never wanted this.” I croaked up at him, making him laugh cruelly.

“Nobody ever wants this.” He replied, his lips pulled thin and tight. “Clean it up and next time I give you something to eat, you better well eat it quickly, I won’t have this again.”

“But they are people.”

“And so were you when I fed from you. Do you really think you were supposed to turn?” he snapped, raising his hand in the air as if he’d strike me again. I flinched back, moving closer to the cold small body still cradled in my arms.

“I hate you!” I snarled at him, and instantly regretted it when his fist connected with my head and I saw stars.

“No one will ever love you now.”

Opening my eyes, longing filled me as I realised how evil my Sire had been. I’d kept his words and let them impact my life. Never allowing anyone to get too close, even Tilly who’d only ever been kind and loving to me, I’d kept everyone at a distance. Charleene however had been like a freight train, barging her way past every defence I’d normally put in place and tearing them to shreds. My Sire’s words fill my head again as I look down at her, so fragile and peaceful. Everything you love dies. His cruel words seem very apt right about now.

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Needing a change of scenery, I placed a soft kiss on Charleene's forehead, "I'll be back soon, Sunshine." I whispered, before walking out into the empty hallway, looking for Donovan. Closing my eyes I let my enhanced hearing flood my senses, picking up on Ally's voice as she spoke with him and following it to an almost closed door.

Ally's broken whisper was clear through the small crack, making me pause on the threshold, "Can you find Lilah?"

Donovan's voice didn't answer, and when he remained quiet, I pushed the door open and found Ally standing before the older man, "What's he doing?" I demanded, wondering what trouble she's brought upon us this time.

"Looking for Lilah, I think," she whispered.

Donovan's lips tightened before his blue eyes met Ally's and he shook his head. She looked gutted at his response. Donovan opened his mouth to say something when a sharp intake of breath had us all turning to find Jacin in the doorway, looking like a wasp had just stung his manhood.

His eyes were narrowed on the three of us and his face should have been bright red with the anger pouring off of him in waves, "Well doesn't this look comfy?"

He looked straight at Ally and even I had to admit she's got insane inner strength as she met his gaze without flinching or faltering, "Jace, get a grip we were just talking." I almost laughed at the heavy eye roll she gave him, before asking what we were all wondering, "what do you want?"

“I want you to be safe Ally, I want for us to find Lilah and for us to go...” He cut himself off with a snarl.

Ally turned to Donovan, giving him a small smile before she shoved past Jacin, forcing him out of her way. “I’m not fragile Jace, I can handle more than you think and I will get answers one way or another,” she snapped and walked off.

Jacin moved into the hallway to follow her, but stopped when Donovan spoke, “Let her be.”

“My whole life has been spent learning how to protect her, but how am I supposed to protect her from loving the wrong man?” Jacin questioned, his voice breaking half way through.

“Everyone must make their own mistakes, young man, you included.” Donovan answered cryptically and Jacin’s face crumpled.

“You love her.” I stated, making both of them turn my way.

Jacin didn’t answer, but the blush staining his cheeks and his protectiveness was answer enough. Nodding at him, I turned to leave.

“I can’t help but love her, she’s always been the one for me.” Jacin answered brokenly.

“Sometimes the feelings we think are love can be misguided, and if the other person’s heart does not beat for you, it can be a fool's errand.” Donovan’s quiet voice filled the room, “sometimes we have to let them go to love them.”

His words were wise and I watched as Jacin really took them in, my heart aching with all this talk of love as my thoughts returned to the woman who held mine in a vice.

Wanting to be with Charleene, I left Donovan and Jacin alone and head back to our room.

Chapter Twenty-Four

How do you say no to a freaking Goddess? - Charleene

Blinking, I focused on Eilidh, already missing the calm that had surrounded Hecate. Eilidh quickly summoned a wave of air and extinguished the ring of candles as I stood and stretched. Every muscle in my body felt like it was on fire. Wincing, I forced my feet to move and wobble as I stepped over the spent candles, noticing they had almost burnt down to the bottom. “How long was I gone?” I asked, rubbing at my thumping head.

“Time is not very clear here, but long enough that I thought you would not wake,” Eilidh said, waving her hand and making the candles disappear.

“Is there any way of knowing how much time is passing in...” I paused, not knowing how to phrase my question.

“In the world of the living?” Eilidh finished for me, “No.”

“It feels like I’ve been here for days, but the sky never changes, so it’s hard to tell.” I wondered out loud, looking up at the perfect sky.

“I’ve never had much reason to think about it before, however I suppose you’re right.” Eilidh pondered, tilting her head to the side like a little bird does. “Did you succeed?” she asked, reminding me of what we’d been doing.

“I think so,” I said, turning my focus inward and searching for the small sparks of magic. However, I was quickly met with a whirlwind of power. Spirit, fire and air

rushed from my body, encasing it in a tornado with red and silver streaks. My hair whipped about, flicking me in the face and blinding me. The rush of wind through a tunnel is all I could hear as I tried to gain control over it all. Panicking, I attempted to grab at the strands of magic I glimpsed when my hair shifted, but my hands slipped through it, almost like I'm trying to grab water.

“YOU NEED TO COAX IT!” Eilidh shouted over the howling wind that'd joined the cacophony of madness.

“WHAT!” I screamed back, not understanding what she meant.

“DO NOT GRAB AT IT! COAX IT!” She screamed.

Letting the tornado rage around me, I took a shuddering breath and tried thinking calming thoughts. Without realising, I began to hum and the wind dropped slightly, continuing to hum the tune that has always calmed me in times of stress. I watched in wonder as my magic retreated and began buzzing beneath my skin. When the last of the tingling left my skin, I dropped to my knees, exhaustion making them weak.

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“Well done, that was brilliant.” Eilidh cheered, rushing over to help support my weakened body.

“I feel knackered, like all my energy has been sucked from my body.” I confided, before a massive yawn took over me.

“I’m not surprised, magic draws from our energy or the energy around us to fuel itself.” Eilidh explained, “You just channelled three magics at once, using your own energy. You should be dead, not just shattered.”

“Oh,” is the only response I could come up with, as I look at the wonder on her face.

“Rest and when you feel up to it, I will teach you how to channel your power safely.” Eilidh said with a huge smile.

Nodding, I lowered myself to the grass, turning onto my back as I went. Closing my eyes I wondered how I’m supposed to rest, when sleep has eluded me since I arrived here.

“Just be,” Eilidh said as though she could read my mind, “do not think about anything and just be still. Feel the grass beneath your fingers and the air upon your skin.” Her voice was hypnotic as I followed her instructions and my body sagged.

“Thank you.” I murmured.

“Do you want to hear more about the Nicniven witches of old?” Eilidh asked and I nodded. I’d love to learn more about them.

“Our Coven began from the holy Goddess Hecate herself. Once during a time of great sorrow for magickal folk, when trials and executions were the norm, Hecate asked a simple woman who lived on the outskirts of a small settlement for sanctuary for herself and her followers. Knowing the price for such an act could end in her death, she hid them all within the barn attached to her house.” Eilidha said, her voice quiet but still somehow echoing around us. Opening my eyes slowly, I watched as she spoke and her words came to life, playing out around us like a film. “They worked in the woman and her husband's fields, for weeks they bonded with the townsfolk. But when the inquisitors came the townsfolk grew scared and soon pointed to the new folk at the farm.”

“Oh no,” I gasped, unable to help myself as my hand covered my mouth in horror. At school we’d been taught briefly of the inquisitors, witch hunts and trials. Atrocities against women of all ages.

“You know of such things?” Eilidha asked, cocking her head to the side as she gazed at me.

“Human schools teach of the various Witch hunts and trials of history.” I told her, watching as she nodded, “At the time I didn't know Witches actually existed.”

She nodded again before continuing her tale.

“When the inquisitors came, Margaret Nic Nevill bade them all to hide in the stacks of hay within the barn and remain silent no matter what they heard. She strode out alone to face the men who had come and stood tall, as her own husband pointed his shaking finger condemning his wife and those inside the barn to death. The inquisitor ordered the townsfolk, who had been summoned to see justice served to the witches who worshipped the devil, to drag all those from the barn and still the women stood firm before the doors, denying them entry.”

“Why?” I found myself interrupting, unable to understand what one woman thought she could achieve on her own.

“She stood and fixed her eyes upon those she'd called friends within the crowd. Beseeching them that no God would want his people killed in his name.”

“And did they listen? Did they help her?” The sad look as Eilidh shushed me is answer enough, as she went on.

“The crowd paused for a moment before the inquisitor demanded they heed his words and not be tempted by the devil's word. You must understand it was a different time then and folk feared the devil more than anything. So when they were told to bind Margaret Nic Nevill they listened and when she was tied to the stake they listened still. That day Margaret Nic Nevill died beneath the dying sun's ruby rays.”

“Oh no,” tears streamed down my face at her tale even though I knew it wasn't over, “what of the others in the barn?”

“They too died; some on stakes with fire, some drowned in the nearest river but all perished, as Hecate watched on. Rage overtook her at the senseless waste of life so on that very night of All Souls, when the veil between life and death was at its thinnest and the moon had reached its zenith, she summoned those who had perished to the Calva Cairns and guided them back through the veil, gifting them a second chance at life. And, for her bravery and strength, she gifted Margaret Nic Nevill the new name of Nicnevin and hence the Nicnevin Coven was born.” Eilidh bowed her head as her words and the images around us faded from view.

“Wow,” was the only word that came to mind as I stared at Eilidh.

“Our Goddess is both firm and fair, she sees all and embraces the rejected in both life and death.” Eilidh explained, and I found every word fascinating. Of course even

living as a human I'd heard of Hecate, but I'd never really known much about her. "Hecate is part of the Maiden, Mother and Crone; she represents all three stages of life and thus we represent her in kind."

"The Maiden, Mother and Crone," I whispered, remembering how the Goddesses' form had seemed to shift in age and how the London Coven had used the same terms.

"That is correct. The Maiden represents girlhood, purity, pleasure and independence among other things. The first born daughter of the coven's previous maiden typically takes on this role. The Mother represents love, growth, maturity, fertility and caregiving and, as such, takes over the mantle of 'Mother' when she gives birth to her first child. The Crone symbolises wisdom and often guides not only the Maiden and Mother in their roles, but the Coven as well." Eilidh's explanation was easy to follow and I found myself nodding along as I listened.

"So where does our magic come from?" I asked.

"Magic is not so simple to understand. As children we are taught that it comes from Hecate herself, which could be true. However as we grow and mature we're taught that it comes from the earth and the energy around us."

"Ok," I said, understanding a little more why I felt so worn out.

"I like to believe that our ability to feel and use the magic of the earth is gifted to our kind by Hecate—"

"Wait, I thought that the Fae created Witches?" I suddenly blurted out, remembering what Dina had said.

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“Hecate was the daughter of a powerful Fae,” Eilidh says, her calm voice not wavering from my interruption.

“So the Fae did create witches,” I surmised, showing I was following her.

“Yes, they gave birth to Hecate, who in turn gave birth to her own children and created the Wicca lineages.”

“But not the Nicnevin Coven?”

“No, our Coven was gifted by Hecate.” Eilidh confirmed. “Over time, I think our Coven forgot their origins and fear took over their minds, but I have to believe that they are not beyond saving.”

Her voice was soft and heartfelt, as I thought about all those “Our Coven” had sacrificed over the years and I wondered if she’s correct.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Oh no, what now? - Dina

I’d not been back in my room long when Donovan rushed past, closely followed by Jacin. Torn between leaving Charleene’s side and finding out what they were running for, I struggled, indecision pulling at me. I’d never been unsure of my actions before and found that I didn’t like it. Looking at Charleene, I made my mind up and chased after their hurrying footsteps. We ran out the back door of Cusworth Hall, and I followed them through the perfectly manicured gardens to a field that borders the

property. My mouth fell open at the sight I beheld.

Ally stood in the field, her eyes closed and surrounded by a whirling tornado of flames. “Leave Lysais!” She screamed, flinging her hand out towards something we couldn’t see. The hair on the back of my neck rose, as my eyes scanned our surroundings for the threat she’s obviously fighting off, but all I found was Donovan, Jacin, Ally and myself.

“What is she doing?” I asked at the same time Jacin screamed her name, “She’s going to set the whole field alight.”

“She’s dream-walking,” Donovan said quickly, as though that should explain whatever the hell was going on.

“She’s what?”

“Dream-walking, and it has brought her enemies one step closer to you all.” He explained, “We need to wake her.”

He began to mutter under his breath as I stood, staring at him like he’d lost his mind, what the heck is dream-walking when it comes to town? I wondered. The wind picked up, flapping my short hair around my face. I attempted to keep my vision clear but it was futile as Donovan called more to his aid, using it to surround Ally and the fire she’s throwing about.

“I can’t hold it for much longer,” he said, his face showing the strain it’s taking, making me wonder and not for the first time, just how powerful Ally is?

“Jacin do something!” I yelled as he catapulted himself over the wooden fence separating Cusworth Hall and the field.

“What do you think I’m trying to do?” he shouted back, his eyes never leaving Ally as a long beam of fire flew forward.

It seemed to go on forever with Jacin’s shouts punctuating the air. Donovan’s knees wobbled and he shook. Moving quickly, I grabbed his shoulders and placed my front to his back, letting him lean on me and take my energy to fuel his magic.

“Jacin!” I warned as Donovan sagged a little more.

Then, as quickly as it started, Ally’s fire disappeared, like a tap has been shut off. She gripped her head in pain before her legs gave out and she fell to the floor. I knew Fae could move almost as fast as vampires but until this moment I’d never seen it. Jacin reached her before her head could hit the ground and cradled her to him.

Donovan’s magic faltered shortly after and he fell fully against me, until I was pretty certain I’m the only thing keeping him standing.

“You need to go.” He said gently, struggling to keep his eyes open, “they know where you are.”

Crap! I thought, shuffling his weight to keep a better hold of him as he lost the battle and his eyes closed. If the Shadow Fae have found us, it would only be a matter of time before the rogue vampire did too. We’d managed to shake him when stopping at Gladys’, but that didn’t mean we’d remain hidden forever. Our best chance was to keep moving. Gently lifting Donovan into my arms, I saw that Jacin had done the same for Ally.

“Come on, let’s get them back to the house.” I said, before turning and using my enhanced speed to rush. I felt uneasy leaving Charleene alone for this long; she was vulnerable, more so than normal, at the moment.

Jacin followed closely behind and walked to the bedroom Ally had been given while I took Donovan and made sure he was comfortable in the study. I had no idea where his bedroom was and I wouldn't want to go poking around in someone else's home. Once I'd made sure he wasn't going to fall out of the deep wingback chair, I ran back to check on Charleene.

She was exactly where I'd left her, she hadn't even rolled over. Each time I saw her so still, I was reminded over and over that she wasn't here and my heart shattered all over again. All I wanted was for her to open those gorgeous brown eyes of hers, so I could fall into them.

Come on get yourself together Dina, I mentally slap myself, before going to find Jacin.

I found him two doors down on the other side of Donovan's study, Ally laid on the bed looking peaceful. Her face is paler than usual, making her freckles stand out more, and her hair looks redder too. Jacin looked haggard as he watched her, perched against the chest of drawers.

"How's she doing?" I asked, leaning against the wall next to the door.

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“She hasn’t woken yet,” he said gruffly, worry creasing his brow. Clearing his throat, he asked me a question in return, “What about Charleene?”

“Still the same.” I told him with a deep sigh, “Donovan said we need to leave, that they know where she is.”

I watched his reaction to my words carefully, noticing how his shoulders tensed and his eyes narrowed.

“Why can’t he just leave her alone?” He said, but I don’t know if it was supposed to be a question or him just thinking aloud. Either way, I didn’t give an answer. “I really thought we’d left all of this behind, that she would get to start over from all the heartbreak.” He continued with a frown, “I guess that was just wishful thinking.”

“You might escape them, when you find your Lilah.” I said, awkwardly, feeling like I needed to give him something to hold onto.

“Yeah, maybe.” He didn’t sound too sure, but pushed away from his perch and sat on the edge of the bed. I watched as he lovingly picked up her hand and held it, much like I’ve been doing with Charleene.

“I think we should continue straight on to Edinburgh, no more stops.” I told him, having already made up my mind. “We need to find Charleene’s coven, maybe they’ll be able to bring her back.”

“Sounds good to me.” Jacin didn’t argue and I thought all the fight had left him.

