



Definitely Dead (Happily Ever Afterlife #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: As a royal Guardian, Tyr Bergstrom is built for battle, not stillness. Not whatever this is. He followed his prince into the depths of the Underworld out of loyalty, but with no foes to vanquish and no lives to safeguard, he's left questioning why he stays. It's dark, cold, and each day blends into the next with monotonous sameness.

Until a spark of sunshine arrives in the Village of Lost Souls.

Sunne Tanaka died. Not ideal, but he's had worse Mondays. While the afterlife isn't anything like he expected—frankly, it's a total scam—from the moment he meets Tyr, he can't help but feel that he's exactly where he belongs. He hasn't decided if the shifter is his destiny or a beautiful disaster waiting to happen, but he knows one thing for certain. He's not leaving the village without him.

But Tyr knows better than anyone that some lines aren't meant to be crossed. He doesn't know what waits beyond the dark waters of the River Acheron, but it's the only condition of his stay in the Underworld. A rule he has never questioned...until another soul puts Sunne's very existence at risk.

Now, he's not just questioning.

Now, he's prepared to take on the living, the dead, and Hades himself to bring his mate back and give them both a chance at a happily ever afterlife.

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Chapter one

Black. Everything was black—the sky, the water, the sand.

His soul.

While not usually so morose, after more than a millennium in the Underworld, Tyr Bergstrom figured he'd earned the right to be a little bitter. Or maybe not, considering he'd done this to himself.

He wasn't dead, even if it felt like it most days. No, he had, with full understanding of his actions, chosen this existence. As such, he could leave anytime he wanted and return to the land of the living. To a world where the sun shined, and time made fucking sense.

But he stayed.

Out of duty? Loyalty? Pride?

He didn't know anymore.

But guiding souls through the afterlife like an operator at a carnival ride damn sure wasn't it.

“Listen up!” he called, raising his voice to be heard over the din of conversation. “You're dead. Yeah, it sucks. No, you can't go back. No, there wasn't a mistake. No, I don't know your loved ones or where they are in the Underworld.”

Where the banks met the glassy waters of the River Acheron, a rickety pier extended past the shoreline, its weathered boards warped and faded. The thing whined from the pressure of merely existing, and it always looked one wrong step away from disintegrating completely.

Tyr ushered the group toward it.

“Wait here for the ferryman. Don’t touch the water.”

“What happens after we cross?” The female’s hair fell around her pale, withered face in tangled wisps, and she pointed toward the river with a finger crooked from age and disease.

“You’ll be judged.” He shrugged. One day, he would be too.

“And then?” A young male tilted his head, his upper lip curved in a smirk.

Pretty cocky for a dead bastard.

“Guess that’s up to you.” And not his problem.

“What happens if we touch the water?” someone at the back asked.

He stared down at the shifting onyx sands beneath his boots and sighed. Always the same uninspired questions. Topside, he had protected royalty and safeguarded kingdoms. Here, he had been reduced to little more than a glorified tour guide.

The least the tourists could do in return was try to be interesting.

“Want to find out?” As he suspected, no one took him up on the offer. “Good. Now, line up.”

“What’s that place?” The teenager jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Can we stay there?”

“Do what you want, kid.” With a quiet growl, he turned and started back up the hill toward the village made of cobblestone streets and thatched huts. “I just work here.”

Because time moved differently between the mortal realm and the Underworld, they didn’t typically receive newcomers in batches like this. One hundred fresh souls—give or take—arrived on the banks of the river every day in a steady trickle spaced over hours.

Many of them, he never even saw before they crossed.

A cluster of ten or more new souls arriving together almost always meant war, natural disasters, or some other type of mass-casualty event. Moreover, they always had something in common, something that would suggest they had died at the same time, in the same place.

Nothing about the current group gave him that indication.

Still, the anomaly didn’t concern him. It didn’t even pique his curiosity. He simply filed the information away to report on later. While he didn’t care what had brought them there, his boss certainly would.

“Hey, mind if I join you?” Without waiting for an answer, the young male from the group fell into step beside him, his hands shoved into the pockets of his ripped jeans. “I didn’t expect it to be so cold here.”

Tyr had felt the same way when he’d first arrived. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Really, though, what is this place?”

He glanced at him from the corner of his eye. Golden hair cut into shaggy layers that framed his face. Big, crisp green eyes. Plump cheeks with a soft jaw. The little witch looked like a fucking kid, but the energy pouring off him belied his meek appearance.

Something about the way he spoke, though, felt...off. Not his words or tone, exactly. It was more in his cadence.

“Village of Lost Souls.” A little hamlet built for the dead, those who, for whatever reason, refused to move on. “You should go back and wait for the ferryman.”

“Maybe later.” The male rounded his shoulders, his thin black tee offering little protection from the biting cold. “I’m Aster, by the way. Aster Hornby.”

He grunted. “Tyr.”

“Tyr? Like top-tier badass?” His laughter rang through the darkness, and he tossed his head back, clearly amused by his own joke.

“Just Tyr.” They reached the top of the slope and stepped onto the narrowed, cobbled street that ran the perimeter of the village. “If you’re staying, you should talk to Helen.” He pointed toward a shop to his left, the windows dimly lit by the orange glow of candlelight. “She’ll tell you what to do next.”

Aster glanced at the crooked door of the bakery and back, his brow creased and a frown tugging at his lips. “You’re not going to show me around?”

“No.”

He’d figure it out. They all did eventually.

Striding into the dark alley between the buildings, Tyr emerged onto the main

thoroughfare. From there, he could see every ramshackle structure in the town, as well as the massive high-rise that towered over everything else and disappeared into blackness.

Shiny, modern, it was in total juxtaposition to the rest of the place. Rumor had it Hades had constructed the building himself to house the lost souls who wandered the banks of the river.

The god had never confirmed nor denied the suspicions, but Tyr wouldn't be surprised if he had. Hades had a well-earned reputation for being a hard ass, but he could also be absurdly generous if the mood struck.

Case in point, the castle at the water's edge Tyr and his brethren shared with their prince.

As Guardians, they were sworn to protect the royal families of the paranormal world. For centuries topside, that had meant safeguarding Orrin Nightstar, heir to the elven court. When the prince had met his mate and relocated to the Underworld, he hadn't ordered them to follow, but their oath didn't end just because their ward had relocated.

Tyr didn't regret his choice, and given the opportunity, he would do it again. But things had changed since their arrival, and despite more than twelve hundred years to acclimate, he hadn't figured out how to change with them.

"You're brooding again."

Tyr's gaze slid sideways toward the male, but he kept walking. "I don't brood."

Undeterred, the guy pushed off the lamppost, his face shadowed from the flickering flames of the lantern that hung overhead. "You have that look."

He slowed, but he didn't stop moving. "This is just my face."

Stepping off the crumbling curb, Rune fell into step beside him. "Who pissed you off this time?"

"No one." He might be annoyed, but not angry. He just wasn't particularly happy either. "Why are you here?"

The big Guardian shrugged and threaded his fingers through his hair, dragging the dusky strands away from his face. "Disagreement at the Tower."

Tyr flicked his gaze toward the high-rise and grunted.

Rune had joined the Nightstar Guard a few years after him, and barring a short transition period, had seamlessly integrated into the team. Strategic, and a bit of a perfectionist, he had been in charge of coordinating Orrin's security for decades.

He didn't just have a plan B. The shifter incorporated the whole damn alphabet, prepared with a contingency for every possible scenario. And no one knew Ministry law like Rune Calix.

No small thing when the Ministry of Otherling Affairs took more of a "punish first, explain later" approach to governing the paranormal world.

In the village, Rune managed petty skirmishes between dead people, and he did it with the same attention to detail and understanding of regulations. Only now, he operated under the rules of the Underworld.

Tyr didn't understand it, but Rune seemed happy. In fact, by all accounts, the asshole was thriving in their new home, unburdened by bitterness or resentment.

“What about you?” Rune asked, his cobalt eyes narrowing at the corners. “Why are you here?”

“I need to talk to Orrin.” When he’d first started up the hill, he had only wanted to get away from the crowd by the pier. That had changed the minute Aster had decided to follow him. “New batch of souls came in, and one decided to stay.”

“You mean the kid following you?”

Tyr paused in the street and looked over his shoulder, just in time to see a pale face duck behind one of the buildings. Damn, he hadn’t even noticed his tail. He was definitely losing his touch.

“Yeah, that’s the one.” A talkative soul with attachment issues. Exactly what he needed.

“Don’t worry.” Rune clapped him on the back as they started walking again. “We’ll get him sorted.”

Of that, he had no doubt, even if he disagreed with the plural part of the statement. Hence why he was on his way to see the prince.

While Orrin had abdicated his claim to the throne, he still carried the title of his position...and he hated it. Since taking on the mantle of Guardian of Lost Souls, he preferred to be addressed by his given name, a request Tyr tried to honor, but old habits and all that.

While the new title came with a lot of responsibility, it also had its perks, like a serious magical upgrade. Which meant Tyr now had the useless task of playing bodyguard to a literal deity.

Very awesome. Totally fine. Loved that for himself.

At the end of the cobbled road, they stopped outside the oldest, shabbiest dwelling in the village. Without a functional foundation, the entire building had shifted over time, giving it a distinctive lean, and the slabs of wood had dried and faded to an unhealthy gray. Lanterns occupied the windows, the warm glow struggling to penetrate the dingy glass, and the thatched roof sagged in several places, especially around the crooked stone chimney.

Villagers asserted the owner had been the first resident, the original lost soul, back when the hamlet had been nothing more than a vacant hill. Tyr had neither the desire nor the energy to verify their claims, but from what he had observed, it sounded reasonable.

“I’ll catch up with you later.” Rather than follow him to the door, Rune took a step back. “Good luck with the kid.”

“He’s not my problem,” Tyr mumbled.

But Rune had already walked away, heading back in the direction they had come from.

The weathered door scraped the floor as it swung open, and the rusted hinges screamed in protest, both violently announcing his arrival. Most places just used a bell. The diner weaponized neglect.