“Oh, good, you're both here,” Donovan’s voice interrupted the silence that had descended on the room, “What are you going to do?” He asked.

Ally moaned, silencing our conversation, and shifted against the pillows before her eyes tried opening and snapped shut just as quickly.

“What happened?” Ally asked, flinching back into the pillows.

“We need to move,” I stated with no preamble, making her whimper as Jacin gave me a narrowed look. I’d just about had enough of the curve balls she’d been throwing our way. It was another reason I wanted to get to Scotland, as then I’d be free of them and their troubles. Jacin was growing on me, but Ally? Well she needed to grow the fuck up and fast.

Jacin picked up a cloth out of a small bowl I hadn’t noticed on the nightstand and applied it to her forehead. Her face instantly lost some of its tension and Jacin’s head turned to look at me disapprovingly, as he walked back to his perch against the drawers. What the hell have I done? I thought as he spoke.

“We will Dina, as soon as they’re both stable enough to move.” Jace’s voice was quiet, barely audible, reminding me that Charleene was in no better condition and needed to rest just as much as Ally.

“What have I done now?” she asked, blinking.

“You...”

“Not now Adrina.” Donovan’s voice cuts me off. He may have spoken just above a whisper but the fury in his eyes told me how much he didn’t appreciate my tone.

Well suck it up buttercup, this is who I am. I thought snidely. I didn’t agree with

keeping things from her, she should be made to realise the danger she's put us all in.

"It appears your dreaming has let your whereabouts slip young one, and your enemies have caught up to you." Donovan explained calmly, giving her the news much gentler than I would have.

"I thought that was another dream," Ally muttered, her brow creasing in confusion. Another thing I didn't like about her; she had no clue how to hide her feelings.

"That's the tricky business of dream-walking. What starts as a dream doesn't always remain a dream." Donovan told her, moving to stand beside the bed and look down at her.

Ally's eyes finally opened, "Why does my head feel like I've been on a seven day bar bender?"

"You used your magic again and this time it took its toll," Jacin answered this time from across the room.

"Toll?" Ally's head lolled in his direction and her shoulders tensed up.

I watched, intrigued, as Jacin's lips tilted up as though he'd heard the funniest joke, "It took some of your energy and it battered against the block in your mind."

"Oh, remind me next time no more magic," She joked, rubbing her forehead and I couldn't help myself as anger flooded through me at her glib tone.

"Next time?" I screamed, giving her my most unimpressed glare. "There won't be a next time, your magic is dangerous, unpredictable, untamed." I continued, anger fueling my words, making them harsher than they should have been, but I'd had enough. Everytime she used magic something disastrous happened and it didn't seem

to affect her.

Jacin opened his mouth as though he wanted to respond and I threw him the same glare. He always defends her, but right now she needed to hear what I was saying. I went to give him another piece of my mind about his own behaviour, but Donovan piped up instead.

“She needs to use her magic Adrina, how else is she to learn control? It is up to you,” he demanded pointing at me, “to protect them, and it’s up to you,” he turned to Jacin next, “to teach them both.” There was so much passion in his words that I didn’t know what to say, and when I glanced at Jacin, I could tell he felt the same. Donovan had just scolded us both like children.

“This was done to Alyssa, none of this is her fault so stop blaming her.” Donovan went on, making me feel a twinge of regret over my harsh words, but I still stood behind them. “Now young one, take this. It will help protect your mind, but it will not last forever.” He explained, putting a small pendant over her head, when had he made that? I wondered, breathing in the scents of lavender and camomile, alongside something else. It’s a protection charm I realised, as Ally gripped it in her fist. Donovan turned to settle a long, stern look on Jacin and then myself, before he shooed us out of the room.

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Jacin was the last one from the room and closed the door behind him, “You know you don’t have to be such a bitch all the damn time.” He informed me, making me pause as I went to walk away.

“And you don’t have to be her knight in shining armour either.” I snapped back, “Find me when you're ready to leave.” I said, turning and walking away before he could reply.

I spent the next hour sitting beside Charleene, bemoaning the injustice that she’s left me alone to deal with the dynamic Fae duo. I was just about to launch into another tirade when Donovan knocked against the door.

“May I come in?” he asked politely.

“It’s your house, you can do whatever you like,” I told him, turning my attention back to Charleene.

“I know you’re worried Adrina, but you can’t keep attacking the poor girl like that,” he admonished, and I really wanted to argue with him, but his fatherly eyes met mine, and I found I haven’t the heart to.

“This isn’t the first time her magic has caused problems,” I admitted in a growl, my eyes flicking to Charleene and back to his, my meaning clear.

“And you need to forgive her for that,” his tone was reasonable but I was already shaking my head.

“How am I supposed to forgive her for taking Charleene from me?” The thought came out as a question that made Donovan sigh.

“I don’t know Adrina, but somehow you need to. What if Charleene had been the one to cause this to Ally, would you want her to be blamed forever?” He asked, turning the tables.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I need answers and I need them tonight! - Dina

Thankfully, Ally fell asleep shortly after leaving Donovan’s so I had a break from her and Jacin fighting. Jacin had also been quiet, only speaking when we crossed the Scottish border to ask for directions to my place in Edinburgh. I’d given him them and lapsed back into my thoughts. Charleene hadn’t stirred or made any noise the entire trip, and her silence was wearing on me more and more. I missed her chatter and bubbly attitude, especially when I found myself being plagued by memories that should remain buried.

I glanced out the window, noticing we were on a familiar street as Jacin murmured, "Ally?" and gave her a little shake, "we're here."

“Here?” she questioned sleepily, glancing out the window, “And where’s here?”

“Edinburgh.” I told her, my tone harsher than I’d intended. I’d spent a lot of the drive pondering Donovan’s words and realised if the roles had been reversed I wouldn’t want Charleene being blamed.

Ally looked back at me and then across at Charleene with a sad look, “I thought we had another stop before we’d got here?”

“We were going to, but after Lysais found us at Donovan’s, we thought it would be best to come straight here.” Jace explained, making her shiver.

“Oh,” was her only reply and for a few minutes she’s silent, only speaking again as Jacins pulled up to the curb and stopped the car, “So what happens now?”

“We’ll get settled inside, and then I’m going to meet one of my contacts here.” I said, trying to be more open with them.

“How do we know it’s safe here?” Ally asked, as I sped around the car, and gently pulled Charleene from her seat.

I made sure her head was resting against my shoulder before answering, as Ally’s head swivelled taking in the street, “It’s one of my spots.”

Leaving them both out on the street, I strode up the steps and unlocked the front door of my house. I took a deep breath of the slightly stale air and a small smile graced my lips as familiar scents of bergamot and freesia welcomed me back. It’d been far too long since I’d last been here.

I took the steps one at a time, being careful not to jostle Charleene as I took her upstairs and tucked her into my bed. There was another guest room down the hall, but if I had to leave her, I wanted her surrounded by my scent. The Fae could use the spare room. Pausing at the door to give her one last look, I turn my attention to the job at hand. We needed more information on where the Nicniven witches could be and I was determined to find it tonight. Going to go back downstairs and inform the Fae of my plans, I froze on the top step. Ally was looking intently at the photographs which had been taken of me over the years. I’d forgotten they even still hung there, a reminder of the past I couldn’t return to.

As if she could feel my eyes on her, Ally’s gaze snapped to mine and a faint blush

stained her cheeks. “I’ve put Charleene in my room and there’s a spare room at the end of the hall up here, so you’ll have to share with Jace.”

“Erm, thank you.” She muttered, shifting her feet.

“She’ll need looking after while I’m out,” I stated.

“Where will you be going?” Ally asked and I frowned.

“Jace has my number if she wakes up.” I said before using my speed to leave.

The door slammed behind me but I didn't care, for now I just wanted to be on my own and I needed to hunt.

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Melting into the shadows cast from the street lights being just too far apart, I made my way into the city of Edinburgh through the network of streets and alleyways. It was alive tonight with people drinking, walking home from lateshifts and those who are homeless. In a world with so much wealth, it really was heartbreaking to see those who have to go without the basic necessities like housing, food or amenities. However, those same people with no home to go to are who vampires can rely on to feed us if we need to. Although tonight I wasn't looking for the blood bank equivalent of fast food, I need something more substantial.

Not being able to help Charleene had made me feel redundant in a way and tonight, I wanted to chase and hunt my prey. To dominate it.

I headed to the rougher parts of the city, watching for the perfect victim. Someone who was bad enough to warrant me hunting them, but not too evil that I would lose my self control. I also required someone that no one would believe if they remembered me feeding from them. Let's face it, who would believe that a person would bite and drink from another person.

It took me over an hour to find someone dealing drugs to an addict who looked so far out of her right mind that it seemed laughable for him to be taking the money from her shaking hand. Waiting until the transaction had been completed and the woman had scurried off, I began my hunt. I let my feet fall heavily on the pavement, close enough that he started throwing glances over his shoulder but keeping far enough away to make him doubt if I was following him. His glances became quick flicks as he turned a corner and I followed. After the third corner his strides grew faster, until another street later he was almost running.

Tasting his fear taint the air, I let a cruel smile twist my lips into a sneer and made myself catch up to him. I was within grabbing distance when he finally found his balls and spun on the spot to face me.

“What ya want lass?” The scumbag asked, showing me his black and missing teeth in the process, “You after a score?”

My lips peeled back from my own perfectly white teeth at his words. “Why would I want your poison?”

“Then wha’ ya followin’ me fer?” he asked, seeming genuinely perplexed with the situation he found himself in.

“To teach you a lesson.” I all but growled at him, letting my own monster dangerously close to the surface and my fangs descend.

The streetlights in this part of town were not maintained very well and every other one seemed to be broken, however the scumbag still had enough light to see them.

“Wha’ are yer?” he asked, narrowing his eyes at me.

“Your worst nightmare.” I deadpanned, before grabbing his throat in one hand and the fist he threw at me in the other. Using my superior strength I forced him down the alleyway we'd stopped next to.

Cutting off his oxygen stopped any noises from leaving his foul, rotten mouth and his free hand clawed at my unbreakable skin as he tried to free himself. Smiling viciously, I allowed him to struggle as I took him to the bottom of the alley. There were no windows, and at this time of night, there would be no one to offer him aid, as I tilted his head and roughly tore into his rancid skin. The stench of his body odour was overpowering as it mixed with the scent of fresh piss. His struggles grew more

frantic and he kicked out at my legs, hoping to dislodge me as the first spurt of his blood hit my tongue.

I almost spat it back at him as its bitter taste coated my tongue like oil. The drugs coursing through his system tainted it and made it taste disgusting. However, I'd started now and needed to force myself to drain enough for him to lose consciousness. If he passed out his brain would assuage him that this had all been a drug fueled nightmare. There'd be no marks to say otherwise, when he woke. Forcing myself to drink faster, I smiled against his sweaty neck as his fight lessened with each heavy pull, until finally he sagged in my hand.

Thankfully pulling away, I forced myself to lick my puncture wounds, before dropping him in a heap at my feet. It's going to take days of donated blood to wash my mouth clean, I thought to myself, trying not to retch as I headed off back towards the city centre and the first contact I had here.

So far my night had been a complete failure. My first two contacts could only tell me that the Nicnevin Witches had been persecuted more than others throughout history, making them secretive and aloof. None of them could tell me why the Coven decided to fully withdraw into obscurity. One had heard murmurs of a strange place outside of Glasgow, where it was said that people walked one way only to find themselves turning around. The other had said the same about rumours from up near Inverness. I was hoping that my final contact would be able to find them for me, but I wasn't holding out much hope.

Still trying to free my mouth of my last meal, I step up to Carol's front door and press the button of her doorbell. It was already well past midnight but I wasn't afraid of waking her, she'd been expecting me after all, and it wasn't as though vampires typically kept to sociable hours. The door of the tall brownstone building opened a crack and Carol's one green eye met mine.

“Adrina.” She greeted me coldly, swinging the door open further so I could enter. There was no love lost between me and Carol, but she was too afraid of my Coven and myself, to deny me information.

“Carol,” I matched her tone and walked further down the thin hallway, towards the kitchen at the back. The air was heavy with the scent of sage and smoke still clung in thinly to the ceiling.

“Well make yoursen at home, why don't ya.” She grumbled, closing the door behind her with a sharp bang.

“I need to locate the Nicniven Coven.” I said with no more preamble as she shuffled into the kitchen to join me.

“Now there's a name I ain't heard in a long time,” she rambled, “Wha’ yer want with them?”

“That's none of your business,” I informed her, narrowing my eyes to match hers.

“Well they ain’t been seen in almost twenty odd years, findin’ ‘em will be difficult.” She mused.

“I'll pay double, can you find them or not?” I asked, taking out the thick roll of cash I'd taken from the drug dealing scum.

“Course I can.” She scoffed with a snort, as though my doubts were unfounded. Carol was a witch who specialised in scrying.

I propped one shoulder against the kitchen door frame, watching as she gathered everything she would need and laid it all out on the table. She lit four candles to represent the elements and poured water into the scrying bowl. Carol chanted quietly,

speaking words only she needed to hear, and watched as smoke rose from the water, filling the bowl and dancing hypnotically near the top. Carol's normal—one blue, one green— eyes were now a cloudy white as she raised her head and settled them on me. A shiver ran down my spine as her voice took on an otherworldly tone; no matter how many times she'd used it in the past it always had the same effect.

“Speak your question and receive your answer.”

“I require to know the location of the Nicnevin Coven.” I responded, keeping my words clear and concise.

The minutes dragged by slowly as Carol sat unblinking, her lips moving silently. “They are bound to Scotland.” Her otherworldly voice intoned, unhelpfully.

“I know that, but where?” I tried.

Again she took a while to answer, “Uncertain; they have been near Edinburgh, near Fife, near Glasgow, near Glencoe, near Glenfinnan and many other places but never straying across the Scottish border.”

The answer was unhelpful, giving me numerous places to search, “Why can they not be found?” I asked, trying to change tactics.

“Magic clouds them, protects them, until they choose to move.” Carol intoned, before drawing in a noisy breath and her eyes cleared along with the smoke inside the bowl. “They are using magic to conceal themselves, even the fates can not find them at the moment.” She explained further, “They obviously do not want to be found.”

“But why?” The question slipped out as any hope I’d held onto vanished like a candle blown out by the wind.

“Who knows, but I can narrow your search down a little; Glasgow flashed in my vision more than once as did Inverness. Maybe those are favoured areas for them.”

“Maybe, thank you for your services.” I said, wanting nothing more than to get home to Charleene.

“A pleasure as always Adrina,” Carol said sarcastically, she hated my visits, “Please see yoursen out.”

With a nod, I did just that and sped all the way back to my own townhouse.

I'd lain awake all night, laying next to Charleene and holding her hand, pondering where it would be best to start our search. I didn't know how much longer Charleene would remain attached to our world, even if we still had four days left on Gladys' spell. I heard Ally's soft footsteps on the hall landing as she padded past my closed door. She'd already been in bed when I returned and Jacin had been snoring on the sofa downstairs. I tuned out their voices as they greeted each other in the kitchen, but it wasn't until I heard my coffee machine beeping that I dragged myself from beside Charleene. Leaving her with a gentle kiss on her forehead I slowly made my way downstairs.

"I was hoping it might rub off on you, but clearly not." Jacin's voice was quiet as I tread lightly on the stairs, "The coffee's really good by the way, Dina has an awesome Nespresso Machine." I heard, confirming my observation that he was touching my stuff, damn Fae.

Jacin passed Ally a steaming cup of coffee. The rich scent of the beans filled the air and I inhaled deeply as Ally asked, "Have you spoken to Dina this morning?"

"No he hasn't." I declared, making Ally jump a mile in the air—how she managed not spill a drop, was beyond me.

Clutching the cup to her chest they both spun to face me. "So what happened last night?"

"I managed to speak with a couple of my contacts in the city. The Scottish Coven has been persecuted, more than any other throughout history, but stories have circulated over the years. We're going to Glasgow today." I explained slowly.

"Why Glasgow? I thought the witches were supposed to be here?" She replied, a small frown forming above her eyes.

"There have been rumours of a Witch's Coven up near Glasgow," I snapped. It's too damn early for her hundreds of questions, I think to myself, heading to the fridge and grabbing out one of the blood bags I had stashed in there.

"Seriously, is that blood?" Ally's voice dripped with her disgust as I grabbed my favourite cup from the cupboard.

"What else would I be drinking?" I said, my tone flat and watched happily as her mouth flapped about like a fish. I squeezed the thick red liquid from the bag, making sure I didn't spill a drop, before putting the cup in the microwave and warming it.