He would like to say the place was a hidden gem, but that would be a lie. The inside precisely matched the exterior—dimly lit, dull, and in desperate need of repairs. A thin layer of sand covered the warped floor, the grains crunching beneath his boots as he made his way to the back of the room.

Seated in the corner on one side of a rudimentary booth, Orrin looked up as he approached, his pale gray eyes gleaming in the candlelight. Fair, refined, with long silvery-white hair, he shined like a beacon in the drab surroundings.

After all this time, one would think the prince would have learned to blend in with the locals, but no. Draped in a sapphire tunic with gold inlays, he looked so wildly out of place, it was almost comical.

A smile stretched his lips, and he reached his hand out to indicate the seat across from him. "Tyr, come sit. Would you like some coffee?"

A dented tin carafe sat in the middle of the table, along with two chipped mugs. Clearly, Orrin had expected him.

"I see we have a new resident," the prince continued, his gaze drifting to the small window beside the table.

"His name is Aster." Sliding into the other side of the booth, Tyr flipped the stained white cup over and reached for the carafe. "I told him to talk to Helen, but..." He trailed off, his voice fading into a tired sigh. "He'll likely be here in a minute."

"I look forward to meeting him." There was a genuineness in his tone that Tyr could never hope to match. "Do we know how he died?"

He paused, his mug halfway to his lips, and shook his head. "I didn't ask."

"Well, at least you got a name this time. That's progress, I suppose."

"I didn't ask that either." He shrugged, unmoved by the mild scolding, and sipped from his cup. The food at the diner might taste like soggy cardboard, but Cian made a damn good cup of coffee. "He just told me."

“A chatty one.” Orrin sat up a little straighter and glanced toward the door, his curiosity clearly piqued. “What’s he like? General impression?”

Tyr understood the excitement, even if he didn’t share in it.

No one could force a soul to accept their fate. With only a few strict exceptions, not even Hades could drag an unwilling spirit across the river to face judgment.

Enter Orrin. As the Guardian of Lost Souls, it was his duty to convince them to face the unknown—a tiresome, thankless job that he still found rewarding for reasons Tyr couldn’t possibly comprehend.

Most souls didn’t want to talk, especially not about the events that had brought them to the village. They wanted answers. More accurately, they wanted a solution to a problem that didn’t exist. As if they could change their fate with a phone call and some paperwork.

Those willing to talk, however, were usually willing to listen, meaning a higher potential for success.

“Young. A little arrogant.” The bench groaned when he leaned against the tall back. “He seems pretty unbothered about being dead, to be honest.”

Orrin hummed quizzically. “I wonder why he stayed.”

Every resident in the village had their motives, and Tyr had stopped speculating long ago. Some simply couldn’t accept their own death. Others feared judgment. A few wanted to move on, but they waited for loved ones to join them before taking the final leap.

He kind of felt sorry for the last group. While they waited for millennia in the

Underworld, only scant years passed topside.

“Hello, Tyr.” The owner of the shabby diner appeared at the end of the table, an amiable smile stretching his thin lips. “Can I get you anything?”

Cian, the first resident, a guy so old he didn’t even have a last name. With his soft features and halo of sandy-brown curls, the guy looked pretty good for someone rumored to be as old as death itself.

While he didn’t say much, when he did speak, it was always with kindness. His welcoming personality drew people to him, making his little corner of the village a natural gathering place.

Tyr held up his cracked mug and dipped his head. “I’m good for now.”

“Just let me know.” His soft-spoken tone carried the hint of an accent Tyr had never heard in the mortal world, likely from a dead language that had been lost long ago.

“Will do. Thanks, Cian.”

“You like him,” Orrin said once the shopkeeper disappeared back behind the slanted bar at the front of the room.

He probably didn’t mean it as an accusation, but Tyr decided to take it as one anyway. “Everyone likes Cian.”

“You’re not everyone.”

“He’s a nice guy.” In fact, he was so damn agreeable that even accidental rudeness toward him felt like kicking a puppy.

The screech of unoiled hinges announced the arrival of another patron. And he didn't have to look up to know who had entered the diner. The timing couldn't have been more accurate if he had planned it.

"Is that him?" Orrin asked.

Aster didn't skulk into the room with his head down like most new souls. He strutted across the threshold, chin jutting, and shoulders back like he had something to prove.

Tyr choked back a sigh. "That's him."

"He's coming this way." A quiet chuckle rolled from the elf's lips. "I think you have an admirer."

More like a parasite. And his cue to get the hell out of there.

Draining the last of his coffee, he placed the cup gently on the table, careful not to damage it further, and slid out of the booth so he stood waiting when Aster approached.

"Sit." He pointed to his vacated seat. "Listen. Don't be a dick. Got it?"

Aster's gaze darted between him and Orrin, a frown tugging at his mouth. "You're not staying?"

"No."

"But—"

"Sit," he repeated, adding a touch of warning in the form of a low growl.

Instead of fear or panic, the kid rolled his eyes and huffed. “Fine, but you should really take your own advice and not be such a dick.”

“Maybe,” he allowed, a smirk curving his lips. “But not today.”

He waited for Aster to settle into the booth, then sent Orrin a questioning look. When he received a nod of dismissal, he sighed in relief and headed for the door.

The kid might think himself special, but Tyr had met a thousand other souls just like him. Cocky. Try-hard. The ones too proud to admit they didn’t have it all figured out. They were all the same.

Much like the Underworld itself.

Unmoving. Unchanging. A place that operated on uniformity and predictability, where nothing interesting or exciting ever happened.

Especially not to Tyr.

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Chapter two

The scent of old leather and crisp pages filled the library, along with the strong odor of lemon and disinfectant. A hint of sweet magnolia lingered near the entrance, carried inside on the spring breeze as patrons came and went throughout the day.

Industrial air conditioners worked overtime, their loud hum heard throughout the building as they struggled to chase away the Louisiana heat. Behind the reception desk, a grandfather clock ticked down the hour, while creaks and groans joined the symphony as the place settled in for the night.

It was Sunne Tanaka's favorite time of day.

He enjoyed interacting with the townspeople—whether that be discussing books or local gossip—but he always looked forward to closing time, when he had the library to himself.

A gentle rain pattered against the windowpanes, streaking the fogged glass and creating halos around the streetlamps outside. On the upper floor, a single light burned, casting shadows over the railing of the wide staircase.

Other staff members often claimed to feel unsettled in the place after dark, but Sunne had always found it peaceful. Soothing.

At twenty-four, books remained his first and only love. The real world could never compete with the thrill of an unsolved mystery or the lure of a well-constructed fantasy adventure. Besides, he understood books. The plot, the structure, the flow...it

made sense.

People? Not so much.

As he moved about, reshelving books and dusting shelves, he tried to be as unintrusive as possible out of respect for the residents. While he had never actually seen a ghost, he remained a firm believer in the afterlife, and the library purportedly played host to at least three spirits.

He'd hate it if someone came into his home and started stomping around like a wounded rhino. He figured it only made sense to show the dead the same courtesy.

When he finished, he headed back to the circulation desk to retrieve a box of new arrivals. Thankfully, they had already been logged into the system and indexed. They just needed to be shelved in the restricted section.

According to the head librarian, they had always maintained a collection of spellbooks and magical reference materials. Miss Opal had told him that before the Awakening—when paranormals had come out of the secrecy closet—that kind of information had been hidden away like contraband.

Now, fifteen years later, the world had changed. Witches and elves came through the doors every day. The library hosted special nighttime hours twice a week for their vampire patrons.

At the same time, a lot of stigma still existed around magic. In an effort to serve the magical clientele while also navigating public opinion, Miss Opal had created a restricted section in an old conference room, away from casual browsers.

That way, people who wanted to access the books had the option. They just couldn't remove them from the library.

Looking through the box, he chuckled at the odd assortment of new additions. A magical cookbook. A large tome on the history of magic and witchcraft in the South. A guide to communing with spirits. And a self-help book with a bright red cover and big block letters titled *How to Hex Your Ex*.

Retrieving the key to the restricted section from the center drawer, he slipped it into the front pocket of his jeans. With the box cradled in his arms, he made his way past the rows of bookshelves and quiet study areas to the back of the building.

Situated next to the public restrooms, the forest-green door with mahogany trim didn't look remarkable or mysterious. If not for the Restricted sign posted on the wall beside it, no one would guess the room beyond housed anything more exciting than cleaning supplies and extra toilet paper.

Balancing the box on his hip, he unlocked the door and repocketed the key before turning the knob. The moment the door swung open, he knew something was wrong.

Heavy bookshelves lined the walls, interspersed with glass display cases, while cozy chairs and small tables filled the center of the room. His gaze was immediately drawn to a table by the arched windows, to the lamplight that illuminated the otherwise dark space.

Seated in a straight-back chair, a mane of strawberry blond locks tangled around her face, a young girl had her head bent over a stained leather-bound book. Though he couldn't make out her words, he could see her lips moving, could hear her voice echoing in a frantic murmur.

She hadn't noticed his arrival.

"Lizzie? How did you get in here?"

Elizabeth Nelsen had been a regular at the library since he had started working there. Sixteen now, with a new driver's license and her own vehicle, her visits had become even more frequent since her birthday. And concerningly, had involved a lot of trips to the restricted section.

She didn't look up or acknowledge him. Instead, she spoke faster, her cadence hurried and clumsy as she stumbled over words she clearly didn't understand.

"Lizzie, look at me."

Still, she chanted, her face so close to the book, her lips practically kissed the pages.

After placing the case of new releases on top of one of the display shelves, he shuffled closer, moving slowly so as not to startle her. Nearing the desk, he could better make out her frenzied mumblings, but it only raised more questions. He recognized a few words and phrases as Latin, but he didn't know what most of them meant.

Judging by the charged atmosphere and icy temperatures that enveloped that corner of the room, however, he had a feeling it was nothing good.

"You need to stop." He placed his hand on the edge of the desk but didn't reach for her. "Lizzie, look at me."