"So when do we leave?" Jacin asked, shaking his head at Ally, as I threw the now empty bag into the rubbish bin.

"In an hour," I said, already bored with the conversation as the microwave beeped and I grabbed my lukewarm cup of blood and left them alone.

It wasn't not long before I heard Ally stamp her way back upstairs and across the landing. Before the door, to what I'm assuming is my guest bedroom, shut with a click and I heard her muffled, "For fuck sake."

Sipping my blood, I savour the taste of it, shuddering at the foul stuff I'd drunk last night. Donated blood wasn't the same as fresh blood, but it was a damn sight better than that drugged up loser's. My gaze watched Charleene, counting each rise and fall of her chest to mark the time I'd given the Fae to get ready.

I listened as Ally packed her stuff and went downstairs, giving them a few more minutes, before I carefully picked Charleene up and grabbed the pillow from the bed. I took each step downstairs carefully, listening to the Fae's hushed conversation.

"Do you think Charleene will ever wake up?" Ally whispered and I couldn't help

myself from responding as I paused in the open doorway.

?“You better pray that she wakes up, because if she doesn’t then...” I began to snarl at her, before Jacin interrupted me.

?“Don’t finish that sentence unless you want a fight!” He snarled with a cutting glare at me.

“Whatever, we’re taking my car.” I informed them, walking away.

“What’s wrong with my car?” Jacin’s voice called after me.

“It’s not mine,” I stated, swinging the front door open.

“What about our stuff?” Ally shouted.

“It’ll be fine here.” I threw over my shoulder, already making my way to the deserted street. With the bite in the air and the early hour, the humans were thankfully still asleep as I made my way to my silver audi.

“But my car...” Jacin whined from behind me as I pressed the button on my keyfob, unlocking the car doors.

"You can retrieve it when you come back this way, I'll help you shift your boxes into the house so we can get going." I offered, placing Charleene in the back seat and putting the pillow beneath her head.

"Fine," he begrudgingly agreed, not like I was giving him much choice in the matter. Jace agreed, passing me his bag and unlocking his car.

Shifting their stuff inside took longer than I wanted; they had so much stuff crammed into that beat up excuse for a car. However once it was done, I locked up as they each got it to my car and we set off for Glasgow.

I didn't speak to either of them as I drove, concentrating on which exits to take and eventually Ally's soft snores filled the car. I drank in the near silence as Jacin stared fixedly out the window.

Jacin's voice finally broke the silence as I drove past a sign declaring Glasgow was only five miles away.

"Ally needs to train." He declared, raising my hackles.

"Absolutely not!" I yelled, surprised that he would even suggest such a thing.

"What the hell are you two arguing about now?" Ally's sleep filled voice interrupted us.

"Brainiac here wants to train your magic." I couldn't help but spit at her, meeting her surprised eyes in the rear-view mirror, before returning them to the road ahead.

"She needs to learn how to control it." He said and I know that he's right however with her track record of using magic, I didn't want her using it anywhere near me or Charleene ever again.

"Yeah, like that turned out so well last time." She scoffed in return, glancing over at Charleene as if to hammer home her point.

"You'll never get any better if you don't face it Ally." Jacin said, turning in his seat to meet her eyes.

"Hmmm," she mumbled non-committedly.

"We're almost at Glasgow, you can't have her letting off powerful magic in its limits," I mumbled, knowing I was fighting a losing battle.

"As soon as we reach a more remote place, I'm beginning her training." Jace begrudgingly agreed.

"Well, I'm so glad that's sorted," Charleene's calm voice made me freeze for a second as it filled the car like the sweetest music I'd ever heard.

Without thinking or even checking the other cars around me, my foot slammed down on the brake pedal and we lurch to a stop. Angry car horns blare as I couldn't believe that she was awake and swivelled in my seat to stare at her open eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It's nice to know you've been missed, but I never want to cause anyone to worry over me... - Charleene

I yanked forward, protected by the seat belt cutting into me as my head flicked towards the seat in front of me. "What?" I asked as they all turned to stare at me, their eyes wide enough I'm scared their eyeballs would fall out.

"You're awake?" Dina asked, barely above a whisper.

"Yes, I believe so." I answered with a little uncertainty, thinking, why are they behaving like I'd died? "So what was all that racket for?" I asked, trying to change the subject.

"Charleene, do you know what happened?" Ally tentatively asked.

"Yes," I stated, meeting each of their eyes in turn. I'm not stupid, I know what happened to me.

"Are you going to elaborate?" Jace asked carefully, making me frown as more car horns began to blare.

"I will, but not here. We're blocking traffic," I said, glancing behind us at the angry driver who's shaking his closed fist in the air as we stop his journey. "Where are we anyway?"

"We're almost at Glasgow," Ally answered, before turning to Dina and making me snort a laugh when she asks, "Dina, do you need someone else to drive?"

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"Nice one, I'm starvin'." I said, as my stomach grumbles and Ally lets out a chuckle. I glanced at Jace's shocked look and wondered how long I'd been... away, "How long?"

Ally, understanding my question, looked at the other two obviously waiting for someone else to answer. However when nobody did, she gave me a small smile and said, "Around twenty-four hours give or take a couple."

"Oh." I commented, lapsing into silence, as I now understand their shocked looks. For me it had felt like so much longer than just a day.

"Dina, drive the bloody car." Jace's demand drew me back to what's happening in the car as he gave her a small shake. Slowly, like a statue coming back to life, Dina moved, putting the car in gear and slowly inching it forward.

My thoughts return to The Inbetween and Eilidh; with her help I now had complete control over my magic, including visions of the future. We'd figured out that my magic had been with me since I was a teen. That my dreams had actually been visions of the future. It explained why my night terrors seemed so real: they had been.

"So who owns this house?" Ally's exclamation split apart the silence, as we pulled up to a wide set of tall, black wrought iron gates. All I could see outside the car were fields upon fields.

"I do," Dina said, making my head flash towards the back of hers. They're the first words she's uttered since my shocking awakening. "It will be perfect for you to train and for Charleene to recover properly. It doesn't have any protective shields in place,

but then that's not stopped what's-his-name from finding you before. So it'll have to do."

"Holy crap!" I let slip as gravel crunched beneath the car and a massive Tudor style building came into view as we turned a wide corner, "you've been holding out on me."

Dina drove right up to yellow sandstone steps at the front of the house, "Ok, well get comfy, I'm going into town this afternoon to speak with someone who might know where we can find the Nicnevin Coven." Dina said to the others before turning to fix me with a very unimpressed glare, "And I think it's You, Charleene, that has been holding out on me! What the fuck happened back at Gladys'?"

Instead of answering her question, because there's a lot to explain, I said, "I hope you have food in there and tea?"

I'm dying for both, I think releasing my seatbelt and getting out of the new car. Who's is this car anyway? I wondered, shivering in the cold wind that ruffled my unruly hair, as I stood looking up at the house before me, and the others climbed out. I can't believe this is Dina's house.

Dina stood at the front of the sky blue car as she said, "The kitchen should be fully stocked, Mrs McClowd should be somewhere on the grounds,"

"You even have a freakin' housekeeper?" I squealed, bouncing on the balls of my feet, ignoring Dina's surly tone and the cold.

"We'll be talking about your...nap. And soon!" Dina said curtly, disappearing inside.

"She's pretty pissed," I commented, voicing my thoughts aloud.

“Well yeah, I’d be pretty pissed if Ally decided to go on a spirit walk and chose not to come back,” Jace declared, leaving me and Ally standing in the drive as he followed Dina.

“It was worth it though,” I whispered without thinking, staring at my palm as a flame flickered into being.

“Holy shit girl!” Ally's voice reminded me that I'm not actually alone. Looking over, I watched as she stared at the controlled flame. “What did you do, during your nap?” she asked, reaching out with her fingers and touching the fire like a child that doesn't understand the danger, “Fuck that’s hot!” she shouted, yanking her hand away as a laugh burst from me.

“Well duh! Ally you really shouldn’t play with fire,” I said, stating the obvious, making her giggle as I linked our arms together like we're best friends instead of people who only met a couple of days before.

Ally quickly explained what I've missed, and why we're in Glasgow, as we walk up the driveway.

“I know where we’ll find the Nicnevin Coven,” I said, dragging Ally through the enormous front door and pausing. Where the heck is the damn kitchen? I wondered, glancing around the huge entrance hall with its chessboard floor and wide sweeping staircase.

Walking further into the hall, I noticed the tall vases of fresh flowers that stood on small round tables next to the staircase and the people staring at us from the paintings on the wall. Is that Dina? I thought, moving closer to a painting of a woman posing before the house. Yep, that's Dina alright, I chuckled, taking in her unimpressed look.

“Oh,” a woman's voice interrupted my musings as she walked into the hall behind

me, “you must be Miss Adrina's guests.” She stated.

“Erm, Yes,” I answered, taking in her dark trousers and neatly ironed white blouse. Her eyes wrinkle in a kind smile as I met her light blue eyes.

“I'm Mrs McCloud, have you just arrived?” She questioned politely.

“We have.” Ally replied, coming to stand next to me.

“Then she will be in the kitchen, please follow me.” Mrs McCloud answers, before walking off down a hall to the right.

Exchanging a look with Ally we followed the small woman. She took us down a long hallway that had small windows with lead criss crossing the glass, which let the sunlight flood inside. We continued following as she opened a small door and led us down a set of uneven concrete stairs, explaining that Dina had replaced the original wooden stairs, to last longer with less maintenance.

“Is the kitchen in the basement?” Ally worriedly asks.

“No, the main house is raised slightly, so the first floor is actually higher than this one.” Mrs McCloud answered, giving her another kind smile over her shoulder.

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Nodding, we continued following her as Dina and Jace's voices could be heard.

“There's a clearing past the manicured gardens that we can use.” Dina was explaining as we walked inside.

“I found these two looking a little lost,” Mrs McCloud said on her way over to the giant silver fridge, “Is anyone hungry?”

“Oh my goodness, yes I'm starving,” I gushed, as my stomach rumbled loud enough that I was surprised the windows didn't shake.

“Do you have any favourites?” Mrs McCloud asked with a beaming grin, that Charleene automatically mirrored.

“Tacos, I would absolutely love Tacos.” I blurted out, clapping my hands in delight.

“Tacos it is then,” she replied, her smile widening at my enthusiastic response, “why don't you all go upstairs and get comfortable in the dining room and I'll bring up the food once it's ready?”

Her words were phrased like a question, however we could all tell that it was more of a demand. As Mrs McCloud busied herself getting everything she needed, we all traipsed back upstairs and followed Dina to an impressive dining room.

It was huge, with a long table standing in the centre and cupboards placed neatly against the walls between the windows. Each one was tall and held all manner of crockery and cutlery. I couldn't stop the grin forming on my lips as I stared around in

wonder. As if she owns this. I thought to myself.

"I think it's beyond time for Charleene to explain just what happened to her." Dina stated, dragging my attention back to them all as they sat around one end of the table, staring at me expectantly.

"She says that she knows where we'll find the Nicnevin Coven." Ally bounced in her seat, looking the happiest and most excited I'd ever seen from her.

"What?" Jacin said at the same time Dina asked, "How?"

"Let me start at the beginning," I said, joining them at the table and explaining everything that had happened to me in The Inbetween. "After I'd freed my magic, Eilidh helped me train it," I said, showing them all a small flame, making it dance on my palm while a wind tousled their hair. "I've also been gifted the element 'spirit.' Which means I can walk with ghosts helping them crossover, divine people's intentions easily and also see visions of the future." I finished, watching their eyes widen with every word I've spoken.

"And how exactly does that help us find the Nicnevin Coven?" Ally asked, her confusion written clearly all over her face.

"Before I...returned, I was blessed with a vision of a tall stone that stands with trees on one side and a wide field on the other. Facing the wide field I saw the remnants of a big battle and on the very edge stood a large group of witches." I said, smiling across at her, "I showed the images to Eilidh using The Inbetween and she explained that it was close to Culloden Moor, which is not too far from the Nicnevin's ancestral home of Clava Cairns."

"That's up near Inverness, which fits with what my contacts said could be a possibility." Dina agreed.

“They will find us on Culloden Moor in eight days' time.” I said confidently.

"You're going to need warmer clothes." Dina stated. "It's a good thing I purchased a cabin up there."

After Dina's stark revelation that she had a remote cabin in the woods that bordered Culloden Moor, things moved pretty quickly as she dispatched Mrs McCloud to go shopping for warmer clothes and enough food to last us at least nine days. As soon as the housekeeper had returned we'd piled back in the car and had arrived at her cabin as night had fallen.

We were nearing the end of my timeline and everyone was getting angsty as we waited with no sign of the Nicnevin Witches.

We'd just finished another meal of spam and beans when I noticed the lack of sound. "The animals have fled..." I murmured, at the same time as Dina's expletive rang out across the clearing before us.

"Shit! How the hell did they find us?" She asked, standing and as I blinked, she shoved me behind herself. I followed her gaze to see dark, shadowy creatures slinking from the woods. An inhuman screech ripped the night apart and others filed in behind the first line.

"There's too many," Ally gasped, as the clearing filled slowly, their howls and growls filling the night air. She shivered, already reaching down and grabbing two gleaming daggers. "Jace, what do we do?"

"We fight," he replied and the metallic swish of steel met my ears as he drew his own blade. My gaze flicked to him.

"Leave the vampires to me," Dina said, launching herself towards the amassing horde

with a savage growl.

My eyes scanned the growing crowd, picking out those who felt similar to me, like a warmth that spread over my entire body as their eyes ran over me.

“I’ve got the witches.” I said, my tone a lot more confident than I felt as I backed towards the cabin and away from my companions.

I watched in awe as Dina clashed with the creatures; she had a long sword that flashed quickly as her movements started to blur, until I couldn't see her anymore as she got swallowed. Fear spiked low in my stomach, making me want to throw up as I watched Jace disappear and then Ally right behind him. However, I don't have long to wonder how they are fairing, as magic is thrown my way. A fire ball thrown from a dark haired man singed the ends of my hair, forcing me to concentrate on my own fight.

Gritting my teeth, I remembered what Eilidh had told me;you're the strongest witch in generations, do not fear anyone. Her words ring in my head, giving me the confidence to step forward. A maniacal grin spread across my face as I summoned my own fireball. Holding it with two hands and meeting his worried eyes, I threw it with all my might.

My stomach turned over as the warlock screamed in agony and I retched at the scent of burning flesh.I'm not cut out for battle, I thought briefly before another witch was standing before me, far too eager to hurt me from the crooked grin that twisted her lips. Trying not to take too deep a breath, I summoned my air magic, swirling it around me to create both a shield and to grace me with some fresh air. Fixing my eyes on the new witch, I ignored the little voice screaming in my head that this was wrong and threw fireballs at her.

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The first two swept past on either side of her body as her cackle got lost in the din of the battle, however she didn't see the third ball that hit her square in the face. I blinked and another foe—a gruesome looking creature this time—stepped forward with its red eyes fixed on me.

Shaking out my feet that were going numb, I summoned two swirling fireballs and launched them right at it, confused when it continued its lumbering run towards me. Switching tactics, I summoned a great gust of air and picked it up from the ground. Its legs flailed about uselessly in the air before I threw it across the battlefield.

“Well, well, well looks like our witchling learned how to fight.” A familiar voice made a shiver race down my spine.

The vampire from under the bridge stood staring at me, his lips turned up in a half smile as his red eyes blazed.

“What? No Huntress to protect you now?” He sneered, making me gulp, as my eyes scanned the area around us. All I found were enemies.

“How...how...” I stammered, shivering and becoming the scared woman I'd been that night.

“How...how,” he mocked, stepping closer and making my shield of wind roar, “such a pathetic little witchling, your vampires hid you well, however my Master has many ways to find what she wants.”

“And who is the one holding your leash?” Dina's voice snapped out from behind him.

“Ah, you were supposed to be too distracted, they promised you would be.” The vampire snarled, clearly annoyed with her appearance as he stepped to the side, so he could keep his eyes on both of us.

“What a pity.” Dina replied, sarcasm dripping from every word.

“I’m only here for the witch.” He said, raising the hairs on the back of my neck.

Dina stepped to the left, moving herself closer to me and edging the vampire further away. “Tough luck, you won’t lay a hand on her. I won’t let you.”

Her voice was calm, as though she was merely discussing going on a picnic.

“Why do you want me so much?” I said, finally finding my voice again, as Dina stepped closer still, spinning the sword at her side.

“If it was up to me lovey, you’d already be dead, but it’s not me that wants you.” He said, watching Dina slink in front of me.

“As I said, over my dead body.” Dina snarled, stepping forward, already swinging her sword at his head.

The twang of steel hitting steel rang around me as I flinched. The vampire met Dina’s sword perfectly, and they began a complicated looking dance. Neither one better than the other as they snarled and cursed. I was far too focused on their battle to notice anything else happening around me and almost missed the sudden hush that fell over the clearing.

An influx of magic inside the mass of creatures, dragged not only my attention but that of the two battling vampires as well. Steel clanged against steel one more time as their heads snapped towards the magic that was still rising. The air dropped a few

more degrees colder and screams erupted into the air, seconds before I flew backwards.

The wind yanked at my hair and a scream tore from my throat, as I tried to find my new assailant. My eyes bounced over the field, and widened in wonder and fear as I saw Dina follow me, and everyone else began stepping away from a slightly off-central point. The magic I felt earlier continued rising as the sudden wind stopped and I fell to the ground, scraping my arms on the twigs and broken branches of the treeline. Sharing a worried glance with Dina who landed not too far from me, I gave her a brief nod and we both ran back towards, where I could feel the magic growing.

I slowed my steps as static raised the tiny hairs on my arms until they stood on end and I could begin to see a swirling vortex of magics. Creatures shuffled nervously, some even turning tail and running as we drew closer.

“Careful,” Dina warned quietly, as her hand landed on my shoulder so we weren’t separated.

Nodding to let her know I heard, I forged ahead, until I could see Ally standing alone in the centre of the magical tornado. Human and inhuman screams filled the night air and I watched in both horror and confusion as she unleashed her magical storm. It lashed out harshly at our foes; some burned or suffocated where they stood. Others have their necks snapped as some, but not many, manage to escape.

Holding my hand in front of my face, I shielded my eyes, keeping them on Ally. A man with dark hair stood across from her. I saw his mouth move, but couldn’t hear his words before shadows swirled around his body. Ally's eyes just looked straight through him, like he didn’t exist, or she wasn’t hearing him.

A shadow loomed up behind Ally, and its wavering arm pulled back to reveal a pitch black blade. My heart slammed against my ribs and I forced my feet to move faster,

pushing against the wind that's battering me. Please let me make it? I mentally shout at any God or Goddess that may have been listening. Its arm pulled back further and then, like a band snapping, everything sped up.

“Alyssa!” Jace screamed from her right, and her head snapped towards him, as the creature behind her thrust its blade forward. A scream tore from my throat as Ally's eyes widened and the blade poked through her stomach.

Ally turned to face the shadow creature, freezing it in place, before her head turned back to Jace, who was also stood frozen in place. I watched in horror as her mouth moved and red blood bubbled from her mouth. She looked down, finally noticing the sword protruding from her body. Her wind dropped and I was finally running faster, but not fast enough. Jace beat us both to Ally as she slid off the blade and falls towards the ground.

“Is she?” Dina's voice startled me as we both watched Ally's eyes lock with Jace and my first tears rolled over my cheeks. Her mouth opened and closed over and over as Jace hushed her and brushed the hair from her face. White flecks join my tears, as the first December snow began falling.

“I've got you.” Jace mumbled over and over as his hands pressed into her stomach, trying to stop her blood from escaping. Tears coursed down his cheeks, dripping onto the backs of his hands as his voice wobbled and broke.

Ally's eyes fell closed and a scream, more similar to an agonised howl, snapped mine and Dina's attention to the pale man with dark hair. His face scrunched in pain and his eyes shone with tears that washed down his face, before shadows encased him and he vanished.

Jace's eyes don't leave Ally's face, even for a second, as he rocked back and forth. Grief crashed over me like a tidal wave. I may not have known her long but I'd grown

close to her. She was the closest thing I had to a friend now.

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“I've got you,” Jacin whimpered, his voice a broken whisper as he lowered his head to Ally's hair. I wanted to hide from his pain, from the pain that was splitting my heart in two.

“She's breathing.” Dina's assertive voice was quiet as her eyes narrowed on Ally's chest. Following her gaze, I watched as after a few moments it slowly rose.

“Jace?” I kept my voice low, not wanting to startle him, “Jacin, she's still breathing.”

Dina edged around behind him as I spoke, ready to catch him. I watched as my words breached the gulf that losing Ally had caused, and ever so slowly, his head tipped down and he stared at her chest. After a couple of minutes it rose again.

“Guys, I think you should see this,” Dina said.

She was looking behind me, across the snow covered field, and when I turned to see what had captured her attention, a small smile raised the corners of my lips.

“I told you they would find us here,” I said and hope rose within me, as I turned back and met Jace's hazel eyes. “Jacin, she's going to be ok.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

I really hope we can trust the Coven... - Charleene

“PLEASE, HELP US!” I screamed into the wind, hoping it travelled across the field

to the line of people watching us. The snow was falling faster, making it hard to see them properly as my eyes beseeched them to aid us.

A blur flew past me and the snowflakes swirled, connecting the people to us in a straight line. Glancing back at Jace cradling Ally to his chest, I noticed Dina was no longer standing with us and when I returned my focus to the people I saw her standing before them. She waved her hand violently towards us and I wondered what she was saying to them, as Jace got to his feet.

“Come on,” he commanded, urgency ringing in his dull voice as he stepped up beside us with Ally in his arms, “I need them to save her, she can't heal herself.”

Unable to do anything else, I offered him a nod and began striding across the field. I'd only taken a couple of steps when my hair flew around my face, covering my eyes. When it died down, I found I'd been left to cross the field alone. My heart ached, making it hard to breathe as I felt slightly abandoned. I knew that's not the case, but it still hurt that no one walked beside me. The line of Witches congregated around Jace as he reappeared before them.

I let my tears fall, feeling a little selfish that they weren't solely for Ally, however I couldn't help that little voice of doubt from telling me that no-one wants me. Years of being abandoned would do that to you I guess. I sniffed as a cold hand slipped into mine, making me jump as Dina materialised next to me.

“Ally will be ok now.” She said, misconstruing the reason for my tears. I didn't correct her, but I felt a little lighter as she accompanied me the rest of the way towards the Coven that first abandoned me.

Reaching them, I realised there weren't as many as I'd first thought. A mixture of ten men and women met me with curious stares as I quickly wiped the tears from my cheeks and attempted to find my cheerfulness again. But so much had happened so

quickly that I failed.

“Your friend will be ok now, our most talented healer is with her.” A kind voice informed me, drawing my attention to a young woman. She had the same colour hair as me, but looked to be a few years younger as I nodded.

“What should we do with them?” A woman who looked to be my own age asked.

“You belong to the Nicnevin Coven?” Dina asked in return, getting straight to the point.

“We do,” the younger woman answered, her brows rising in surprise or suspicion, I couldn't tell which.

“We must meet with your Coven Elders, I'm Adrina, a Huntress of the London Vampire Coven.” Dina explained, making more murmurs rise around us as she continued, “I've been tasked with meeting them.”

“Very well Huntrees Adrina, we shall take you with us. Do you have your own car? Our Coven is not here.” The young woman replied curtly.

“I do.” Dina said, matching her curt tone.

“The injured woman and her partner will travel with Julie, our healer, you two can follow us in your own car. We will drive to Leanach and make our way to our village from there.”

She turned to a man and woman stood beside her to whisper something, and when she turned back to us, they left, jogging back the way they'd obviously come.

“I'll come with you.” The young woman announced, making me uneasy, and I began

to question if meeting the Nicnevin Witches was really a good idea.

The drive to Leanach was tense and silent. Part of me worried about Ally and the other part was terrified at the thought of meeting my birth family. What was I supposed to say to them? Hey, I know you didn't want me but here I am. I snarked in my head as my nerves rattled. By the time we pulled through a gated fence which had a sign proclaiming it to be 'private property.' My nerves were frayed and my leg bounced uncontrollably, as my heel tapped on the car floor.

"You ok?" Dina questioned as I stood from her low car.

Am I ok? I wondered.

"Just worried," I said quietly, attempting to swallow down the butterflies that were trying to escape from my stomach.

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“I won't let anyone hurt you.” She promised, meeting my gaze steadily as the younger witch joined us.

“This way, it's still a bit of a walk.” Her tone was still icy. I guess it wasn't often that a hidden Coven had visitors after all.

She hadn't offered up her own name, and to be fair, neither I nor Dina had asked her what it was, so we followed in silence. The small private car park led to a padlocked gate, which in turn led out onto a wide field, full of brown wild flower stalks that swayed in the wind. The snow that had been falling was more like sleet now, and made the trek to the Coven's village truly miserable. I'd just opened my mouth to ask our guide how much longer when the first wooden house came into view.

My eyes widened further with each step we took towards the houses. They were a mixture of one and two storeys high, with cute wrap-around porches attached to them and there are at least sixty, if not more.

“The Mother and Crone are awaiting your arrival,” the woman around my own age said in greeting as we walked through the straight grassy streets, between houses.

“Thank you Sophia, we'll go straight to them.” Our guide said, her voice losing some of its frosty edge. “And how are our other... guests?” She asked, seeming to pause over what to call them.

“The woman is being tended to by Julie and the male has not left her side. We managed to get them inside before anyone saw them.” Sophia answered, matching our guide's pace.

My fear over Ally's well being tampered a little at her words. It seemed that there was hope my new friend would survive the attack on her. I exchanged a glance with Dina as we continued following Sophia and our guide to a large wooden building in the centre of their village. The Coven was definitely bigger than I'd been expecting and I couldn't help but wonder why they were so secretive. Sophia walked ahead and held open one of the double doors for us all to enter.

The building was almost empty, with a few witches and warlocks from Culloden Moor milling about. However, my focus was on the two women sitting on the small dias set up opposite the doors. One looked to be about fifty with a few laugh lines and wrinkles near her eyes; we had the same eye colour, and other than the few strands of white in hers, our hair also matched in colour. The second woman was older, stooping a little with her narrowed eyes surrounded by wrinkles. Their colour was a washed out version of my own. Am I related to them? I thought as we drew closer.

There was an empty chair on the other side of the middle aged woman, which to my surprise our guide strode up to and sat in demurely.

“Merry Met, Huntress Adrina and our lost daughter... Charleene,” the middle aged woman paused before my name and her eyes shone with unshed tears.

“Why have you sought us out?” The older woman continued, her eyes narrowing further when they met mine.

“We have three reasons, the first being that the London Covens were concerned with your disappearance, our second reason is that the London Coven of Witches thought you may know of a way to send lost Ancients back to where they belong.” Dina's voice rang out loud and clear, even as murmurs began around us.

“Ancients?” Our guide questioned, with a glance at the woman next to her.

“The Fae who travelled with us, they are currently with your healer.” I piped up, my voice wobbling a little as the Crone pursed her lips at me, giving her face a sour look.

“And the third reason?” the Mother inquired.

Stealing my spine and keeping my head up straight, I answered clearly, “I’m the third reason.” The first two women’s eyebrows raised in surprise, whereas the Crone’s face remained the same. “I was given for adoption at birth, and until recently I believed I was human. However I am a witch and the London Coven believed that I belong to the Nicnevin Coven.”

I summarised my story, keeping it short and making no assumptions as I addressed the three women. My stomach fluttered uneasily as they looked at each other.

“As you can see, the Nicnevin Coven is fine and healthy, so you can report that back to your Covens and thank them for their thoughts.” The youngest said, when neither of the others answered, “You have given us much to deliberate on regarding your other reasons.”

“Thank you for meeting with us, I will inform my Coven.” Dina said with a small respectful nod.

“Sophia will show you both to one of our guest houses—”

“What! You’re sending us away?” I snapped, my temper rising at their dismissal as I interrupted the one I suspected could be my Mother. “All my life I’ve wondered who my birth parents might be, who my mother might be and you’re not even going to discuss it with me.”

I knew I should have kept myself in check but I had the funny feeling that my “Mother” was looking at me right now and dismissing me like I didn’t matter.

“We shall discuss the other matters.” The Crone's voice snapped out like a whip, startling me. “You are dismissed.”

Sophia stopped before her Coven elders, bowing her head, before ushering both me and Dina from the large house.

“Are all Coven elders so rude?” I grumbled aloud as Sophia walked in front of us.

Dina let out a choked snigger that she tried to disguise as a cough, when Sophia glanced at us over her shoulder, “Our Elders are wise and never act rashly.” She informed us.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply otherwise, I'm just frustrated.” I told the woman honestly, making her pause and turn towards us.

“Were you really raised as a human?” Her voice wasn't unkind and held no judgement, however for the first time in my life I felt less than for my upbringing.

“I was.”

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“I'm sorry, I just can not understand why a witch would be sent away as a baby.” Sophia said, her cheeks tinting pink, with her embarrassment.

“I don't know why I was either, but I would like to understand.” I told her truthfully, drawing a small smile from her.

“I'm Sophia,” she introduced herself, holding out her hand towards me.

“Charleene,” I answered with my own smile as I shook her hand.

“Is it true!” A woman's desperate shout drew all of our attention further down the street, where a short portly woman strode towards one of the many houses.

The two witches outside didn't even glance at her as she attempted to get in their faces by standing on her tiptoes, “Who is in there?” She shouted. “You'll let me in this instant!” She continued making demands when she received no answer.

“Ah, news travels fast in our Coven,” Sophia said by way of explanation as we walked towards the woman, who was now attempting to forcibly move the other witches out of the way.

“Lilah, please calm down.” Sophia greeted the irate woman, keeping her own voice calm.

“Did you say Lilah?” I ask, recognising the familiar name.

“Yes, she came to us for help months ago,” Sophia tried to explain but Lilah was

already shoving her aside.

“You know of me?” She asked, “How?” Both questions came flying at me so fast they almost gave whiplash, as Lilah changed direction and stood before me.

“Ally has spoken of you many times,” I told her, watching as her eyes widened, before they narrowed again.

“Where is she?” She asked suspiciously. “Was she with Jacin when you saw her?”

“We travelled with both of them,” I began but she cut me off with another eager question.

“Where are they now?” Lilah's voice shook and tears gathered in her eyes.

“Ally was hurt in a battle, the Coven brought her here with their healer.” I said, not shying away from the truth. I had the feeling she wouldn't want me sparing her feelings.

“Hurt how?”

“She'd been stabbed through the stomach with a demoran blade.” Dina took over explaining when words failed me.

Lilah's hands flew up to cover her mouth, stifling the sob that broke loose. “He's definitely found her then?” She asked no one. “Where is she? I need to see them.”

I looked at Sophia, as I had no clue if Ally and Jace were in the house beside us or not.

“They're inside with Julie,” Sophia said quietly, motioning to the house with the

guards.

Lilah flew around on her heel at Sophia's words, marching back to said guards and demanding they let her through.

“Let her in.” A woman's shrill voice shouted from within and the guards moved aside, allowing Lilah to disappear inside.

Baffled, I shared a look with Dina. So that was the Lilah who Jace and Ally had been searching for. For such a short woman she was kinda terrifying.

“I'll show you to your own guest house, please follow me.” Sophia said, collecting herself and waving us on.

“You have a lovely village,” I complimented, wanting to break the silence that settled around us.

“Thank you, we've stayed here for longer than most other places and have been able to make it our own.”

“How long have you been here?” I was intrigued. “It must be hard having to move around so much.”

Sophia shrugged before answering, “It's all I've ever really known. Some of the elder witches find it harder, they remember when our Coven was more settled. But we've been here for the last year.”

“Why does your Coven move around so much?” Dina asked.

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“Unlike the other Covens we like to live together, so moving allows us to keep our way of life without drawing suspicion.” Sophia answered like it was the most normal thing in the world.

“Don't the other Covens live together?” I wondered aloud.

“No, they tend to mix into human cities and villages, coming together on the main pagan holidays.” Dina explained as we walked towards a small wooden house, with only one floor.

“Here we are, sorry it's small, however we don't get many guests and so our guest houses are limited.” Sophia said as our feet thudded over the wooden floor. “This one only has one bedroom.”

“That's ok,” I reassured her, giving a small smile as I walked past her and into a gorgeous looking house.

The front door let you straight into a large living area that had little in the way of furniture. There was a comfy looking sofa, a couple of paintings hung on the walls beside a small bookcase and a TV hanging above the log burner. An open plan kitchen sat to the side of the small living space, stocked with a fridge, cooker and microwave.