Instead, she mumbled even faster, her voice rising in volume, every syllable laced with desperation. Trails of vapor streamed from her lips as the temperature continued to plummet, and veins of ice encircled the spellbook, spreading across the surface of the desk.

While Sunne didn't know exactly what she hoped to accomplish, he had a vague idea as to what had started her down this path.

The past year had been a dark one for the entire town, but especially for Lizzie, beginning with an accident on a construction site at the edge of town. Three men, including her father, had been lost in the tragedy, and the rumors that followed only made matters worse. It had started with whispers, with quiet speculation, but the ponderings had quickly grown louder and more confident with each passing day.

Many of the townspeople had blamed Lizzie's father for the incident. Some claimed he'd been negligent. Others insisted he had known the risks but didn't care. Whether true or not, it didn't matter. Their musings wouldn't change what had happened, and no one had stopped to consider the effect their words had on a grieving teenage girl.

Then, barely six months later, Lizzie's mother had remarried, rekindling the gossip mill. While the town had collectively decided they liked her new husband, they disapproved of the timing of the union.

Not uncommon in a small town, where Saturday night mishaps made Sunday morning headlines. That didn't make it right, though, and he would never understand that kind of callous disregard for someone else's pain.

At the same time, no one talked about the fact that Lizzie had visibly lost weight, or that she looked paler these days. They didn't mention that she had been skipping school frequently, or that her grades had been on a steady decline since the start of the new year.

"Lizzie, please stop. Talk to me. Whatever's going on, this isn't the answer."

Ice crystals crawled across the carpet and up the walls, spreading like glistening spiderwebs. The windows crackled as the glass froze beneath an opaque layer of frost, and the light from the desk lamp surged and flickered.

A heaviness settled over the room, a physical manifestation of the magic Lizzie

conjured. Sunne's shoulder rounded from the weight, and pressure built in his temples as he fought to pull oxygen into his lungs.

Lizzie's fingers had turned an inky black where they gripped the edges of the grimoire, the rot spreading across her skin like a disease. A trickle of crimson seeped from her nose and spilled over her lips, and while she didn't seem to notice, Sunne couldn't ignore it.

He had tried to be gentle, to give her agency to do the smart thing, to make the right choice, but he refused to watch as she continued to hurt herself.

"Enough!" Lunging across the desk, he reached for the book, only to be knocked back by an unseen force.

Lizzie's head snapped up, her powder-blue eyes wide and glazed. She opened her mouth again, but no words came out this time. Only a rasping, inhuman scream that resonated through every corner of the building and rattled the windows.

Not knowing what else to do, Sunne rushed forward again, his hands reaching for the spellbook. Nothing tried to stop him this time. No magic forced him back, but the tome glowed with a blinding light as he tried to wrest it from her grasp.

The pages heated beneath his touch, scorching his fingers and palms, but he didn't let go. "Lizzie, stop!"

Tendrils of green smoke curled from the book, as if the very words had been burned away, and a deafening, high-pitched whine filled his ears. The pressure in his head continued to build, the pain nearly unbearable, and every panted breath came shallower than the last.

They wrestled for control, Lizzie fighting him with an unnatural strength. Fire seared

through his hands and up his arms, though it felt more like being burned from the inside out. Still, he kept fighting.

“Give it to me, damn it!” Tensing every muscle, he yanked on his half of the book, rending it right down the middle.

A heartbeat of stillness followed, a sigh before the storm.

Then he was flying, soaring backward through the air from the force of the explosion.

Glass shattered. The walls cracked. Shelves toppled, spilling their contents across the floor, and the library groaned as it shook from the blast.

And then...quiet.

Dust from the crumbling drywall floated in the air, the particles illuminated by the streetlights outside. A humid breeze swept across the destruction, rustling the pages of open books, and rain soaked the carpet beneath the broken windows.

Sprawled on his back on the other side of the room, Sunne closed his eyes and tried to assess the damage. Surprisingly, however, he felt fine. The pressure in his head had vanished. His chest didn't feel like it had a boulder sitting on it anymore, and his hands had stopped burning.

He moved, only a little at first, but grew more confident when everything appeared to be in working order. No broken bones or aching muscles. No weird pains or bleeding lacerations. Nothing that would indicate he had just survived a magical attack.

“Lizzie?”

With a gasp, he clambered to his feet, squinting into the darkness as he searched for

the teenager. It didn't take him long to find her beneath a broken desk, her hair fanned around her head, and those bright blue eyes open but unseeing.

"No, no, no. Lizzie? Lizzie, say something." He rushed to her side, his heart lodged in his throat. "You're okay. Everything is going to be okay."

He reached for the splintered wood, intending to lift it off her, but froze when his hands sank right through the surface. What the fuck? Shaking his head to clear it, he tried again. And again. Each time with the same confusing results.

"Sunne?"

He jerked around, his eyes rounding when he found Lizzie standing by the closed door, her expression a mixture of guilt and confusion. His relief lasted for only a moment, though. Glancing back at the lifeless body on the floor, his heart sank as his mind reached for an answer it couldn't quite grasp.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I just wanted to talk to my dad. I didn't mean to...to..."

"Hey, it's okay."

It wasn't. Not even a little, but what else was he supposed to say?

Stepping over broken furniture and torn books, he reached out, relieved when his hands didn't pass through her like they had the desk. He pulled the girl into his arms, offering her comfort in the only way he knew how.

"Everything is going to be okay."

"Indeed," came a deep, rumbling voice from behind him. "Everything will be fine now."

Spinning on his heels, Sunne held his arm out, ushering Lizzie behind him as he eyed the male standing in the middle of the room. At least a head taller than him, his wide frame blocking the light from the center window, the newcomer arched an eyebrow, returning his assessing gaze with a haughty grin.

“You have questions,” he surmised.

“A few,” Sunne confirmed, pushing Lizzie back toward the door. “Who are you?”

“My name is Bane. You can think of me as your personal Reaper, here to escort you to the afterlife.”

“The...” It took a second too long for the words to register, but when they did, Sunne immediately began shaking his head. “No, this isn’t right. She’s just a kid.”

“A dead kid.”

Tactless much? “Look, just take me.”

“I plan on it.”

“But let her stay. She doesn’t deserve this. She didn’t know what she was doing.”

“Debatable.”

Somehow, he didn’t think punching a Reaper in the face would end well for him, but that did nothing to tame the desire. “Will you just listen?”

“No. Now, are you coming or not?” Bane lifted his arm and glanced down at his bare wrist. “I have places to be. Other souls to reap.”

Sunne straightened, his eyes narrowing and his chin jutting in defiance. “You’re kind of an asshole, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told.” Bane dropped his arm and adjusted the cuffs of his dark suit jacket. “Ready?”

“No, I’m not ready .”

“Sunne, it’s okay.” Gripping his arm, Lizzie pushed it down to his side and stepped forward to stand beside him. When she spoke again, it was to the Reaper. “Will I get to see my dad?”

Bane’s eyes softened, and the hard lines of his face relaxed into something almost kind. “That’s not for me to say, but you certainly won’t find him here.”

“Then I’m ready.”

“Wait.” Sunne held his hands up. “Just pause for a second, okay?” Taking Lizzie by the shoulders, he pulled her around to face him. “Think about what you’re saying. You have your whole life ahead of you.”

“Not to be a stickler for details, but she really doesn’t.”

Sunne shot the Reaper a cold glare, but otherwise ignored him. “What about your mom?”

Her smile was a little sad, a little self-deprecating, but she didn’t look afraid. “She has Andrew now. He’ll make sure she’s okay.”

“But what—”

“Sunne, I didn’t mean for this to happen, but it did. It’s over, and we can’t take it back.”

“Listen to her,” Bane interjected. “She’s smart.”

“I’m just so sorry you got caught in the middle of it,” she continued. “If anyone should get to stay, it’s you.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

Yeah, being dead kind of sucked, but it honestly wasn’t the worst thing to ever happen to him. Hell, he doubted anyone would even notice his absence.

“Look, I really do have to go. You can come with me and have a shot at a pretty decent afterlife, or you can stay here and haunt the library.” Bane pulled his shoulders back and adjusted his scarlet tie. “It’s up to you, but decide now.”

As much as he loved the old library, he had no wish to become another footnote in the town’s mythos. Besides, the great beyond was supposed to be all singing cherubs and streets paved in gold. How bad could it be?

Taking Lizzie’s hand, he nodded. “Okay, we’re ready, but when we—”

The rest of the sentence became lodged in his throat when the library dissolved, the walls melting around him, leaving him standing atop a hill of black sand. Granted, he had never teleported before—or died, for that matter—but somehow, he had expected the experience to be...different.

“Damn,” Bane muttered. “Overshot the landing.” Then he shrugged and turned away. “Oh, well. I’m sure you’ll figure it out.” He glanced over his shoulder and tipped an imaginary hat. “Good luck.”

“Wait, this isn’t—” But the Reaper was already gone, vanishing without so much as a disturbance of the air. “Asshole.”

“What do we do now?” Lizzie asked, her fingers digging into the top of his hand. “Should we ask someone?”

“Who? Where?” All he saw was endless miles of onyx sand and a vast river aglow with a haunting blue light.

“Um, Sunne?” She tugged on his hand. “Turn around.”

“What are you—oh.”

Okay, he hadn’t expected there to be a whole ass town in the middle of the nothingness. Although “town” might be a bit too generous. He would barely call it a village. A settlement, maybe?

While it did, indeed, have streets, they were paved with smooth stones rather than gold, and he didn’t see a single chubby-cheeked angel in sight, singing or otherwise.

He couldn’t deny it. He was definitely dead, and frankly, the entire experience was vastly underwhelming.

Still, he supposed it could have been worse. They could have been dropped into the full fire-and-brimstone experience. So, silver lining and whatnot.

“Come on.” Smiling, he gave Lizzie’s hand a light tug. “I’m sure there’s someone here who can tell us what’s going on.”

He had taken only a single step, right onto the edge of the stone street, when a mountain of a man emerged between two of the rickety buildings. With thick, corded

muscles and a permanent scowl etched into the lines of his face, he had danger written all over him.