“The bedroom's back here and has an ensuite bathroom,” Sophia said, walking towards a door on the back wall of the living area, next to a large log burner. “The burner will give you limited hot water, but it takes time for it to warm the tank, especially at the time of year.”

“Keep showers short,” I said, nodding along and following her into the bedroom. It was smaller than the living room, with a double bed taking up most of the space and a thin wardrobe standing next to the door.

“There's towels and extra sheets in the wardrobe and a chest of drawers in the living room. And through here is the bathroom.” Sophia continued with her tour. “That door over there leads out into a small garden,” Sophia pointed at a door next to the bed, that I hadn't even noticed.

“Thank you, it's wonderful,” I said with a wide smile.

“Right, well I'll let you get settled. Do you need any help retrieving anything from your car?” She asked politely, pausing in the bedroom doorway and looking back at us.

“No thank you, I'll bring everything over.” Dina replied as I looked around the room again, while she escorted Sophia back to the front door.

The bed had smooth white cotton sheets and had so many pillows I wondered how anyone could possibly sleep with them all. There were thick rugs covering the wooden floor on either side of the bed. Opening the back door, I peeked out into the small garden and inhaled the mixed scents of the herb garden I found there. It stretched across the length of the house's wall, running under the small window, making me wish it was warmer so I could leave the window open and smell their fragrances.

Sadly I closed the door and went to the small bathroom as Dina walked back in.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

How can they not see how special she is? - Dina

Returning to the bedroom, I found Charleene peering into the small bathroom. I loved how inquisitive she was when in a new place. “Only one bed, eh.” I joked as her eyes found mine.

She gave me a gorgeous half smile and her eyes twinkled. Lavender, Sage and Thyme hung heavy in the air, tickling my nose as they mixed with her intoxicating scent of roses. “Yep, it seems so,” she laughed, moving to sit on the edge of it. “Do you think Ally really will be ok?” She asked.

“I think she’s with the best people to help her,” I said, trying to soothe her fears. She gave me a weak smile that had me pushing off from the door frame and striding over to her. “Before I go grab our stuff, how about I take your mind off things?”

Her eyes widened at my suggestion and she nodded, making me step closer and run my fingers down the side of her face. She leaned into my touch and her mouth dropped open, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. She looked adorable. Leaning down, I placed a hesitant kiss to her forehead, then her cheeks, before finally her lips. I kept it tentative and gentle at first, just an exploration as Charleene began to relax and melt under my touch. Her tongue swept across my lips, making me hum appreciatively and deepen our kiss, as my thumb caressed her soft cheek.

The other moved up her arm, dragging over the thick sleeves of the jumper she was still wearing, and a growl slipped loose as I rubbed over her breast. Breaking our kisses, I gripped the bottom of her knitted jumper and the thermal t-shirt underneath. I yanked them both over her head, trying to be mindful of my own strength, however I still heard the tell-tale sound of something tearing. Her arms remained tangled in the sleeves, as I laid her back on the bed and trailed soft kisses down the side of her neck.

Charleene wriggled under my weight and I moved my lips down, leaving a trail of goosebumps in my wake as I neared her round perfect breasts. I loved how one was a little larger than the other, and how her nipples stood to attention as I pulled down the

cups of her bra. The cabin was warm compared to the braising wind that rattled the windows. Sucking one of her nipples into my mouth I was rewarded with a low deep moan of pleasure from Charleene, as she arched up on the bed, pushing her breast further against my face. If I was human I may have been afraid that she'd suffocate me, but being a vampire meant I didn't need to breathe as often.

Nipping it I moved over to her other and lavished the same attention on it, making Charleene wiggle more as my fingers trailed over her stomach then across her trouser clad pelvis to rub at her pussy. Another moan left her lips, her eyes closed as her head tilted back and her hips buckled up from the bed.

A loud impatient knock rang through the cabin. "For fucks sake!" I growled as it interrupted our alone time. Even Charleene looked disappointed as she righted her clothing.

"We'll finish this later." She promised, leaving me to answer the damn door. I swear this better be important, otherwise I might just kill whoever it is.

Charleene's shocked gasp had me by her side in an instant and my eyes locked with the Coven leaders who stood on the porch. The Crone's hostile look already has the hairs on my neck rising and the Mother's saddened gaze puts me further on edge, however the Maiden looks at Charleene with such open curiosity that I can't decide if I should just rip all their heads off now or let them inside.

"Please come in," Charleene said, making the decision for me.

"We have discussed the matter of you being part of our Coven," the Crone said, her voice dismissive, however it's the Mother's eyes narrowing that I'm focusing on.

"Charleene, you are my child." She confirmed, shooting the Crone an angry look, "And you are not just a matter to be discussed."

Charleene's shocked gasp said it all. We'd suspected she was from the Nicnevin Coven, but I hadn't really considered that she would be the daughter of one of the Coven's leaders. Her brown eyes filled with tears as she looked at them each in turn, "W...w...why?" She managed to get out as my arm wrapped around her shoulders.

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“I didn't know you still lived,” her Mother sobbed, letting her own tears break free.

“Then who?” Charleene asked, confused.

“I did.” The Crone's voice snapped out, turning our focus to her. “You were conceived without permission to a father not of our Coven and to top it all off, I feared you were a child of prophecy.” She continued, lowering my estimation of her further with each word that came out of her mouth.

“But why not kill me like the others?” Charleene asked, staring at her Grandmother.

“I couldn't. Something protected you, all I could do was bind your magic and make you disappear. I gave Aradia a choice to either raise you alone and be banished from the Coven, or to let me take you away. After dropping you on the steps of the nearest orphanage I was done with you.” The old woman sneered callously and I stepped forwards, ready to throttle her where she stood.

“Well at least I can thank the Goddess for her mercy and the chance to grow up.” Charleene snapped back. “Did you not love me enough to face banishment?”

“It...it... wasn't that simple,” Aradia sobbed, before the Crone cut her off.

“She moved on, like I told her to. The Coven must always come first.” The Crone snapped at Charleene, making her tears run faster.

“Why are you so cold?” Charleene snapped right back, showing her fighting spirit.

The Crone stepped back as though Charleene's words had slapped her and her mouth worked but no words came out. Pride welled up inside me at how resilient my girl was.

“I've always wondered just who my family was and why they would abandon me. And now that I'm meeting you I can honestly say that no matter how hard my life was, I'm certain I grew up better off without you in it.” She spat, jabbing her finger at her Grandmother.

“Charleene—” the young woman who'd brought us to the Coven attempted to speak kindly.

“Just save it, I think I need some time to come to terms with everything I've just heard.” Charleene interrupted her younger sister, before storming off across the living area and slamming the bedroom door behind her.

Her mother and sister looked longingly after Charleene, and when Aradia moved as though to follow her, I stepped into her path, “Let her calm down.” I said, hoping they'd leave so I could make sure Charleene was ok.

The Crone stamped out, muttering under her breath, however Aradia paused looking crestfallen at her daughter's rejection. “What did you expect?” I asked her, feeling angry on Charleene's behalf.

“I never expected to see her again.” Aradia answered, turning her sad eyes to me, “I thought I'd lost her forever.” She sniffed, before turning and following the Crone.

“Please, ask her to find me when she's ready. I never knew I had a sister but I would really like to get to know her.” Her voice was kind and she looked about as shaken as Charleene at the revelations that had just been shared, so I nodded and waited for her to leave as well.

With a small nod she did, closing the front door behind her as I turned for the bedroom. Knocking gently, I waited for Charleene to compose herself, and from the sound of sniffing, I knew she was crying.

“Can I come in?” I asked gently, hoping she'd let me be there for her. I counted to ten slowly and when no answer came, I turned the knob and let myself inside.

I found Charleene curled up on her side in a tight ball. Her eyes were red and she had snot and tears running down her face. My heart broke a little for her, as I went and sat beside her in the bed. Sliding an errant piece of hair behind her ear, I offered her a small smile. “Let it all out.” I told her. Hoping she knew that she was safe and could show me all of her emotions. With me, she didn't need to be perfect or have the right genes. All she needed was to be her, because I found her perfect.

Opening my arms, my heart leapt when she slid into them, letting me hold her through her pain. I didn't speak, just let her tears soak my shoulder and held her as she shook. This was a lot to come to terms with for anyone, especially when finding out that her birth family hadn't wanted her. I knew how that felt but for different reasons.

“Adrina?” Mother's shrill voice called from the front door, filling me with hope that I wasn't the monster Alsadair said I was. “Where have you been, Child?”

My mouth lifted into the beginning of a smile at her scolding tone, the same one I used to hate and I ran towards her, with my arms stretched out before me. “Mama...” I managed to choke out as my arms wrapped around her waist.

“Your freezing Adrina,” she said, rubbing up and down on my arms, “Your father and I have been so worried. It's been one week since we discovered your empty bed.”

Her hand rubbed my hair down the back of my head. Still being the Mother that

Alasdair said I'd lost. Drawing in a deep breath so I could attempt to answer her, I froze. Her scent was amazing, like the sweetest honey. My throat burned and my gums ached as my mouth watered. The heavy thump, thump, thump, of her heart rang in my ears, getting louder and louder with every second. My hands tightened around her waist as I lost the battle with my fangs and they descended.

"Adrina, what is the matter?" Mother asked, pushing me away and gasping in horror as my eyes turned red and she saw the fangs pressing into my bottom lip. "Devil. Monster!" She screamed, struggling against my vice-like grip.

Forcing the memory back down, I focussed on Charleene, who's shoulders had stopped shaking so violently. She hiccuped and scrubbed at her eyes, before pulling away from me and meeting my gaze. "You ok?" I asked, knowing full well that she wasn't.

"I will be, it's just a lot to take in." Her voice shook still but sounded a little stronger.

"Why don't you take a bath, while I grab the stuff from the car?" I suggested.

Shuffling across the bed a little, she let out a long sigh, like she was attempting to force all the negativity from her body. "That sounds perfect."

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I waited until she was in the bathroom and I heard the water slosh about before heading out into the night. My skin prickled, the hairs lifting at leaving her here alone, but we needed our things from the car and I'd rather do it myself than let some unknown witches snoop through our things. Using my speed, I made it to the car and back, carrying the stuff we'd quickly grabbed from the cabin. I decided to manage it all in one trip, wanting to be back with Charleene before she finished her bath.

"Hey!" A woman's voice shouted, making my foot pause on the first step of our new cabin. Turning my head, I internally groan as I see the small woman from earlier striding towards me.

"Can I help you?" I grumbled, not wishing to talk.

"I just wanted to say thank you, to both of you, for bringing Ally and Jace here." She said, looking up at me, "And to let you know she's going to be ok."

"You're welcome." I responded, moving up another step, hoping that was the end of the conversation.

"Can I ask, how is she?"

"Ally?" I asked, my brow furrowing as I thought about how best to answer her question, "A nuisance." I told her, opting for honesty.

"Jace says she's had some...magical mishaps." She went on, stumbling over what to call Ally's magical outbursts.

“Yeah, you could call them that.” My voice remained disinterested and flat, but it didn’t seem to deter the woman.

“I’m sorry for the trouble it’s caused you. The block on her mind is supposed to suppress her magic, as well as her memories.” Lilah explained, glancing at her feet for a few seconds before her eyes met mine again, “I think it’s failing, and I can’t remove or fix it.”

“If it fails will she survive it?” Charleene’s voice almost made me jump.

“I don’t know, we never planned on keeping her here this long.” Lilah answered.

Charleene walked down the few steps and held the woman’s hands in hers, “Maybe the Coven will be able to help.”

“Maybe.” Lilah replied, chewing on the inside of her cheek, before giving Charleene’s hands a gentle squeeze, “Anyway the main thing is she’s here and she’s safe.”

“That’s right, has the healer been able to help?” Charleene queried, her voice dropping low with concern.

“Yes, Ally’s resting now but she should hopefully wake soon.” Lilah gave Charleene a small smile, “Anyway, you’ve all had a very stressful day and should get your rest.”

“Will you please let us know when Ally wakes?” Charleene requested as I finally finished climbing the steps and stood on the porch.

“Of course Dear.” Lilah said, giving us both a bigger smile, before she walked off back to Ally and Jace.

“Well she seems nice,” Charleene declared, coming to join me on the porch.

“You’ve only spoken to her for ten minutes,” I commented, nodding towards the front door. Charleene grabbed it, sticking her tongue out at me as I walked past. “If you're not careful I’ll put that tongue to good use.”

“Maybe I want you to.” Charleene said with a cheeky wink as a gorgeous blush stained her cheeks pink.

With a low growl that vibrated through my chest, I dropped everything on the floor near the small sofa. Turning back to see that Charleene watched me with her top lip trapped between her teeth. In three steps I’m in front of her, my thumb tugging it free before I slammed my lips down on hers. Grabbing her hand in mine, I tugged her to the bedroom and growled, “I think it’s about time we finish what we started earlier.”

Chapter Thirty

They always say the calm comes before a storm, I just wonder how many more storms we can weather... - Charleene

Last night was amazing. I felt languid and relaxed as my eyes opened to the soft sunlight coming in through the still open curtains. Rolling over my hands smoothed over the bed beside me, finding it cold and empty. My heart raced as my mind questioned where Dina had gone. It wasn’t the first time I’d woken up after a sensational night with her to find her gone, and I decided right here that I don't like it.

Abandonment flooded through me, making my chest tight and my breaths short as panic set in. She's left. My mind screamed, drawing on my years of being discarded as a teenager. Tears burned my eyes when I wondered why she would stay with me. She'd brought me to the Nicnevin Coven after all and her life would be much simpler without me. The bedroom door swung open slowly, dragging me from my spiralling

thoughts.

“Morning beautiful,” Dina said, her eyes scanning me as I laid in bed, "Did you sleep well?"

My tight throat prevented me from answering so I nodded instead. She's here, I told myself, fighting against the intrusive thoughts that told me I'm not worth loving.

“You ok?” Dina's voice interrupted my thoughts and she frowned in concern.

Returning my eyes to hers I finally found my voice, “I'm...” I started, but realised I don't know how to answer that question. Last night was a lot. Not only had I found my birth Mother and that I had other family members, but I'd also found out that my worst fear had been right. They didn't want me. Sharp pain speared through my chest and the tears I'd been suppressing fell down my cheeks.

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“They're not worth your tears, Beautiful.” Dina said, stepping closer, but I held up my hand knowing I'd get myself back under control soon enough.

“I know, but it still hurts you know.”

“I know it does.” Dina replied kindly.

Dina's head suddenly flicked back looking over her shoulder, “What is it?” I asked.

“Someone's knocking at the door.” She responded, clearly as surprised as I was as she frowned across at me.

“Right, I'll just get myself ready. Could you answer it while I get dressed?” I asked her, already slipping out from beneath the covers and shivering as the cold air hit my bare legs.

“You sure you're up for...guests?” Dina wondered without moving from her spot by the door and blatantly ogling my naked body.

“I will be.” I told her, forcing a smile to pull my lips up, before running across the room and into the bathroom. Closing the door behind me, I sagged against it, flinching at the cold wood biting into my skin and wondering just what I'd have to deal with today. I was going to confront my Mothermore; when I was ready. I had questions that only she could answer and I wasn't leaving until I knew them.

With a heavy sigh, I realised I couldn't hide in here forever and needed to metaphorically pull on my big girl pants and deal with the crap life kept throwing my

way. I wanted to be the happy person I'd been before all of this madness had descended on me, and that would start today. Walking to the mirror on the opposite wall I turned on the shower over the bathtub and let it warm up as I stared at myself. "Come on, you've got this." I told the girl staring back at me, as steam began clouding the glass, hiding my reflection.

Plastering on a smile, I stepped under the warm spray, enjoying how the powerful stream pounded the tight muscles on the back of my neck. A genuine smile lit up my face as I looked down and found my own shampoo standing on the edge of the bath, alongside my conditioner, body wash and loofa. The bath stuff that had been on the bath last night smelt mostly of sage and I'd missed the familiar smell I inhaled now, as I squeezed a dollop of my favourite strawberry shampoo onto my hand. Taking my time, I followed my usual routine of washing my hair twice before adding conditioner to it and scrubbing my body thoroughly. Then leaning my head back, I washed the conditioner from it and grabbed a fluffy towel to wrap myself in. I found a smaller one for my hair and returned to the bedroom. I could hear soft voices speaking in the next room.