But he also happened to be the only person in sight.

“Hey,” Sunne said, adopting the same cherry expression he used to greet patrons at the library. “We’re a little lost.”

The guy paused at the mouth of the alley, his big frame visibly tense. A thick beard covered the lower half of his face, obscuring his features, but his eyes pinched at the corners as if Sunne’s very existence offended him.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” the stranger said, his voice quiet with a hint of gravel.

Obviously. He thought he’d made that clear. “Right. So, uh, if you could just point us in the right direction, that would be great.”

The man’s eyes—one a deep, rich brown, and the other a bright, burning amber—flickered to his and Lizzie’s clasped hands, and a low growl sounded from his chest.

Okay, weird, and kind of rude. Sure, the guy was stupid hot, but he really needed to work on his people skills.

Lizzie immediately shook off his grip and took a measured step to the side, creating distance between them.

Sunne sighed as he shot her a wounded glare.

“Traitor,” he muttered from the side of his mouth before focusing on the male again.

“Anyway, if you could just tell us where we’re supposed to go, we’ll be on our way.”

“Hey, Tyr, wait up.” Another muscle-bound male dressed in solid black jogged out of the alleyway, pausing across the street when he spotted Sunne and Lizzie. “You’re new.” Striding forward, he offered his hand, his lips stretching into a grin. “I’m Rune. Welcome to the Underworld.”

“I’m Sunne.”

He reached forward but froze when the other man—Tyr, apparently—growled again. Tired, confused, and just wanting answers, he pulled his hand back and huffed out an irritated breath.

“Seriously, what is your problem?”

Tyr’s entire body trembled, from anger or something else, it wasn’t clear. A pale light glowed from his dual-colored eyes, and his upper lip peeled back to reveal an impressive set of elongated canines.

Scary.

Kind of hot.

Utterly unhelpful.

“Well?” Sunne demanded. “Say something.”

Another deep, harsh growl spilled from his lips, and when he finally spoke, it was only a single word.

“Mine.”

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Chapter three

Drowning in an ocean of conflicting and unfamiliar emotions, Tyr couldn't move. He couldn't think. Nothing made sense, but at the same time, he had the unshakeable conviction that his entire life had been leading to this moment.

Long-buried instincts clawed their way to the surface, each one vying for dominance. A possessiveness of this stranger with an aura as sunny as his name. A fierce protectiveness that made his vow to the Nightstar family look like a pinky promise in comparison.

And the absolute certainty that this vibrant human would change him in irrevocable ways.

"Well, shit." Turning to Sunne, Rune rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. "I hope you were planning to stay."

Tyr waited, his heart pounding, for Sunne's answer.

But his mate didn't respond. Instead, eyes the color of melted chocolate bore into him, assessing him, as if Sunne could see every secret written in his soul.

Finally, he looked away, his gaze flickering to Rune, and he nodded. "I'm staying." He gestured to the girl beside him. "She's not."

A strand of glossy black hair fell over one eye when he moved his head, and Tyr had the insane urge to reach out and brush it away, offended that it obstructed his view.

Guessing his touch would be unwelcome given the circumstances, he curled his fingers into a fist and rooted his feet to the hard stones beneath his boots.

With a nod, Rune crossed the narrow street to stand beside the female. “Come on, kid.” He jerked his head to the side, toward the river. “I have a feeling things are about to get messy.”

To her credit, she didn’t immediately agree. Stepping past him, she stopped right in front of Sunne, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

“I’m really sorry this happened to you. I would take it back if I could.”

Sunne smiled and shook his head. “Actually, I think I’m right where I’m supposed to be.” He didn’t turn, but he sent a brief glance at Tyr from the corner of his eye. “Go find your dad.”

The girl bit her lip, clearly uncertain.

“Really,” Sunne assured her. “Everything is fine. I’ll probably even see you in a few days.”

Tyr couldn’t tell if he really thought that or if he had said it for her benefit. He really hoped it was the latter.

Hades had agreed to let him and the other Guardians remain in the Underworld with Orrin...under one condition. They could never cross the river. The god hadn’t said why, nor had he elaborated on what would happen if they broke the rule.

None of them wanted to find out, though.

“I’m going to hug her,” Sunne told him, his eyebrows winging toward his hairline.

“Don’t growl.”

Tyr could only nod. He had nothing personal against the teenager. Hell, he didn’t even know her name. He just didn’t particularly like her touching his mate. Despite knowing how irrational that sounded, after being sucker punched by fate, it didn’t really change anything.

But he could keep it together while they said goodbye. As long as Sunne didn’t make it a habit of hugging strangers, it would be fine. Probably.

As he waited—every cell in his body on lockdown—it occurred to him that it should have felt weird being mated to a dead guy. Mostly, however, he just hated that he hadn’t been able to prevent Sunne’s fate. And sure, if the guy had been a ghost without a corporeal body, maybe things would be different.

Thankfully, in the Underworld, souls pretty much existed the same way they had in life. The Tower even had indoor plumbing. No one knew exactly how it worked. Like everything else, it just did.

“You’re an Otherling,” Sunne said once the girl had disappeared down the hill with Rune.

It wasn’t a question, but Tyr nodded anyway.

“Shifter?”

Technically correct. He nodded again.

“Not a regular shifter, though.” Sunne smiled and took a step toward him. “I’ve never seen a shifter’s eyes glow like that.”

Tyr grunted his approval. His mate was perceptive, and he seemed to have a better understanding of Otherlings than a lot of humans.

“No, not a regular shifter,” he confirmed. “I guess you would call me a berserker. A bear shifter—”

“With magic,” Sunne finished for him, his eyes rounding. “That’s pretty badass.”

Yes, but not in the way the guy probably meant it. The intrinsic magic that flowed through him let him heal in real time, making him nearly indestructible. He was faster, stronger, and more powerful than even his fellow Otherlings, but he couldn’t cast spells or move objects with a flick of his wrist.

Sunne shoved one hand into the pocket of his jeans and rubbed his other up and down his arm. “I just work at a library. Well, I used to.” Sadness flickered across his face, and he shook his head. “Poor Miss Opal.”

Tyr frowned. “The girl?”

“No.” In response, he laughed in a quiet, musical way. “The girl is Lizzie. Miss Opal is the head librarian. Between you and me, she kind of looks like she died years ago, and someone reanimated her corpse. She is still very much alive, though.”

Tyr’s lips twitched. Not quite a smile, but he found his mate’s conspiratorial tone amusing. The male had a gift for words, and it seemed fitting that he had worked with books before his death. He had never met this Miss Opal, but he could picture her clearly from Sunne’s description.

“And you’re worried about her?” he asked, trying to understand what had elicited the moment of sadness.

“Not her exactly.” Sunne rounded his shoulders and rubbed more vigorously at his arm. “I’m more worried about what this might do to the library.” A sigh bubbled from his lips, and he shook his head. “It’s complicated.”

He assumed “this” was in reference to Sunne’s death, which he now guessed had happened at his place of work. And it somehow involved a teenage girl? Not the strangest way someone had ever died, but he did have questions.

All of which could wait.

“You’re cold.”

Everyone acclimated after a while, but he remembered how uncomfortable it had been in the beginning. It wasn’t a normal cold either. It didn’t cause goosebumps or turn breath into smoke. It didn’t freeze the water or fog the windows.

It was the kind of cold that burned, that burrowed beneath the skin and numbed the bones. The kind of cold that lingered in the soul long after the physical pain had passed.

“A little,” Sunne answered with an embarrassed grin that made his nose scrunch.

He didn’t have a coat or a blanket to offer, but he could provide him shelter and something warm to drink.

“Follow me.”

He wanted to take Sunne’s hand, maybe wrap an arm around him to shield him from the brutal cold. He did neither of those things. Without waiting for a response, he turned and strode down the alleyway.

By the gods, he had never felt so fucking inadequate. He would eviscerate anyone who dared to breathe wrong at his mate, but he couldn't even give him a moment of gentleness. He had been trained for battle, for violence. No one had ever taught him how to love someone.

Love?

Damn, he was getting ahead of himself. They had met five minutes ago, and he didn't even know the guy's last name. In fact, he knew almost nothing about him. Just enough to realize that he didn't deserve him, but he also couldn't walk away.

"Hey, Tyr. It's Tyr, right?" Footsteps padded behind him, scuffing the stones and scattering debris. "Wait up. Where are we going?"

"The diner."

Cian always had a fire burning inside for newcomers, along with a warm smile and a hot cup of coffee. He figured Orrin would still be there as well, and the prince would be able to give Sunne what he couldn't.

Answers.

Reassurance.

A spark of light in the darkness.

"There's a diner here? For dead people? Do dead people eat? Can I eat?"

"Yes, you can eat." Stepping out of the alley, he turned onto the main street, a smile playing over his lips. No one ever asked these types of questions. "The food is kind of terrible, though, so I don't know if that's a good thing."

Sunne laughed, the sound smooth as honey and just as sweet. “Bummer. I guess I’ll have to give up my cinnamon roll addiction.”

“You like cinnamon rolls?” He would have to ask Helen about stocking them in the bakery. And whoever else he needed to talk to about getting the ingredients.

“More than like.” Sunne chuckled again. “It’s a bit of a problem, really. I—oh.”

Alerted by his gasp and the sound of his feet scraping across the road, Tyr turned just in time to catch him when he tripped over a loose stone and stumbled forward.

“Nice save.” He didn’t pull away immediately but tilted his head back, his eyes wide, and his cheeks a delicate shade of pink. “Thank you.”

Gods, the male felt amazing, a solid, comforting weight against his chest, and he fit so perfectly against him, like he had always belonged there. That close, he was even more beautiful, more radiant, and the scent of sun-kissed wildflowers poured off him, filling Tyr’s head and invading his senses.

The fragrance brought to mind the fields he’d played in as a child. Of warm days and misty nights on the fjords. Of a place he hadn’t seen in centuries.

It reminded him of...home.

“Let’s get you somewhere warm.”