Grabbing a pair of soft, grey sweatpants, I put on my bra and comfiest t-shirt. Then, once my hair was brushed and tied back in a high ponytail, I took pity on Dina and went to find out who had come visiting this early. Pulling open the bedroom door, I almost turned right back round again when I saw my new found sister sitting on the sofa with a steaming cup in her hands.

Dina's voice stopped me as I went to do just that, "Charleene, this is Angelinia, she wanted to make sure you were ok."

Her thoughtfulness touched me and made me curious just why she had come. Our Grandmother had made it perfectly clear what she thought of me last night. "Why?" I asked, taking a step further into the living area.

“I don’t agree with what happened to you. Until yesterday I didn’t even know I had a sister let alone two.” Angelinia went on.

“What do you mean two?” I snapped, interrupting whatever she was about to say next.

“I spoke with Mother further last night and she told me that there were two girls.” Her voice was cautious and wavered slightly. “You didn’t know either.” She surmised.

“No, I thought it was just me.” I said, thinking back on the prophecy Eilidha had told me and realised why there had been so many deaths. My eyes widened as I put it all together; they’d all been twins! “Where are they now?” I demand.

“Mother is at our house and Grandmother will be at the meeting hut.” Angelinia said.

Without waiting to see if any of them were going to follow, or putting any shoes on, I strode out the front door and down the front steps, only noticing my bare feet when the grass tickled between my toes. I couldn’t care less as I stamped my way towards the meeting hut.

“Charleene, wait!” Dina called but I didn’t slow down, determined to see if the horror running through my head was correct.

Dina caught up in no time and we walked side by side to the large circular building. When it came into view I quickened my pace and shoved through the double doors, letting one of them bang against the wall with the force I’d used. My so-called Grandmother was sitting in the same seat she’d used last night on our arrival and a small gathering of witches and warlocks stood before her. However their talk cut off quickly with my dramatic entrance and all their heads turned to watch me.

“Was I a twin?” I demanded, still halfway across the open space, my voice ringing clearly.

Grandmother, to her credit, looked a little shocked however I can’t tell if it was from my sudden interruption or the question I’d just asked. She glanced at those who have now turned to stare at her, waiting alongside me for her answer.

“This is a family matter. I will convene a new meeting time for later today. Blessed be.” She said to her Coven members, waiting for them to bow their heads and leave before her eyes met my own. “Yes you were, what difference does it make?”

“What happened to my sister?” I demanded, stopping in front of her.

“The same thing that happened to you. I couldn’t kill either of you.” She admitted, her lip pulling back in a sneer. “If I’d known you’d come back to be a pain in my arse, I’d have snuffed out both of your lives.” She went on.

“Mother!” Aradia’s voice snapped out from behind me. “That’s enough.”

“No Aradia, it isn’t. I should have listened to my Mother’s advice and killed them both when they were babies. The fact that She is here now only proves that I was too soft and may have doomed us all.”

“Grandmother Agnes, that’s a horrible thing to say.” Angelinia chided.

“Hold your tongue child, you have no idea about these things. The prophecy is clear that twin flames from our very own Coven will bring about destruction. The fact that she,” Agnes says, jabbing her finger at myself, “travelled here with two Ancients only proves my suspicions.”

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“That prophecy is ages old and has still to come true, what makes you think it’s even real?” I questioned.

“It hasn’t come to pass because our Coven has killed all twins that have been born, until you.”

I staggered back at the venom in her tone and her narrowed eyes. She really believed that killing all of those innocent children was the right thing to do. “You’re a monster.” I flung at her, covering my mouth with my hand.

“No, child, I’m pragmatic as all Crone’s should be. I let my own personal feelings cloud my judgement once, I will not do it again.” Pushing up from her seat, Agnes stood and glowered down at me. “I will not allow you to join our Coven. We already have a Maiden and need no other.”

“Mother, wait.” Aradia said, interrupting. “I will not lose my child twice.”

“I don’t want to join your Coven.” I snapped at both of them, “I came here to find out who I am and to get help with my magic. I’ve managed to find a teacher on our way here so the second thing is a moot point, and from what I’ve seen I’m better off without having you,” I jabbed my finger at Agnes to make my point, “in it!”

“Then leave!” Agnes shouted at me, a bit of spittle flying from her lips.

“I will once I know my friends are ok.” I snapped back, reaching out to join my hands with Dina’s. Agnes’ brows rose up her forehead at my action and her face turned bright red. It was almost like she’s a cartoon kettle getting ready to blow.

“You will destroy us all. I will not recognise any child who goes against Coven law. Your love is forbidden.” She snapped and a blast of air forces my hand from Dina’s. “Even the Vampires forbid unions between species.”

I don’t wait to hear anymore, shaking my head and striding away; I’d already heard all I needed to. My heart ached for all those innocents killed because one witch declared they might be a threat.

“Charleene, please wait?” Aradia’s worried tone made my feet pause as I reached outside and dragged in a deep breath of winter air.

“What!” I shouted, out of patience and it wasn’t even ten in the morning.

“I want to get to know you. I’m sorry for...” she trailed off clearly not knowing what to say.

“For what? The fact your Mother wishes I was dead or that your Coven has been killing innocents for far too long. Or let’s see? How about the fact that you were too cowardly to stand up for your own children?” I snapped at her, my magic rising as my hair blew back from my face.

“I’m sorry for all of it. I should have been stronger but I was a child still myself, no older than twenty when I had you and your sister. I didn’t know what to do.” She sobbed, tears falling over her cheeks, “I’ve hated myself for it every day since I last held you both.”

I was stunned for a moment as I took in her words, “You wanted me?” My voice was quieter than I wanted it to be, as all the years of thinking I’d been thrown away came rushing back from the box I’d stuffed them in.

“I’ve wanted nothing more than to see you again.” She said, not quite giving me the

answer I was looking for, “I thought if I was good and toed the line, that if you ever found us I’d be able to fight for you to stay this time and I intend to do just that. Please don’t leave.” She begged.

I stared at the woman before me, she looked so much like me it was unreal. I want to get to know her and Angelinia I realised. Giving her a nod, I watched as a hopeful smile lit her eyes before she turned round and went back inside.

“Do I even want to know what that was about?” Lilah’s warm voice asked from behind me and I spun around to find her watching me with a raised eyebrow. Shaking my head, I offered her a small smile and stepped out of her way. She didn’t ask again, merely returning my nod and continuing into the meeting hut.

Chapter Thirty-One

I’m at the end of my journey but I dread it actually being over... - Dina

The more I saw of Charleene’s Grandmother Agnes, the more I despised the woman. I knew I could be a grumpy sod, but she took it to a whole new level, inflicting her own pain on everyone around her. I was almost certain that she wouldn’t even know a smile if it jumped up and bit her on the mouth. I watched each time she interacted with Charleene and how she sucked any happiness from her. Over the last week, Charleene’s mother Aradia and little sister Angelinia had been making some progress towards actually being somewhat of a family. After Charleene’s last blow out something had switched in Aradia, and slowly she began taking the side of her eldest child over Agnes.

Angelinia seemed to have a much easier time of it; she seemed to genuinely enjoy spending time with her new big sister and sought out Charleene’s opinion when it came to one of the Coven boys that she had a crush on. Ally had also finally woken up earlier in the week, but Lilah had asked us—well Charleene specifically—to let

her rest, so neither of us had seen her yet.

Tomorrow was the Winter Solstice but I found myself torn; the Coven was going to attempt breaking the block on Ally's mind, hopefully meaning that the Fae would then be able to return to where they'd come from. However, that also meant that both of my jobs would officially be finished, and I'd have to return to the London Coven. Just the thought of going back there without Charleene made my heart ache. One, I didn't trust the Coven to look after Charleene and two, it was like she'd become the other half of me, filling a hole I hadn't even known existed until her. The more I thought about leaving, the more I found I didn't want to. What was the point of eternity if you couldn't have what you wanted? And I wanted her. Coven Laws be damned.

"What ya thinking about?" Charleene's voice interrupted my stare off with the window, drawing a smile to my lips as I looked across at the bed. We'd fallen into an easy rhythm in the week we'd been here. Charleene slept in and I watched her, she had a small breakfast and then she'd head out with Sophia, then Angelinia or her Mother would call round. It was simple, easy and surprisingly; I found I kind of enjoyed it.

"Just about leaving you here alone tonight," I told her honestly.

"I'll be fine," she answered quickly, not alleviating my fears but making them worse. "I'm seeing Ally in the morning, me and Sophia are taking her dress shopping for the Solstice." She continued, sounding a little more like her old happy self.

"Ok, fair enough," I said with a shudder at the thought of dress shopping. Never in all my life had that particular activity ever appealed to me. Give me trousers over a skirt with frills any day.

"Since you're going to be away, I've invited Sophia over for a girls night, she has

homemade face masks and everything.” Charleene giggled, before sliding out of bed and padding over to me on her tiptoes and giving me a quick peck on the cheek.

“That sounds...” I trailed off not really knowing how to finish my sentence and slapped her arse as she walked past to the bathroom.

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“It sounds like something I need more of in my life.” She called back, before shutting the door and I left her to get ready.

I’d had no signal on my phone since we’d arrived, the spells used to keep the Coven hidden interfered with them, or so I’d been told. The nearest place you could use a phone was the car park where we’d left my car. So I had two reasons for leaving this evening. I needed to feed or find a blood bank—vampire’s had established one of our own in most of the major cities— and I had to update Tilly on our progress here. I’d let her know about the bad reception on our first nighthere, but if I didn’t contact her soon, she’d be on her way here to find out what was going on and I had the feeling that wouldn’t go down well with Agnes.

I heard the water shut off in the bathroom and went to the kitchen to fix Charleene some breakfast. The witches had stocked our kitchen with everything we could possibly need in the days after our arrival, so I grabbed everything to make pancakes and fruit. I had them ready and on the small coffee table in the living area as Charleene walked out our bedroom.

“So what’s your plan for today?” I inquired as she sat down and dragged the plate towards her.

“Not much, I’m meeting with Aradia and Angelinia to go over what to expect tomorrow, then I was thinking of seeing some more of the village.” She answered around a mouthful of pancakes.

“Would you like me to join you?” I was envious of her ability to eat human food, it was the one thing I missed about being fully human.

“You can if you like.” She answered diplomatically, giving me the option of declining, which I wouldn’t do. I was beginning to see our time together as precious and fleeting.

“I’d love to.” I said, giving her a smile and going to wash the pots and pans I’d used.

We spent the morning with Aradia and Angelinia, hearing more about the Winter Solstice celebration and how they usually went. This year would be slightly different with having two Ancients here, but it would mostly run the same.

Lilah had explained the block on Ally’s mind a little more while she’d still slept after her stabbing. It served a couple of purposes; one being to keep her looking human and blocking her magic. The other was to suppress her memories of her own past, it was this last element that was now causing her pain. It had been designed to allow her to remember things naturally but if things were revealed too quickly or before the weaving thought she was ready it would cause sharp pain to stab through her head. She’d also told us a little about the reasons behind them coming here to hide Ally and while I understood their reasons the spell itself seemed a little barbaric.

“Do you think Ally will be ok with having her block broken?” Charleene asked, voicing simpler thoughts to my own as we walked casually down one of the many streets.

“I don’t know. I suppose it will depend on how complexly the block is woven in her mind.” I said, thinking out loud. I didn’t understand much about magic, either Witch or Fae.

“I hope she will be,” she went on, chewing her lip worriedly.

“Me too.” I agreed, mainly for Charleene's sake. She’d become close to Ally during our travels and I didn’t want her to feel responsible for anything that happened to her

friend. Silence reigned as we turned another corner and began walking around the outer perimeter of the village.

Birds chirped, happily filling the air with their songs, while wild rabbits darted across the fields and the shadows cast by the houses lengthened as we wandered. Our peaceful day together was quickly turning into late afternoon and I knew I'd have to leave soon if I wanted to make it to Glasgow and back again before morning.

With a heavy heart I walked Charleene back to our combined house and waited until I heard Sophia's cheerful humming approach our door. Then, after placing a quick kiss on her forehead, I left them both to their evening of movies and sped to my car.

The drive back to Glasgow didn't take too long thanks to my car's powerful engine and the fact that there were hardly any cars on the road. I pulled into the small parking lot of the private blood bank around eleven and walked slowly inside. The blonde vampire behind the white desk looked up as the automatic doors opened.

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked, politely with a sincere smile.

"Yes, it should be under Adrina." I informed her, falling back into the monotone voice I used to use all the time.

The woman typed on the keyboard before looking back at me with a smile, "Please take a seat, the doctor will be out momentarily."

Giving her a nod, I retreated back to the row of five chairs and tapped my foot. The clock on the wall ticked by slowly as I waited for the doctor, being virtually immortal made vampires less aware of how long a minute actually was, so I wasn't too surprised when it took him fifteen minutes to appear with a small cooler in hand.

"Adrina, I was told you needed a week's supply." He said by way of greeting,

handing over the red and white cooler.

“Thank you,” I replied, liking him more for his lack of small talk, as I flicked open the lid and checked that there were in fact enough blood bags to last me another week. Happy with the contents, I closed it and gave the male “Doctor” a nod.

Taking my phone from the front pocket of my jeans I thought to kill two birds with one stone and dialled Tilly’s number while walking back to my car.

“Hello sunshine,” she said by way of greeting, making my eyes roll at just how happy she sounded.

“Well someone’s happy.” I grumbled back, storing the cooler in the boot of my car, tucking it in the middle of a coil of rope to keep it steady.

“Certainly happier than you. What’s got your knickers in a twist?” she pushed in true Tilly fashion.

“Nothing. The Coven are going to attempt to help the Fae woman tomorrow night.” I said, slipping into the driver's seat and closing the door to keep our conversation more private.

“And has the rogue been seen again?” Tilly replied, meeting my business-like tone.

“No, it worries me that he hasn’t attacked. It wouldn’t have been that hard for him to trail my car.” Voicing it didn’t make it any less worrying.

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“Maybe it’s the witches keeping him away.”

“Maybe, but I think it’s bigger than that. In the clearing, he said his Master wanted Charleene.” I reminded her.

“The Council of Five find the fact that our rogue vampire is acting on behalf of an unknown master to be troubling. You’re being ordered to try and find out who is pulling the vampire’s strings.” Tilly’s words gave me hope that I would be staying with Charleene a little longer.

“Have you found anything more out, regarding the Vampire Law against interspecies relationships?” I asked, not really hoping for anything. Our Laws had been created a millennia ago.

“Actually I have,” she said, raising my hopes a little even as I tempered it back down, “I found out that drinking witch’s blood was forbidden by the Covens back in the 11th century.”

“Why?” I asked, my curiosity raised.

“Because it was highly addictive and gives the vampire a high that is similar to when human’s take drugs like acid and magic mushrooms. It made them highly volatile and seemed to shut off the rational part of their minds.”

“Well shit, that could account for relationships being out-lawed as well.” I surmised aloud.

“It could.” Tilly said, and I could hear the lecture coming from her tone. “You need to keep distance between the two of you.” She went on, using the serious tone she reserved for new vampires.

“I think it’s more than just an infatuation Tilly.” I said, knowing I needed at least one vampire in my corner if I was to ever have any hope that me and Charleene could one day be openly together.

“Dina.” Tilly using my favoured name made me pay more attention, “if fate has dealt you this hand you need to be careful, even we can’t fight against fate.”

“I know.” Tilly didn’t answer and after a few more minutes of silence I ended the call, flinging my phone into the small compartment to the side of the steering wheel in frustration. Why was fate such a bitch? I wondered, twisting the key and starting the engine.

I drove slower on the way back, needing the time to mull over everything Tilly had told me, and stopped near Culloden Moor to hunt in the woods. The sun had already well and truly risen by the time I drove back into the carpark and even speeding back to our shared house, I found it empty and a note laying on the coffee table: Gone dress shopping will be back later. Charleene.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Is a Coven all that important for a witch? - Charleene

“How was shopping?” Dina asked as I pushed open our front door.

“It was so much fun, you should have seen Ally’s face.” I replied, laughing at how white she’d gone when seeing all the dresses, “You’d have thought she’s never had a girly day.”

Dina's chuckle was infectious as I found her on our sofa with a book. Sauntering over, I added a little more sway to my hips than probably necessary, but I loved seeing the fire it brought to her eyes when I did. "I'm glad you seemed to have fun, what else have you been up to?" she asked, her eyes crinkling at the corners.

Falling down on the sofa beside her I explained all about the meeting I'd gone to with Ally for tonight's ceremony, "I'll be helping the Coven with my magic." I finished.