Though he looked like he wanted to say something, after a moment, Sunne bit his bottom lip and nodded. He still didn’t pull away, though. Instead, he stayed pressed to Tyr’s side as they navigated the twisted street to the diner.

Whether for warmth, comfort, or something else, he didn’t know, but he wasn’t about

to question it. Not when it felt so damn right.

“So, how does all this work?” Sunne asked.

Tyr sighed. He hated the question, and honestly, he had expected more originality from his mate. Still, he couldn’t fault him, and he found that, coming from Sunne, the inquiry didn’t annoy him as much as it usually did.

“Typically, souls arrive and take the ferry across the river. There, they’ll be judged and—”

“No, I get that,” Sunne interrupted. “I mean, this place.” He waved a hand toward the row of buildings. “There are probably thousands of souls here, right? So, where is everyone?”

A slow smile stretched his lips, and he had the insane urge to laugh. Sunne wasn’t like the others, and he never should have doubted him. Instead of the same boring, canned questions, his mate wanted to know the secrets behind the curtains. Tyr liked that.

“Most of them have already turned in for the night, but there are a few still out and about.” As an example, he pointed to the wide window of the tavern. “See?”

“It’s nighttime?” Tilting his head back, Sunne stared up at the obsidian sky. “How can you tell? And where the hell is the light coming from?”

This time, Tyr couldn’t help himself. He did laugh. Quiet, rusty from disuse, but a laugh all the same.

“You get used to it after a while, and as for the light?” Despite no obvious source, a pale, ethereal glow illuminated everything from the town to the river, blanketing the

village in endless twilight. “No one knows. It just is . You’ll find a lot of things are like that here.”

“So, you’re saying this place provides what people need? When they need it?”

Tyr paused and stared down at his mate. “It would seem so.”

He had been floundering, sinking in his own futility. Then magic, fate, the Underworld, or something infinitely more mysterious—he didn’t know, and he didn’t care—had given him exactly what he needed.

Even if the delivery had been somewhat unconventional.

Sunne stared back, eyes round and unblinking. “Why do I get the feeling you’re not talking about bags of rice and paper napkins?”

“Because you’re perceptive.” Tightening his arm around Sunne’s shoulders, he started walking again, ushering him down the street. “We’re almost there.”

They continued in agreeable silence, but as they approached the diner, Sunne stiffened and slowed his pace.

“What’s wrong?”

“Umm, that guy is staring at us.”

Leaning against the corner of the hut, arms folded across his chest, Aster tracked them through narrowed eyes as he raked a calculating gaze over Sunne. It couldn’t have been more than fifteen minutes since Tyr had left him at the back booth, yet there he was. Apparently, Orrin hadn’t been as successful as he’d hoped.

“Do you know him?” Sunne asked.

Tyr sighed. “He’s new here. Arrived just before you did.”

“Oh, that sucks.” He still held himself rigidly, and he pressed more heavily against Tyr’s side. “Why is he glaring at me like I stole his lunch?”

“Maybe he thinks you’re someone else,” he lied. Whatever Aster’s problem, he had no desire to make it his own.

“Picked up another stray?” Aster called, pushing away from the building.

“I’m Sunne.” Standing straighter, he pushed his hand out in offering. “I’m new here, too.”

“Hey, sunshine. I’m Aster.” He took the proffered hand, a smile curving his lips that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You must be something special.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Pulling his arm back, Sunne pressed against Tyr’s side again. “There’s nothing special about me. I’m not even an Otherling.”

Aster’s gaze flashed to Tyr, then back. “Yeah, well, you got a warmer welcome than I did.”

Sunne might not be an Otherling, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t special. Even if the human hadn’t been his mate, Tyr still would have preferred him to Aster. That wasn’t Sunne’s fault, though, and if the asshole had an issue with it, he could take it up with him.

Before he could open his mouth to tell the mage exactly where he could stick his opinions, Sunne spoke again.

“That sucks, and I feel for you, I do. But if you don’t stop eye-fucking my mate, that’s going to be the least of your worries.”

Tyr turned away to hide his grin, but he couldn’t stop his shoulders from shaking with silent laughter. The outburst had been completely unexpected, but not in the least unwarranted.

He anticipated anger from Aster, maybe a snarky quip. When he looked back, however, the witch wore a genuine, almost admiring expression.

“I like you.” Then he walked away, continuing down the street, a quiet chuckle echoing behind him.

“Oh, my god.” Sunne buried his face in his hands with a groan. “What is wrong with me? Why did I just say that?”

If he had to guess, he’d say the thinly veiled threat had manifested from their mating bond. While not noble in the least, knowing the guy felt just as territorial over him filled him with a deep sense of satisfaction. Still, probably not what Sunne wanted to hear right then.

“He tends to have that effect on people.” Leaving it at that, he rubbed Sunne’s arm in comfort—the little gestures becoming easier by the second—and guided him to the entrance of the diner. “Come on, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Tyr chuckled again but didn’t comment.

Inside the shop, he led Sunne over to the fireplace on the far wall, the tension in his neck easing when his mate sighed and held his hands out to the flames. Grabbing one

of the threadbare blankets from the back of a wooden chair, he wrapped it around the male's shoulders and encouraged him to sit.

"Wait here."

Sunne snapped his head up, his eyes too big, too pleading.

"Stay by the fire." Unable to resist, he pressed his palm to the side of his mate's face, cradling his delicate cheek and loving the way Sunne leaned into the touch. "I'll be right back. I promise."

"Okay." Before he could pull away, Sunne grabbed him by the wrist, holding him in place. "Thank you."

Uncomfortable with the gratitude, Tyr grunted and dipped his head before going to find Orrin. While he got the impression that Sunne understood the significance of the connection between them, they still needed to talk about the M-bomb that fate had dropped in their laps.

Then he could explain that Sunne didn't need to thank him. He didn't even need to ask. Whatever he needed or wanted, it was already his.

On his way to the back booth, he paused at the counter and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Can you get him some coffee?"

Cian's gaze flickered to the fireplace. "Of course. Sugar? Cream?"

"Uh..." Damn, he didn't know. And he hated that he didn't know. "He likes cinnamon rolls."

The shopkeeper's eyebrows drew together before a knowing expression settled over

his face. "I'll take care of it."

Tyr rapped his knuckles against the battered countertop as he walked away. "Thanks."

"Hello again," Orrin said with a quiet chuckle when he arrived at the booth. "Another soul?"

"Yes."

Orrin nodded and motioned toward the bench seat on the other side of the table. "Bring them over."

"No." Clearing his throat, Tyr tried again, minus the growl this time. "He's cold."

The prince eyed him for a moment before looking toward the fireplace with a frown. "I see."

He didn't comment on the odd behavior, though he had clearly clocked it. Tyr never personally escorted souls to the diner. When they followed him, like Aster, he passed them off to Orrin without drama or fanfare. Not once during all their time in the Underworld had it been any other way.

He sure as hell never demanded the Nightstar prince and Guardian of Lost Souls go to a new resident instead of the other way around.

"In that case, let's not keep him waiting." Rising gracefully, Orrin shook out his long robes and nodded. "Lead the way."

Relieved by the easy response, he strode back across the room to Sunne's side, leaving Orrin to follow after him at a more leisurely pace. Grabbing two extra chairs

from a nearby table, he placed one right next to his mate and the other a little farther away.

Orrin might be his prince, and he trusted the male with his life, but until he got a better handle on his emotions, it would be better for him to keep his distance.

“Cian is bringing coffee.” He settled into his seat and pulled the ends of the blanket more securely around Sunne’s shoulders. “Are you hungry?” The food didn’t taste the best, but it was filling. “Maybe some soup?”

Grinning, Sunne took his hand, cradling it between both of his own. “Coffee is fine for now. Thank you.”

Orrin arrived then, his gaze going from their clasped hands to the chair Tyr had placed a few feet away. When he looked back, there was a gleam in his gray eyes, but he simply offered Sunne a slight bow of his head and took his seat.

“Oh, hi.” He shifted around to face the prince, but he didn’t release Tyr’s hand. “I’m Sunne.”

“Sunne, this is Pr—uh, Orrin.” He shrugged when the elf arched an eyebrow at him. “He’s kind of in charge around here.”

Orrin snorted delicately. “That’s a generous description. I just help souls cross the river.”

Inching closer to Tyr’s side, Sunne shook his head. “I don’t want to cross the river. I want to stay here.”

Orrin’s smile was kind, if a little sad. “I understand why you feel that way, but—”

“No.” Sunne shook his head again, his fingers biting into Tyr’s hand. “I won’t cross.”

Tyr felt torn. On one hand, he had just found his mate, and he would fight the mortal world, the Underworld, and every realm in between to keep him. On the flip side of that, however, he knew what Orrin had been trying to say.

Sunne didn’t belong there.

And the only reason he stayed...was for him.

“Very well,” Orrin said after a long silence.

He held his hand out, producing what looked like an old-fashioned skeleton key with a leather tag. The numbers 7714 glowed across the back of the tanned hide, the ghostly blue light glinting off the bronze metal.

Sunne didn’t reach for it. “What is that?”

“If you’re staying—” Orrin glanced at Tyr, his expression unreadable. “—you’ll need a place to live.”

“Really? I can stay?” He wasn’t looking at the prince, though. He stared up at Tyr, his face shining with hope.

Though it made him a selfish bastard, he couldn’t say no. Oh, he should. If he had any honor at all, he absolutely would. Sunne deserved so much better than a bleak half-existence in the village, but he couldn’t send him away. Not now. Not when his mate smiled at him like that.

“Yes, lelien.” He brushed a strand of hair away from Sunne’s brow and caressed his cheek, his heart aching at how absolutely perfect he was. “You can stay.”

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Chapter four

C curled up in the reading nook of his new apartment, Sunne flipped the next page in his book and smiled.

When Tyr had told him the Underworld provided what the residents needed, he had been picturing basic accommodations and maybe a hot meal twice a day. What he had actually received went beyond anything he could have imagined.

In life, he had rented an overpriced studio apartment with a kitchenette and an air conditioner that frequently stopped working in the middle of the summer.

In death, he had upgraded to a fully furnished, one-bedroom unit that boasted a real kitchen and a shower that didn't make him want to launch himself out of a window. Decorated in his favorite colors of teal and black with bright pops of silver and gold, it wasn't just an apartment.

It was his sanctuary.

He didn't know how any of it worked. The lamps that shined without bulbs. The stove that cooked without gas or electricity. The hot water that streamed from the showerhead despite a lack of adequate plumbing. None of it made sense.

The moment he had stepped into the warmth of Unit 7714 and spotted the floor-to-ceiling bookshelf lined with all his favorite titles, he had decided not to question it. If the Underworld wanted him to have pizzas in his freezer and a king-sized bed that cradled him like an old lover, who was he to refuse?

Although finding an obscenely large bottle of lube among the other toiletries in the ensuite had been a bit of a shock. Grateful, but also ridiculously embarrassed, he had stashed it in the cabinet beneath the sink before Tyr could see it.

While it would probably sound unhinged to most people, being blasted out of the library and into the afterlife had been one of the best things to ever happen to him. Sure, never seeing the sun again kind of sucked, and he absolutely detested the cold, but if he hadn't died, he wouldn't have met his mate.

And if an eternity of darkness was the price he had to pay to be with the Guardian, he would do so happily and without complaint.

In the three days since he had dropped into the village, Tyr hadn't left his side. In fact, it had gotten to the point that even his semi-sentient apartment had decided the guy lived there now.

It had been little things at first, like extra space in the closet, beer in the fridge, and a second toothbrush on the bathroom vanity. Then the place itself had started to change. Everything from the cabinets to the chairs had been raised by at least three inches. The doorways had expanded, and splashes of cerulean had started creeping into the color palette.

Just that morning, he had awoken to find a heavy cedar chest beside the front door, the inside filled with swords, daggers, and other weapons he couldn't name. He didn't know why the shifter needed a whole arsenal at his disposal, but Tyr had seemed happy about it, so he hadn't said anything.

“Hey, lelien , are you ready?”

He sighed through his nose, and his heart beat a little faster as a shivery feeling spread through him, just like it always did when Tyr called him by the endearment.

The first time he had asked what it meant, his mate had deflected the question. Eventually, however, he had confessed that it came from an old magical dialect and loosely translated to “my soul.”

While he found the meaning beautiful and quite fitting given the circumstances, the word itself didn’t matter. He liked it because it made him feel special, because Tyr had chosen it for him and only him.

“I’m ready.”

Closing his book, he placed it on the window seat and stood, stretching his arms over his head to loosen the tight muscles in his back. It was little things like that—sore muscles, racing pulse, the occasional yawn—that still weirded him out. He had spent hours trying to identify something different about himself, but everything still functioned the way it always had. In short, he didn’t feel dead.

In fact, he had never felt more alive.

“Why are we going to the pier?” he asked as he pulled on a pair of fur-lined boots. Tyr kept assuring him he would get used to the cold, but so far, that hadn’t happened.

“It’s supply day.” Removing a black wool coat from a hook by the door, Tyr held it up for him to slip his arms into.

“Oh, cool. Who brings it?”

“Technically? No one. We don’t know where it comes from.” Tyr shrugged as he pulled the door open and ushered him across the threshold. “But every seven days, a new drop appears at the dock without fail.”

“Well, who places the order?” Surely that person had a contact or some idea where

the materials came from.

His mate chuckled, the sound lighter and more natural than it had been when they'd first met. "There's no order. No special requests. The shopkeepers just have to take what they can get."

"Why?" Frankly, it sounded dumb. "My apartment supplies everything I want before I even know I want it."

"I don't know, lelien ."

Fair, but he must have a theory. "Best guess?"

"Do you have your key?"

Sunne patted his zippered coat pocket and nodded.

"My best guess is that souls aren't meant to stay in the village," Tyr answered as he pulled the door closed behind them. "It's not supposed to be enjoyable."

"Then they should probably rethink these units. They are ridiculously intuitive."

"No, they're not. Most of them aren't like yours. For most of the souls here, these apartments are shelter and nothing more."

Tyr had given him a lot of information, which elicited just as many emotions. Yet, his mind and instincts decided to latch onto just one of the ideas.

"Been in a lot of apartments, have you?"

"It's not like that." Laughing again, Tyr caught him by the wrist and whirled him

around.

Sunne stared at the hollow between his collarbones, refusing to meet his gaze. Childish, but he couldn't really find it in himself to care at the moment.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about the fact that you apparently think I'm fucking half the building." The hint of a growl threaded his words, adding emphasis without threat.

"I didn't say that." He'd thought it, but as far as he knew, Tyr couldn't read minds. "Maybe you're projecting."

In the next heartbeat, he found his back pressed against the wall of the corridor, a mountain of muscle anchoring him in place. "You're jealous."

"You're jealous," he shot back, his entire body short-circuiting from the male's proximity.

Strong yet gentle fingers slipped under his chin, urging his head up until he had no choice but to finally meet his mate's gaze. A sexy, sinful smile curled one side of Tyr's mouth, but the look in his eyes didn't match the playful smirk. Instead, they burned, shining with a feral light and filled with unspoken promises.

"I like it," he said, his voice quiet, throaty. "It's cute."

His other hand landed on the wall, caging him in as he bent, pressing closer, his lips barely a breath away.

Sunne froze, his head spinning and his heart throbbing in his throat. Fire coursed through his veins, singeing and consuming, and while he ached, it didn't hurt. Gods,

his lips were so close. Dangerously close. He could lean in, close that last inch, and claim what he wanted.

He could...but he didn't.

Nerves kept him shackled, immobile, and whatever happened next, it was up to Tyr.

“Hey, Sunne! I was just—oh. Oops.”

Or the jackass who lived across the hall.

Sunne felt the heat creep into his cheeks at being caught in such a compromising position, but Tyr didn't move. Closing his eyes, he dropped his head and growled, a deep, rumbling sound that echoed down the corridor.

“Are you guys headed to the dock?” Aster asked, his tone absurdly casual. “I heard there's something going on down there today.”

Tyr growled again. “I'm going to kill him.”

“He's already dead,” Sunne whispered, shoving against his mate's chest to get him to move.

“Not dead enough.”

“So, do you guys want to go down together?” Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his jacket, Aster shuffled closer. “Or do you need another minute? I can wait.”

Despite his initial dislike of the guy, Sunne didn't consider Aster a bad person. A pain in the ass, maybe, but not bad. He was just a little too enthusiastic and had zero regard for personal boundaries.

He also still suspected Aster had a crush on his mate, but once he had realized Tyr didn't return the attraction, his jealousy had cooled. Mostly.

With a frustrated grunt, Tyr shoved away from the wall to glare at their neighbor. "Do I look like I fucking—"

"Sure!" Sunne grabbed the shifter's wrist and squeezed. "We were just headed that way."

"Awesome. I'll go call the elevator."

Still holding Tyr's wrist, he smiled and nodded. "We'll be right behind you."

"Lelien ."

He heard the warning, but he shook his head anyway. "He's just a kid." Well, eighteen, but close enough. "And he's all alone here."

"There's an entire village of souls. Let him ruin their day."

Gentling his smile, he slid their palms together and linked their fingers. "Be nice."

Tyr shook his head. "I don't do nice."

"For me?" He rounded his eyes and blinked innocently. "Please?"

His mate stared back at him for a long time before he huffed and started dragging him toward the lifts. "You owe me for this."

He would give Tyr anything he wanted, debt or not, but he wasn't above using it to his advantage. "Deal."

The elevators were another one of those things that just worked, though no one really understood how. They didn't have buttons, yet the cab always stopped on the correct floor. Instead of a mirrored wall at the back, the ones in the Tower were made of only glass with a clear view of the vast blackness beyond.

Well, for about the first twenty or so floors. After that, the darkness gave way to the strange, silver light that covered the town. If he had to compare it to something, he would say it looked like moonlight, but softer, more dispersed, as if someone had hung a lampshade over the night sky.

And Aster? Apparently, no one had taught him how to read a room because he kept up a constant stream of chatter on the ride to the lobby. Sunne pasted on a polite smile and pretended to listen, though Tyr held most of his attention. His mate looked about two seconds away from breaking the windows and tossing Aster through them.

“Oh, you know those weird phone booths downstairs?” he asked. “I heard you can contact people through them. Like a haunting or something.”

While an expansive space with high ceilings and marbled floors, the building's lobby didn't house a business center, a welcome desk, or even a wall of mailboxes. It didn't boast cozy seating areas or generic, mass-produced art.

Apart from the bank of elevators, the only thing in the cavernous space was a dozen bright red phone boxes that stood in a neat row. Sunne had never heard one ring, and he had never seen anyone make a call. Maybe they had a purpose, but Aster's claim kind of sounded like bullshit.

Besides, even if what he said was true, Sunne didn't have anyone to call. He'd been nine when his mom had dropped him off at school one morning and just never came back. His dad hadn't really been that present in his life before, and after his mom left, it had only gotten worse.

Now, the guy existed in an angry, drunken haze, and while technically still alive, he had checked out long before Sunne had. As a result, they hadn't so much as exchanged Christmas cards in six years.

At some point, Sunne figured the local police station would inform him that his only son had died in a freak accident. He wondered if the old man would even remember that he had a kid, let alone care.

It still unsettled him that his body probably hadn't been found yet. While he had spent the last three days adjusting to his new reality, barely three minutes had passed since he'd bought himself a one-way ticket to the afterlife. And trying to wrap his mind around that just made his head hurt.

So, he tucked it away with other unpleasant things to worry about precisely never.

"Everything okay?" Tyr asked as the elevator finally slowed to a stop on the ground floor.

Blinking to clear the fog of reminiscence, he squeezed Tyr's hand and bobbed his head. "I'm good. Just thinking."

"Anything you want to share?"

He glanced at Aster from the corner of his eye. He didn't carry pain from his past, nor did he treat the things that had happened like some big secret. At the same time, he didn't particularly want to get into it in front of a stranger either.

"Later."