"So there's definitely no getting out of going?" Dina asked hopefully, turning to face me.

"Nope." Dina's face fell at my answer, I knew she wasn't too keen on socialising and she definitely wasn't happy about having to be anywhere near my Grandmother, a sentiment I think we both shared. "Did you manage to do what you needed?" I ask, trying to change the subject.

"Yeah, Tilly even found out why interspecies relationships are forbidden." She didn't sound very hopeful as I searched her eyes.

"And?"

"Apparently a Witch's blood is highly addictive and detrimental to Vampires." I'm pretty sure she gave me the short version, but it still didn't leave any hope that we'd be allowed to love each other anytime soon. And I was pretty certain that's where I was headed.

"So what's the plan for tonight?" This time Dina changed the subject, making me smile.

"I'm off to help Ally get ready about sixish and then coming back here to get myself sorted, before we head over to the field they're holding tonight's ceremony in." I

explained, kicking my feet up on the coffee table. They ached from all the walking I'd been doing, reminding me of when they'd hurt after a busy shift. Adding a little bit of normal to my now unusual life. We lapsed into silence and I was almost asleep when Dina nudged me.

"Don't fall asleep there." She said her voice hiding a laugh.

"I feel shattered and all I've done is watch Ally try on dresses." I laugh back at her.

"Didn't you get one for yourself?" Dina inquires, making my happiness dull slightly.

"Rosie picked one out for me, but it's been made perfectly clear that I'm not a member of this Coven." I said, my words having a little more bite than I'd intended, as a gentle knock came from the door. Sharing a puzzled look with Dina I craned my neck, watching as she answered it.

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“Hello?” Her voice drifted to me, making me even more curious.

“I just wanted to drop this off for Charleene.” Rosie answered, making me frown.

“Oh, thank you.” Dina replied, before shutting the door and returning to the sofa with a brown paper bag in hand.

“This is for you,” she said, holding it out to me.

I took the bag gently as though it would bite me and peered inside. Nestled amongst some tissue paper was the white dress I’d tried on. My bottom lip trembled as I lifted it up.

“Do you want to be part of The Nicenevin Coven?” Dina probed gently, interrupting my focus on the dress and making me think carefully about my answer. Did I want to be a Coven member? I wasn’t sure.

“I dunno, maybe?” I answered honestly, with a yawn taking over my face.

“Why don’t you go have a rest, I’ll wake you in time to get to Ally.”

Grateful of her offer, I jumped up off the sofa, spinning to give her a peck on the cheek before almost running to the bedroom. I hung the dress on the door of the wardrobe, before throwing myself down fully dressed onto the bed. Staring at the lovely dress, it didn’t take long for my heavy eyes to fall closed.

“Babe? It’s time to get up.” Dina said, shaking my shoulder gently as her words took

a couple of minutes to register in my mind.

“Just five more minutes?” I whined, rolling over onto my back.

“If you intend on helping Ally, you don’t have five more minutes.” Dina laughed as I forced my eyes open.

“Really?”

“Really.” She deadpanned back at me, raising one of her eyebrows and smirking.

“Fine.” I said, pushing myself up on my elbows, “How long do we have?”

“About ten minutes before we need to set off.”

“Ok, I just need my bag of tricks.” I said, sliding off the bed and standing.

“Your what?” Dina sniggered on her way to the door.

“My make-up bag.” I replied, grabbing the fairly large black bag and slipping the strap over my shoulder, before following her to the living room.

Knocking on their front door, I don’t wait for an invitation, before excitedly pushing it open and striding inside.

“Hello?” I called, drawing both Lilah and Jace’s attention from whatever they were arguing about.

Lilah looked amazing in her long black dress and flat black sandals. Her hair was as it usually was, a dark frizzy riot. I swear she looked like she stuck her finger in an electrical plug socket every morning. Jace was wearing an all white suit whilst he

paced in front of the living room window.

“Could you hide this in your bag?” Lilah asked on the way up the stairs, holding out a delicate silver chain, with diamonds in the shape of snowdrops dangling off it. The diamonds caught the electric lights and threw rainbows over the stairs. Nodding, I held out my hand and she placed the light jewellery into my palm. I slipped the delicate jewelled chain into my make-up bag so that Ally wouldn’t be able to see it until she was fully ready.

“She’s in the bath.” Lilah explained, as she opened Ally’s bedroom door and let us both in. I placed my bag on her bed as Lilah went to the ensuite's door and knocked.

“What!” Ally snapped from the other side and I exchanged a worried glance with Lilah; she sounded in a delightful mood.

“Ally?” Lilah asked the closed door, raising her voice so she would be able to hear her, “You ok hun?”

“I’m fine Lilah, I’ll be out in a minute.” Ally called and we both heard sloshing water.

“Ah here she is.” Lilah exclaimed as the bathroom door opened, it was as though she thought Ally might have somehow absconded from the bathroom. With what she had to face tonight I wouldn’t have blamed her if she had. Ally, wrapped in a towel, gave Lilah a small smile, before turning my way. I couldn’t help but grin at my friend.

“You ready?” I asked, knowing if it was me, I probably wouldn’t be. At her nod, I reached out and yanked her fully into the room, “Good, because we don’t have much time.” I said, pushing her new dress into her arms and waving at Lilah to leave on my way out.

Closing the door behind us, I counted to one hundred silently in my head before tentatively pushing open her door again and praying that she's decent. My mouth almost hit the floor and an appreciative gasp left it, at the same time Lilah made a similar noise. Ally looked gorgeous in the white dress. It hugged her curves and showed off every asset she'd been blessed with. The beading caught the light and sparkles glinted as she moved carefully so as not to stand on the full length skirt.

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“I look stupid,” Ally mumbled, with a pink tint to her cheeks as her eyes met Lilah’s in the mirror and she twisted her hands together self-consciously.

“Don’t be daft.” I gasped out, wanting her to see herself as I did. She was beautiful, with her red hair and alabaster skin that complemented the dress perfectly. “You just need some finishing touches.”

Offering her a reassuring smile, I centred myself to attempt something with my magic that I’d never done. During my time with the Nicnevin witches, I’d watched amused at how they combined latin and their magic to accomplish tasks. Keeping my imaginary fingers crossed, I use a phrase Sophia had taught me.

“Capillium duo plecto latus caput curro.”

And to my utter astonishment, Ally’s hair braided itself in twin braids along the side of her head, while the rest dried into perfect ringlets. Ally’s eyes widened in astonishment as she looked at her now neat hair, and I dipped into my bag of tricks, carefully retrieving the jewelled chain Lilah had me hide.

“Sit.” I demand, drawing her attention from the mirror before wrapping the chain around her forehead and tucking it into the hair-grips securing her braids. Ally glanced between me and Lilah before her frown smoothed out and she followed my order. “Now close your eyes.” I instructed, catching the pleading look she threw at Lilah. Wow, has no one ever done her make-up before? I wondered silently before getting to work.

It took me twenty minutes of deep concentration to get it all perfect, but once I’d

applied the reddest lipstick I currently owned, she was ready.

“There, you’re done.” I crowed triumphantly, making Ally jump in the chair before her dark blue eyes met my own and I smiled down at her.

Lilah bumped into my side, in her haste to thrust a small handheld silver mirror in front of Ally so she could see just what I’ve done. Ally’s eyes widened and her hand gingerly touched the string of diamonds that wrapped across her forehead as tears gathered in her eyes.

“It was your mother’s,” Lilah whispered, wiping a tear from her cheek as she watched Ally’s reaction.

“Are they diamonds?” I could hear the disbelief in her voice and couldn’t stop the squeal of delight from escaping me as Lilah nodded.

“Do you like it?” I all but shout in my excitement.

Ally nodded with a small smile and looked back in the mirror, studying her reflection, “I look...” She trailed off, an uncertain frown gathering her eyebrows together at whatever thought she’d not voiced.

“You look like you always should have, Ally.” Lilah said, and my heart squeezed at the thought that even Ally had more of a mother than I ever had. Swallowing down my own bitterness and dark thoughts, I kept my smile firmly in place as Ally grimaced.

“Is all of this necessary?” She asked, looking uncomfortable and unsure.

“Absolutely,” I gushed with a giggle, throwing all of my energy into making sure she was full of confidence, “it’s a party Ally, let your hair down and maybe you-know-

who will turn up.” I laughed, wiggling my eyebrows suggestively at her. At her snort, I knew that my work was done.

“HMMMMM,” she said sceptically, making my smile widen as my cheeks hurt.

Leaning over, I placed a soft kiss on Ally’s cheek, “See you there.” I promised, bouncing out of the room to get to Dina.

I found her attempting to get Jace to stop pacing and laughed at her as she threw her arms into the air in frustration. “Oh, leave him be Dina, if he wants to fall through the floor let him.” I laughed, grabbed her arm and tugged her to the door.

We all but ran back to our own house and in less than ten minutes I’m wearing the lovely knee length dress Rosie picked out for me. It was simple, with littlelace embellishments but no sparkly beading, and hugged my breasts tightly. The material was super soft and clung to all my curves. I left my hair loose around my face, letting it drop over my shoulders to cover them. Glancing at the small clock on the wall and seeing that I was already way later than I should be, I decided to forego any make-up and shoes.

Rushing into the front room, I stood stock still as Dina’s eyes widened and her tongue darted out to lick her lips. “What?” I asked, turning my head to see if there was anything behind me. Nothing was there.

“You look breath-taking,” Dina said, making my head flick back to her. She looked like she was about to eat me as she took a step towards me.

“Thank you,” I managed to say through my tight throat, as butterflies erupted in my stomach. Swallowing far too loudly, my finger twisted into my hair and I fidgeted from foot to foot under her stare. “We’re going to be late.” I whispered, breaking her trance.

Dashing into the clearing, I was amazed at how pretty it all looked with the lights hung in the air and the Coven members all dressed in white. My eyes scanned the field, looking for our friends, and another shiver ran over me as the cold air bit at my skin. Who the heck thought it would be a good idea to congregate, in dresses, in Scotland, in December? Shivering again, I continued scanning the field and found poor Ally had already been cornered by my Mother and Grandmother. Taking pity on her, I pulled Dina in their direction.

“And where is that child of yours Aradia?” Agnes’ sharp voice reached my ears as we got closer.

“I’m here, Grandma,” I answered, dragging Dina behind me.

“Oh great, she brought the vampire,” Agnes sneered, giving us both a disapproving look before turning on her heel and marching away.

“Will she ever get over it?” I grumbled, staring at her back and wishing that looks could kill.

“She will, in time, accept your decision Charleene,” Aradia answered, “She just needs time, you’re forcing us to turn our back on a thousand years of tradition with your...relationship.”

Smiling, she turned to Dina, “welcome and blessed be Dina,” she said pleasantly before leaving us as well.

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“Well she needs to hurry up.” I chuntered, before Dina could answer my mother.

“Maybe I should go?” Dina offered, making me angrier that they’d made her feel unwanted.

Tightening my grip on her arm, I made things even more awkward and declared proudly, “Don’t you dare, it’s a party, why shouldn’t we get to enjoy it together?”

After a few minutes of silence and awkward looks, Ally piped up, “Sooooo? Who wants a drink?”

“Me, definitely me,” I said, with a grateful smile at her. Shaking my head at my family, I turned to stride towards a long table full of bottles.

I looked over all the different bottles, selecting a couple that would make a tasty cocktail. Grabbing me and Ally a disposable paper cup I got to work, mixing rum manhattans and passing them round. The liquor warmed my throat as it burned on the way to my stomach and once my cup was half empty I let out a satisfied sigh.

Ally cautiously sipped her own drink, before humming in delight and taking a larger mouthful as she turned to look out over the crowd. Mirroring her action, I took in all the dancing couples as some children squealed with delight and darted past us. Looking to the right, a wisp of darkness caught my attention. It looked like a shadow but couldn’t have been; the lights from above chased all the shadows away. Frowning, I left Ally to appreciate the solstice celebration and weaved between the dancing members as I followed more black wisps.

They led me through the crowd and across the field to the edge of the floating lights. Beyond was dark, with only the stars peeping down. “What’s brought you out here?” Dina asked, making me jump as I didn’t realise she’d followed me.

“I don’t know, call it a feeling.” I replied, narrowing my eyes and staring out across the seemingly empty field.

“Come on, let’s go back.” Dina suggested as my eyes adjusted to the dark.

“You should listen to your friend witchling.” A voice, smooth as silk, said to my left, making my head turn in its direction.

“Who are you?!” I demand, still searching the darkness.

“A monster,” the voice laughed back at me, “A destroyer of all that is good and happy.”

“I don’t believe that.” I snapped, as a dark shape materialised and the dark haired, blue eyed Shadow Fae stepped in front of me. “What do you want with Ally?”

I studied the man closely, wondering what it was that drew my friend to him. Shadows twirled around his lithe frame, but I knew it wasn’t just his devilishly good looks that had Ally blushing anytime he came up in conversation. The shadows seemed thicker around his head, almost crowning it.

“Maybe I want to steal her virtue,” he sniggered as my eyes narrowed. The shadows seemed to be seeping into his head.

“What’s wrong with you?” I blurted out, not taking my eyes from his head, as the shadows intensified.

“Everything, nothing,” he said, not making any sense.

Irritated by his answer, my eyes flicked down to meet his own and found they were wider than before and he seemed to be studying me as much as I studied him.

“There’s something wrong with your head.” I told him bluntly.

“What do you mean?” His eyes narrowed in suspicion as I acted without thinking, summoning my connection to my spirit magic. Focusing, I wrapped it around his head, covering all the shadows with the light silver magic until he looked like he was wearing a sparkly silver bandage.

“What have you done?” he asked, his voice different this time, somehow lighter than it had been seconds ago. Meeting his gaze, I also found his eyes seemed brighter. “Answer me Witch.” He snarled, making Dina bristle at my side.

“I don’t know, help I hope,” I stammered out, shocked that my magic had even done as I asked. Whatever that was.

“I can’t feel them or hear him.” Ally’s stalker said quickly, flashing me a wary look, “What are the witches planning with Ally?” He quickly asked.

“They’re going to attempt to break the block on her magic.”

“When?”

“At midnight.” I said, eliciting a growl from him as shadows wrapped around his body, “I’ll break it myself.”

And with that he was gone. I’d just turned to Dina, when chaos began to unfold from the centre of the field behind us.

Couldn't we just have one minute of normal? I asked myself as we both turned towards the gathered Coven. Sharing a glance we took off running, Dina keeping pace with myself until we reached the drinks table where I'd left Ally not too long ago.

Everyone seemed to have stopped moving and created a circle. Shoving my way through using my elbows, I stumbled to a stop just in time to see the dark haired man holding Ally to his chest, his hand wrapped around her throat.

"Ally!" Jace screamed from somewhere in the crowd as she nodded and shadows wrapped around them. As quickly as the shadows arrived they were gone, taking Ally and her dream man with them.

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“Nooooo!” Jace’s heart wrenching scream tore the night apart as he fell to the floor where Ally had just been standing.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Why can’t life just pause for one minute so you can get your bearings again after the crazy? -Charleene.

After Ally had been taken, Jace was inconsolable, screaming and tearing at the grass on his knees. Even Lilah couldn’t get him to calm down. He just kept repeating her name over and over, until I could still hear it echoing in my head now. The Maiden, Mother And Crone had decided that, in light of what had happened, it would be best to cancel the rest of the celebrations. To their credit, they organised search parties to spread out, searching the fields around the village but, as the sky became tinged with the fiery coming of day and we still hadn’t found her, they were called off.

Returning to Lilah and Jace I wondered if I’d helped the man or just made things worse, as my eyes rested on Jace. He was broken, utterly broken as he still knelt in the same spot.

“She’ll be ok.” Lilah cooed to the top of his head, as she stroked his golden hair.

“He took her. They have her. We failed.” He sobbed, finally breaking out of his mantra and looking at Lilah with tear streaked cheeks.

“We don’t know that.” Lilah said.

At the same time I asked, “Who have her?”

“The Shadow Fae.” Jace whispered, as if uttering their name would bring them here. Dina growled beside me and I flashed her a confused look.

“The Shadow Fae were responsible for creating Vampires.” Dina explained, reminding me of her dislike for all Fae. “What do they want with her?”

“She has the ability to open gateways between worlds.” Lilah calmly explained, like she was discussing the weather, not the possibility of other worlds.