Outside, they followed the uneven road that led from the Tower to the heart of the village. Sunne smiled and nodded at some of the residents they passed, receiving

mostly odd looks in return. Although one soul had given him a startled wave before ducking their head and scurrying away.

Tyr had confirmed that thousands of people resided on that side of the river, but Sunne had yet to see any evidence to support the claim. At most, he had witnessed maybe a dozen or so souls gathered in one place, and barely twice that many in total. The streets and shops were almost always empty, quiet, creating a sense of hollowness that rang throughout the town.

“Where the hell is everyone?” Aster asked, giving voice to Sunne’s thoughts. “It’s fucking dead around here.”

It shouldn’t have been funny, but Sunne snorted. Then that snort turned into a chuckle, and before he knew it, his amusement had snowballed into a full-blown belly laugh that made his cheeks ache and his stomach cramp.

“What?” the kid demanded. “What’s so funny? It’s true.”

“It really is true,” Sunne gasped through his laughter. “It’s so dead here.”

“I know. That’s what I...I...oh, my god.” Cottoning on to his own accidental joke, Aster looped his arm through Sunne’s and leaned against him as he joined in his hilarity. “I didn’t mean it like that, but you’re right. It’s so true.”

The only person who didn’t appear amused was Tyr. Eyeing Aster with barely veiled disdain, he curled his upper lip and growled.

As a result, Aster’s laughter faded, but he didn’t back down. “Bro, chill.” Tightening his hold on Sunne’s arm, he stared up at him and rolled his eyes. “We’re just laughing. You should try it sometime.”

“I laugh,” Tyr responded defensively. “And I’m not your bro .”

“Fine. How about Daddy? Is that better?”

Sunne nearly choked. If the kid hadn’t already been dead, he might have thought he had a death wish.

Cackling, Aster finally let go of his arm and danced away when Tyr reached for him with a menacing growl. Then he jogged backward, his eyes gleaming with mischief, clearly enjoying himself.

“I’m going to get some coffee.” He pried his gaze away from the Guardian and focused on Sunne. “Want anything?”

“I’ll take a cup of coffee.”

“Cool. I’ll meet you at the dock.” He glanced at Tyr again, his lips curved into a wicked grin. “See ya, Daddy .”

“I’m going to kill him,” Tyr growled as they watched Aster jog toward the diner.

“Tyr, he’s—”

“Don’t say it,” he warned. “Don’t fucking say it. I don’t care if he’s a kid, or if he’s already dead. I’m going to kill him.”

Sunne pressed his lips together and dipped his head. Telling his mate to calm down would only piss him off more. Plus, he kind of got it, even if he didn’t share in Tyr’s frustration. Sure, Aster could be a bit much, but the guy was starting to grow on him.

Like toe fungus.

Irritating, but ultimately harmless.

Still, probably best to change the subject. “Do you always oversee the supply drops?”

“No, not always. I rotate with Rune and Sindri.” His nostrils flared as he huffed out a breath. “Today was supposed to be Sindri’s turn, but he’s topside with Orrin.”

From context clues, he guessed Sindri to be another Guardian, though he hadn’t met the guy, and Tyr had never spoken of him before. “Is it just the three of you?”

“Here? Yeah.”

Of all the things he’d learned about the Underworld, discovering his mate wasn’t actually dead had been the biggest mindfuck. When they had met in that alley, he had naturally assumed Tyr was another soul like him. Knowing the shifter could leave and return to the mortal world whenever he wanted—a place Sunne couldn’t follow—still sparked a bit of panic whenever he thought about it.

“What are they doing topside?” he asked to cover his discomfort. “Or is it like top secret god stuff?”

Tyr wound an arm around his waist to help him navigate the shifting sands as they made their way down the hill toward the riverbank. “Nothing like that,” he said with a chuckle. “Sunday dinner at the palace.”

A displaced elfin prince with the powers of a god, who helped lost souls and still made time to share a meal with his family. He couldn’t make this shit up.

“That’s really sweet.”

His mate grunted, possibly in agreement, but with him, Sunne could never be sure.

A crowd had started to gather at the end of the pier, largely consisting of shopkeepers or their assistants. Some carried tattered canvas bags, while others pulled carts on wobbly wheels behind them. He recognized Helen from the bakery, and Clarice, an ancient-looking woman who darned clothes for the village's residents.

"I don't see Cian."

"He doesn't come down here."

Sunne blinked. "Ever?"

"Nope. He always sends someone else to pick up his stuff."

Interesting, but not really any of his business. "Do you think there will be ingredients for cinnamon rolls?"

Even as the words left his mouth, wooden crates and woven baskets began appearing at the end of the dock.

Tyr took his hand, tugging him to get him walking again, and smiled. "Let's find out."

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Chapter five

There had not been ingredients for cinnamon rolls.

To his credit, Sunne had taken the news in stride with only minor disappointment. Or so he'd claimed.

The apartment had tried to help. They had returned from the river to find a package of cinnamon rolls waiting in the pantry. Not the warm, soft, gooey kind from a bakery, but certainly passable. Sunne had disagreed.

And the apartment had...reacted.

The bright jewel and metallic tones that filled the unit had dulled to a pale, depressing gray. The water pressure in the shower had reduced to a trickle. The titles and covers had been erased from all of his beloved books, and various things started going missing around the place.

Probably the biggest fuck you, however, was when the ambient temperature had dropped to match the numbing cold outside.

The petty assault had gone on for three whole days before Sunne had finally given in and eaten one of the prepackaged pastries. After that, things had returned to normal, and his mate had been careful not to offend his temperamental home again.

Tyr had told Sunne that most units in the building didn't behave like his, and he'd meant that. They provided the basics like food and running water, but very few

changed to reflect their owner's personality. They damn sure didn't provide curated desserts, then throw a tantrum when those offerings were snubbed.

He took it as proof of what he already knew. Sunne was special. Maybe not on a cosmic scale. He probably wouldn't change the course of history or rewrite the future. But he had a spark, something about him that made him different.

And clearly, Tyr wasn't the only one who had noticed.

"You know, if you don't think about it too hard, it's kind of pretty." Stretched out on his stomach in the sand, his chin resting in his palms, Sunne stared out over the River Acheron. "How many souls do you think are in there?"

"Millions."

Just below the dark surface, orbs of blue light drifted lazily with the current, a collection of disembodied souls awaiting reincarnation. He didn't know what the selection process entailed, or what made them worthy of being reborn. That information was apparently above his paygrade.

He would occasionally, however, see a Reaper approach the river with a small gold locket and pluck one of the flickering lights from the water. Then they would disappear as silently and mysteriously as they had arrived.

"What happens if someone falls out of the ferry?"

Snorting, he rolled onto his side and levered up on his elbow so he could see his mate. "You worry too much, lelien."

"Maybe," Sunne allowed. "But what happens?"

“They won’t fall out of the ferry.”

“But what if they did?”

“Then they would be erased.” He shrugged one shoulder. “No coming back. They would just cease to exist forever.” They’d already had this conversation, so he had to assume there was more to the question. “What are you getting at?”

“I don’t know. It seems kind of unfair.” Rolling over, he pushed into a sitting position and pulled his knees to his chest. “You die, which already sucks. Then you’re just trying to step onto the ferry, but your foot slips, and...poof. You’re gone forever.”

He wouldn’t lie. It did happen. Not that exact scenario, but plenty of souls had ended up in the river either by accident or because they hadn’t known better. Those incidents had been greatly reduced since he and the other Guardians had started patrolling the shore, though.

Hence why he found himself at the river in the middle of the night while the rest of the village slept. No matter how much he hated being away from Sunne, having a mate didn’t excuse him from his duties. Still, he hadn’t asked the guy to accompany him. In fact, he’d been pretty adamant that Sunne remain in the warmth and safety of their apartment.

Sunne always insisted on coming with him, though, and Tyr was just selfish enough to let him.

Sitting up, he held his hand out in invitation. “Come here, lelien .”

Without a flicker of hesitation, Sunne reached out, taking his hand as he scrambled across the sand to him. Once he was close enough, Tyr caught him around the waist and pulled him into his lap so that he straddled his thighs.

Their eyes met, and they both stilled, the implication of such an intimate position hanging over them.

Although Tyr had nothing to compare their relationship with, he liked to think things had been progressing well. Maybe a little slower than he would have liked, especially the physical parts, but definitely headed in the right direction.

He still slept on the sofa at night, and apart from that almost-kiss in the corridor, they hadn't done anything more than hold hands or cuddle. While he loved any excuse to be close to his mate, and he would wait until the end of time for Sunne to be ready, he couldn't deny that he wanted the male.

As the mating bond strengthened, instincts clawed at him, reawakening desires he had buried beneath duty and loyalty long ago. Not only a carnal appetite, but a deep, innate need to protect, provide, and to claim what belonged to him. Not in ownership, but as a warning to anyone who would try to take what was his.

“Lelien, I need you to hear this.” With one hand on Sunne's waist, he cupped the side of his face with the other. “You can't save them all. That doesn't make you a bad person. It doesn't mean you stop caring. Bad shit happens, but it's not your fault.”

“I know,” Sunne whispered back. “I just—”

“No.” Adjusting his hand, he pressed his thumb to his mate's lips and rubbed gently to quiet him. “I love that you have such a big heart, but if you let it, that kind of empathy will eat you alive here.”

“Interesting choice of words.”

Tyr rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, fair, but hear me out. Maybe we could post a sign, yeah? Or form a welcoming committee?” Slowly, shyly, he wrapped his arms around Tyr’s neck and leaned into him. “If you hadn’t found me when I arrived, I would have been so lost. I wouldn’t have known how to get Lizzie across the river. What would have happened if we had touched the water to get a drink or clean our hands?”

Tyr growled, a storm of emotion building inside him at the thought of something happening to his mate. “What do you think we’re doing here?”

“But you can’t always be here. I’m proof of that. And that Reaper douche wasn’t helpful at all.”

“Poor baby,” he teased. “Do you want me to punch him in the face if I see him again?”

Sunne pretended to consider his offer before giving him a resolute nod. “Yes.”