“I beg your pardon?” I asked, my mind remembering the scene from the spirit world of the large shimmering archway and the woman with violet eyes who’d seemed familiar.

“Alysium’s mother had the same ability, but when the Shadow War broke out on Agenia, she closed the gateways between the worlds. Then, when Lysais helped the Shadow Fae infiltrate Agata Palace she sent myself, Jace and Ally here to Earth.” Lilah explained, meeting my gaze with one that told me she wasn’t lying.

“It’s true,” Agnes’ shrill voice rang out, making all of us except Dina jump in surprise. “My Mother told me legends of The Gatemaker Fae and of The Gatekeepers.”

“Why have you never told us this before?” Mother’s voice snapped, her hurt showing in its sharpness.

“I’d thought they were nothing but stories until you showed up at my feet.” Agnes said, jabbing her finger at Lilah. “And then when my...Charleene showed up with two Ancients in tow, I knew it had to be more than a story.”

“What are Gatekeepers?” Angelinia asked, informing me that it had just become a family affair of more secret airing.

“We are,” Agnes said, her eyes jumping between us all, “When the gateways reopen one of us will be chosen as The Gatekeeper of Earth.”

I shivered, not liking the sound of being chosen. Heavy footsteps behind me made me turn to see Sophia running towards us like her life depended on it. Confused, I glanced at Dina and my sister before turning my attention back to my new friend, whose face was red and her hair dishevelled. In the short time I’d known her I’d never seen her look so pale and unkempt.

“THEY’VE FOUND ALLY!” She screamed at us when she deemed herself close enough.

I think it took all of our brains a minute or two to understand what she’d said, but once the words settled in myself, Dina, Jace and Lilah charged in Sophia’s direction.

I cursed myself, breathlessly, as we reached the Warlock carrying her. His group had been one of the last returning when they’d seen shadows collect near the village, leaving Ally behind. She’d looked like death had already claimed her. Her lips were blue and her skin even paler than it usually was.

“Quick get her inside.” Julie, the healer snapped at us as she arrived, making us all hurry back to the guest house Ally and Jace had been using.

That had been hours ago and she still looked only marginally better. Heavy bells rang out through the village, forcing my eyes from Ally’s still body. Since she’d been taken by the Shadow Fae Prince and been returned to the edge of the village this morning, she hadn’t moved, her fingers hadn’t even twitched. The only comfort any of us had was the fact that she was still breathing slowly.

What the hell is happening now? I wondered to myself, meeting Dina's gaze across the room. She nodded towards the door, and without questioning, I followed her from the room, Ally was well protected between Jacin and Lilah.

"What's going on?" I asked, closing the door behind me.

"It's the warning bells, the Coven is under attack." Dina said quietly, already heading for the stairs. Running after her, I was right behind as she flung open the front door, where utter chaos ruled the streets. Witches and Warlocks ran in every direction, some carried small children or dragged older ones behind them, as they made for the large meeting hut. Meeting Dina's eyes I walked off up the street, my steps hurrying the same way as everyone else.

I was breathing heavily by the time I pushed through the crowd and found Agnes, Aradia and Angelinia standing on the slightly raised dais. The noise was deafening as everyone shouted at once and my new found family tried to field all of their questions.

"We don't know..." Aradia's voice was swallowed almost as quickly as I heard it, drowned out before I could hear the end of the sentence. Glancing around, my head spun between the worried shouts and crying children.

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“Will everyone pipe down!” I found myself screaming at the top of my lungs and surprisingly my words, fueled by magic, rang out above the din and silence suddenly descended inside the hut. “We will get nowhere shouting at each other.” I continued in a much more reasonable tone.

“Thank you,” Aradia said, flashing me a grateful look.

“Yes, thank you...Charleene,” Agnes said, looking like she was chewing on rocks just saying the words. “Sisters, Brothers, enemies are on the Culloden Battlefield, we must move quickly.”

“Move?!” I called at her. How could she even think of just picking up sticks and moving? “This is your home, where many of you have been born and raised,” I implored the crowd around me and received a few murmurs of agreement.

“We have always moved when danger grows close,” Angelinia’s soft voice answers me.

“You would run, instead of fighting for what’s yours?” I replied, flabbergasted that their first instinct was to run away.

“Why fight and lose lives unnecessarily, when we can leave and all live?” Aradia asks me, with agreement from the crowd.

“And what happens if they find you again, will you continue running forever?” I countered, raising an eyebrow at her.

“If we must.” Agnes’ voice is strong and pinned me with a narrow eyed glare.

“And what if everyone isn’t ready before they get here?” I demand of her, giving my own glare back.

“Then we leave the few to save the many.” Agnes’ reply was cold and calculated.

“You would leave your own behind?” My tone showed everyone the shock I felt at her words and the angry murmurs told me even more about what the crowd thought of them. “And you? Do you agree?” I shouted, turning to face the crowd, “Do you wish to run away, leaving everything you’ve built here?”

The crowd closest to me shuffled their feet and looked down at the ground. I was about to shake my head at their cowardice, when a clear voice rang out strong and clear.

“I wish to fight!” Sophia pushed her way to the front, and like a pebble tossed into a still pond, her words began a chain reaction, until the word fight was chanted throughout the hut. I was amazed at the ferocity that filled the meeting hut to the rafters and I got the feeling that they didn’t want to move again.

Agnes’ eyes tightened in displeasure as they were forced to put it to a vote, and when the choice to stay and fight wins, “I knew you’d destroy us all,” She snapped at me on her way past, storming from the hut.

My stomach flutters uneasily at her words as I realise that without me, the coven wouldn’t be putting themselves in danger.

Biting my lip, I stared out over the dark shadows that shift and shiver across the field opposite us. It hadn’t taken long for the coven to organise themselves with the vulnerable and young being evacuated, while those that wished to fight had

assembled upon the hill beside me, Dina and Sophia.

“What are they?” Sophia gasped beside me as we lined up against the Shadow men.

“Demoran.” Dina answers her without so much as blinking. “Abominations created by the Shadow Fae.”

“How do we kill them?” a Warlock who’s name I didn’t know asked.

“I don’t know.” She replied honestly.

“Well that’s not exactly inspiring,” I muttered under my breath, knowing she’d be able to hear me and hoping that the others wouldn’t.

“It doesn’t matter, here they come.” Dina pointed out as with a roar the Shadow men charged towards us.

“Use any magic you have, do not let them get close to the village!” I shouted, launching a fireball. I lost myself, busy fighting off the Demoran, throwing my fire and air magic that has little effect against them. The witches and warlocks around me are doing the same as we kept the shadow men at bay.

Lilah appeared beside me, and the glint of silver caught my eye as she passed two swords to Dina and began passing out daggers to the Coven members around me.

“The metal is spelled, it will destroy the Demoran.” She quickly explained, raising all of our hopes.

“Heck yeah,” Dina said, before flashing into our enemy's ranks and I began to think that we may actually make it out of this alive as Demoran began falling from the blades she’d been given.

I was bunched together with a group of four witches, keeping some of the Demoran busy while others sprinted around the field, felling them with the spelled daggers. When a hopeful cheer began behind me, however, I couldn't take my eyes off of the enemies before me. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Ally and Jace charging into the fray. They looked formidable in their black leather armour. Ally had twin swords gripped in her hands that she twirled expertly and her hair flamed like real life fire as she plunged one of her swords into the chest of a Demoran and flicked her hand at another group that have surrounded some of my fellow Witches and Warlocks. I watch in awe as bright flames, much more powerful than my own, wrapped around each Demoran squeezing until they melted away.

"Keep together!" I screamed, moving my own group towards another and another. Collecting us together in the chaos.

Jace flashed past at one point, his blade slicing through Demoran like a knife through butter and I had to marvel at how skilled he was in battle. It's clear that, unlike us, the Fae have had significant training. Human screams and grunts filled the air around me, combining with the inhuman screeches of the Demoran. My ears rang and I knew that whoever lived through this would never forget it.

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I'd lost track of how long we've been fighting, with the clouds blocking the sun. All I knew was the weakness spreading through my arms as I flung even more magic onto the battlefield. I was weakening when a single scream pierced the air.

I know that scream, my mind shouted at me as I glanced around frantically. Stepping away from my party I scanned the field, trying to find Ally as a deathly quiet settled over the battle like a blanket. Everyone froze and as I turned, I saw Ally surrounded by a mixture of elements. The Demoran closest to her began edging away as the elements intensified. Ally's eyes flicked from one Demoran to the next, and without any warning, she erupted.

It was amazing to witness as fire shot out in long streams, dodging Witches and Warlocks but engulfing the Demoran. Water flooded the field, washing away Demoran but leaving the Coven standing as mud ran beneath my trainers, turning them brown. Air made my hair whip around my face and the ground shook beneath my feet, making Demoran tumble to the ground as her fire magic destroyed them. Their inhuman screams filled the air until everything went silent and there was not a Demoran left within five feet of us.

My feet slipped and slid on the mud as I stepped towards Ally and Jace. Baffled, I glanced around, waiting for another attack. My heart froze as an agonised scream burst from Ally and my head whipped back to her in time to see her knees wobble and give out. She plummeted towards the ground, not removing her hands from her head to break her fall. I raced towards her but it was like I was moving in slow motion as she neared the ground, and I knew I wasn't going to be fast enough.

Jace's arms wrapped around her, stopping her from hurting herself as another scream

tore from her throat. Terror raced through me and I forced my feet to move faster as the sloppy mud sucked at them.

“What’s happening to me Jace?” Ally asked as I finally managed to draw close. She was staring into his eyes like he was the only thing keeping her here, and I wondered the same thing.

“I don’t know Ally.” She shook as Jace answered, her hands squeezing her head harder as she whimpered. I stepped closer, wanting to help but a gentle hand on my arm stopped me. I looked down at Lilah who shook her head at me.

“It hurts. Please, please make it stop!” Ally screamed, before her eyes closed and her nostrils flared. I was jostled as Dina came to a halt on my other side and we watched as shadows collected beside them, and I shivered in anticipation of another fight. However, the dark haired Fae that stepped out flashed us all a menacing glare before he strode towards Ally.

“What do you want?” Jace snarled at him, pulling Ally closer to his chest, as though that act alone could stop the Shadow Prince from taking her again.

“I’m here to help Jacin,” Ally’s dark dream man’s voice was smooth and my lips twisted in a smile as I realised whatever I’d done on the solstice was still having a positive effect.

Ally’s lips twitched into a smile as Jace’s arms reluctantly loosened and the Shadow Prince—I really needed to ask Ally for his name— cradled her against him.

“Hey,” I barely heard Ally’s whisper, but the way her eyes lit up made my stomach squirm. Should I be watching this? I thought, but I couldn’t take my eyes off them. They’re a beautiful contradiction; one dark and one light.

“Let go Princess,” his commanding tone made me twitch to follow his order.

“Let go of what?” Ally’s voice wavered and tears ran over her cheeks, but the Shadow Prince’s voice didn’t waver in the slightest as he answered her.

“Alysium, let down your walls. Concentrate.” He growled at her and I got the feeling it wasn’t the first time he said something similar to her.

“I can’t Ly,” Ally gasped, “the pain’s too bad.” She whimpered and I wanted to run to her side and help, but knew it wasn’t my place. I didn’t know what was happening to her or how to help her, but Ly obviously knew something we didn’t.

“You can do this Ally.” He cajoled, gently wiping away the new tears with one hand as the other supported her, keeping her clean from the mud he was knelt in. I watched, along with everyone else, in stunned silence as Ly bent his head down, until his lips met Ally’s.

She let out a surprised gasp before she kissed him back. It was hot, heavy and made me feel a little awkward watching it. I was about to suggest they find a room, when Ally’s eyes closed and her body went limp in Ly’s arms.

Jace growled, dragging my eyes from the couple to his angry face as he stepped towards them.

“Back off Jacin!” Ly snarled at him, “She’s fixing herself.”

He stumbled to a stop, his eyes flashing from Ly to Ally and back again, “What’s happening to her?” He finally asked, his voice losing a little of its anger as fear for Ally overtakes it.

“When our fated-mate bond snapped into place last night, the block on her mind and

magic dissolved. Like the spell was designed to unravel if we completed the bond.” Ly frowned and gently moved the hair clinging to Ally’s forehead behind her ear. “I don’t know what you did witch, but thank you for giving me this time with her.”

Lysais’ eyes flicked to me and I didn’t know what else to do but nod at him, as Jace and Lilah looked at me in confusion. But, before any of them could ask me any questions, Ally stirred in his hold.

Strands of strange magic trailed out of her in long, thin bands that flickered in a multitude of colours. I gasped in wonder as it collected, making a shimmering archway behind them. Ally moved suddenly, drawing my gaze as her eyes flew open. She smiled up at Ly, but he stiffened like an electric shock had just run through him and her smile faltered as shadows gathered around his head, like they had been last night, and I knew my spell had finally faltered.

“Find me.” He whispered, pushing Ally away. Before she could hit the mud, Jace grabbed her and my heart broke for them as Ally’s hands wrapped into the fabric of Ly’s shirt.

“Ly?” she questioned, her fists tightening as he pulled backwards. He didn’t speak as he yanked her hands from his shirt, stood and turned his back on her.

“STOP!” Ally’s voice rang out, making Ly’s steps halt. I was hoping that he’d go back to her; I’d try and figure out a more permanent fixture to whatever was going on with him, but his eyes travelled over her before landing on the archway behind her.

“Goodbye Princess.” Ly snapped, making Ally’s head flick back to him as her eyes went blank, but it’s not her that worried me as Ly’s lips pulled back in a satisfied sneer. It was like he was the cat that’d gotten the best cream as his smile made my blood freeze.

“So it’s true.” His mouth snarled at Ally, but it sounded different, colder as his eyes glinted dangerously and he took a menacing step towards her, closing the small distance between them as everyone stared in wonder at the gateway Ally had just created.

Everything seemed to speed up as Ly made a black blade appear in his hand, and dragged it back, before plunging it forward.

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Lilah shoved me to the side as she screamed and darted between the two of them and I watched, helplessly, in horror as the blade pierced her chest and appeared on the other side. “Lilah no!”

I didn’t know how to describe the scream that tore from Ally. It was one of those screams that if you hadn’t heard it, you’d never understand. But one that once you have heard it, you never want to again. Tears flowed over more than one person's cheeks as Ly’s new voice filled the clearing.

“Again? They do love to protect you Princess.”

Ally’s eyes went strangely blank again, like his words had triggered something inside of her. Lysais tugged his blade back, and Lilah’s body collapsed to the ground, as I summoned the biggest ball of fire I could to my hands.

“Leave!” I demanded, not knowing who this man was, but he wasn’t the same person who’d helped Ally.

“Ha, little witch, you think you can protect her from me?!” he snarled.

“Not on my own I don’t,” I spat back at him, raising my eyebrow as my fellow witches drew their own magic to their hands, “Now leave or we’ll make you.” I threatened. With a callous laugh he took a step towards me and I threw my fireball at his feet, “The next one won’t miss. You mean nothing to me.” I bluffed.

I watched as he considered his options as more Witches raised their elements, but as he turned and began walking away I let my magic fade and everyone else followed

suit. I really didn't want to hurt someone my friend loved, but I would to protect her.

"Why?" Ally's voice snapped out, but Ly continued walking, ignoring her, "Why?!" she screamed at him and Jace's arms wrapped around her from behind, tugging her towards the shimmering portal.

Everyone was riveted on the glowing Gateway that had appeared behind Jacin and Ally, its surface twisting with chaotic rainbow swirls. Frowning, I stared at the archway, racking my mind for where I'd seen something similar. Ally's screams rent the air, dragging my own gaze back to her shattered gaze that stared at Lilah's body. I'd not had the chance to get to know Lilah much, but from the way Ally had spoken about the women had made me want to know her. Now I would never have the chance as the woman laid lifeless on the grass.

Nobody seemed to notice the dark figure standing in the tree line. With a deep sigh, I looked over at the Witches I was just getting to know, my gut telling me that I may not see them again as I approached the waiting shadow. Getting closer, I saw that it was a woman around my own height who was leaning against the tree, with a lit cigarette in her mouth. The tip glowed orange as she took a deep drag of it. Moving closer still, my feet paused as I looked into my own face and my breaths faltered.

She looked just like me, apart from the artificially dyed green hair that wafted in the wind. The woman blew out a steady stream of smoke, her eyes not leaving mine as I felt Dina stop just behind me.

"Hey Sis." She said with a joyless laugh and raised one of her manicured eyebrows.

The End.