“Done.” Gods, he loved that laugh, and he would do anything to keep the smile on Sunne’s face. Even form a fucking welcome committee. “Look, I get what you’re saying, and you’re not wrong, but this is how things have always been.”

He and his fellow Guardians filled some of the gaps, but they couldn’t hold back the flood on their own.

“And people used to piss in the streets. Just because a system exists doesn’t make it a good one.”

Tyr barked out a surprised laugh. His mate really did have a way with words that never failed to both impress and amuse him.

“Fine. You want change? Make it happen.”

“Me?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Who else?”

“But...” Trailing off, Sunne dropped his gaze and chewed his bottom lip. “Do you really think I can do it?”

“Lelien.” He slid his hand along Sunne’s jaw to grip his chin and waited for him to meet his gaze again. “If anyone can do it, it’s you.”

Gratitude and something deeper flickered in Sunne’s eyes, and he leaned forward, capturing Tyr’s lips in a kiss that was both spontaneous and fleeting.

“Oh, my god,” he gasped, jerking away abruptly, his gaze wide and filled with panic. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.”

But Tyr was having none of it. With a possessive growl that echoed his need, he tangled his fingers in Sunne’s hair, pulling him close.

“Well, that’s a shame. Because I did.”

What came next was anything but brief.

Tyr slanted their mouths together, melding their lips in a fervent, insistent dance, each touch igniting a fire that had lain dormant for far too long. There was no hesitation, no room for doubt. Instead, he kissed his mate with a fierceness born of hunger and need, a declaration of everything he felt but hadn’t yet spoken.

Tyr traced the outline of Sunne’s lips with his tongue, eliciting a sharp, needy gasp, before delving deeper, exploring the sweet contours of his mouth. Sunne’s breath hitched, and his fingers clutched at Tyr’s arms as he melted against him in quiet

surrender.

Time stilled, and the world faded, leaving only the two of them clinging to one another beside the water.

Tyr's heart crashed against his ribs, and his cock swelled inside his leathers, but he kept his touch gentle, coaxing rather than forceful. Fuck, he wanted him, craved him, but his ray of sunshine deserved so much better than desperate rutting on a cold stretch of river.

Yet every brush of Sunne's tongue, every hushed moan, made it harder to remember why taking him right there was a bad idea.

When they finally pulled apart, breathless and flushed, the world came rushing back into focus, but nothing felt familiar anymore. Staring into the depths of Sunne's gaze, everything shifted. Priorities realigned. Promises took on new meanings.

In the measure of a single heartbeat, everything had changed.

Before the realization could settle, a rush of energy swept over him, a disturbance he had become all too familiar with over the centuries.

"Up you go," he said, patting his mate's hip. Then, because he wanted to—and he could—he brushed another kiss over his lips. "We have company."

He had expected more panic. Maybe a tinge of pink as embarrassment crept in, but neither of those things happened. Sunne took his time getting to his feet, a funny little smile on his mouth.

"You look very satisfied with yourself," Tyr observed as he joined him.

“Oh, I am. I’ve wanted to do that since I met you.”

They’d wasted days dancing around boundaries that didn’t exist, but it had been well worth the wait. “Why didn’t you?”

Sunne shrugged, a small, casual movement of his shoulders. “Nerves, maybe? I don’t know. It didn’t feel right yet.”

He wouldn’t have been able to put it into such simple terms, but he understood exactly what Sunne meant. It had never been about a lack of attraction, and all about the desire for it to mean something.

“Oh.” A gasp fell from his mate’s lips as they started walking toward the pier. “He’s...different.”

That was one way to describe the new arrival.

A couple inches shorter but just as broad in the chest, the male had the kind of body developed from hard labor rather than hours spent in a gym. Tight denim encased thighs the size of tree trunks, and a plain white tee begged for mercy as it stretched tight across his chest.

Not really Tyr’s type, but he supposed the guy was objectively handsome. If one were into that sort of thing.

“Stop looking at him.”

Sunne snorted. “How am I supposed to talk to him if I can’t look at him?”

“Good point. Don’t talk to him either.”

His laughter was soft and indulgent, and he slipped his hand into Tyr's with a comforting squeeze. "I meant that I've never seen an actual cowboy before."

Tyr stared at the newcomer. He just looked like a guy in a hat to him. "I guess, but to be fair, I've never met a cowboy vampire before."

"You're serious?" He blinked a couple of times, his brow creased. "He's really a vampire?"

"Yep." He could feel the energy pouring off the male, even at a distance. Not immense, but a little wild. A little restless. "Probably not very old."

"Huh," Sunne mused. Then he waved his free hand over his head in greeting. "Hey, there!" he called. "You look a little lost."

The cowboy turned away from the river and removed his wide-brimmed hat like a true gentleman. Approaching them, he wore a charming smile—broad, ingratiating, with just a hint of humility.

Tyr hated him already.

"Not lost," he answered, his voice low, smooth, and tinged with the kind of accent that melted panties. "I'm dead, ain't I?"

"More than once." Tyr grunted when his mate elbowed him in the ribs.

"I'm Sunne." Stepping forward, he offered his hand and a kind smile. "What's your name?"

"Fenton Truitt, but you can call me Finn." His gaze flickered to Tyr before accepting the handshake, and he kept the contact brief while maintaining a respectful distance.

Their eyes met again, and Tyr nodded his approval as understanding passed between them. Sunne was off-limits.

“You’re a vampire, right?” Sunne asked.

Finn shook his head. “Naw. Bloodsucker killed me, but I’m not one of them.”

Well...shit.

Fenton Truitt was absolutely a vampire, and the fact that he didn’t know it painted a pretty bleak picture.

The process of becoming a bloodsucker was pretty straightforward. Step one—die after ingesting vampire blood. And that was it. That was the entire list.

“Um, can you give us a minute?” Grabbing Tyr by the hand, Sunne spun him around and marched a few yards away down the riverbank. “Don’t move,” he called. “And don’t touch the water.”

“This isn’t good.”

“No shit,” Sunne hissed. “Are you sure he’s a vampire?”

“I’m sure.”

“Does he need to feed? Is that a thing here?”

Tyr bobbed his head. “Yeah, it’s a thing.”

Like humans, Otherling souls functioned pretty much as normal in the Underworld. Shifters and weres still transformed into beasts. Witches maintained a degree of their

magic, though it did have its limitations. Vampires still needed blood, especially a newly raised fledgling.

“What do we do?”

For that, he didn’t have an answer. Left to him, he’d send the cowboy across the river and let the powers that be sort him out. Somehow, he didn’t think his mate would be agreeable to that solution.

“It’s up to him if he wants to take the ferry or not.”

“But he doesn’t even know what he is.”

“Not our problem.”

“Well, I’m making it our problem.”

Tyr sighed. Yeah, he had a feeling Sunne would say that. Might as well get it over with.

“Okay, here’s the deal,” he said as he strode back toward Finn. “You’re a vampire.” He held his hand up to cut him off when the guy started to argue. “You can come with us to the village.” For emphasis, he gestured toward the top of the hill. “Or you can take the ferry across the river. Up to you.”

“Oh, my god.” Clapping a hand over his face, Sunne groaned. “What is wrong with you?”

“I’m really a bloodsucker?” Finn looked a little confused, a little curious, but he seemed to be taking the news well.

“Yes,” Sunne answered, shooting a glare at Tyr. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? You’re not the one who killed me.” Spinning his hat between his hands, he looked over at the dock. “If I stay, can I change my mind later?”

“Yes. You can leave whenever you want.”

“But there’s no coming back,” Tyr added. “Once you cross, that’s it.”

“In that case, if it’s alright with you, I think I’ll stay awhile.”

Sunne smiled, the tension bleeding from his shoulders. “How about a cup of coffee?”

Settling his hat back on his head, Finn cocked his head and smirked. “Got anything stronger?”

Resigned, Tyr started trudging back up the hill toward the village. Only his mate could adopt a dead, Southern-grown fledgling in the middle of the Underworld and make it seem like a regular Tuesday.

But after twelve hundred years of the same shit, at least things were finally starting to get interesting.

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Chapter six

S eated at a table near the fireplace in the diner, Sunne looked up and smiled when Aster placed a cup of coffee in front of him. “Thanks.”

“I thought you could use a little caffeine infusion,” Aster answered, sliding into the chair across from him. “No offense, but you look a little pale.”

“Do I?” Considering that the sun never shined there, it made sense. “I feel fine. Just a little tired.”

Lifting his own mug to his lips, Aster smirked around the rim. “Tyr been keeping you up late?”

He chuckled nervously, uncomfortable discussing the intimate details of his and Tyr’s relationship. Even if there wasn’t anything to discuss.

“I’ve just been having trouble sleeping.”

Falling asleep wasn’t the problem. Every night, he tumbled into bed and passed out almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. Then the dreams started. Vivid, disturbing, the kind that blurred the lines between fantasy and reality.

They didn’t shock him awake, but at the same time, it was as if he had never dozed off in the first place. As a result, no matter how many hours he spent in bed, he never felt rested. Some mornings, he felt more exhausted than he had before turning in for the night.

“Man, same. I swear ever since I got here, I can’t shut my brain off.” Leaning back in his chair, Aster reached into his pocket, coming back with a small vial of shimmering yellow powder. “I got this from Paris over at the apothecary.”

Sunne eyed it suspiciously. “What is it?”

“Valerian root. Nothing cagey.” He stared at the vial for a moment longer before thrusting it across the table. “Here, you take it. I can get another one.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that.” He might make a trip to the apothecary later, though, and pick up his own sleep remedy.

“You sure? This stuff works, and it’s really not a big deal.” Aster placed the small bottle down on the table in front of Sunne’s cup. “I mean, it didn’t cost me anything.”

That last part was true enough. A strange perk of being dead.

Curious against his better judgment, he took the vial and held it up to the firelight to inspect it. “How does it work?”

“Just put a pinch in some tea or something before bed.” Aster rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “I swear, you’ll sleep like a fucking baby.”

His fingers flexed around the smooth glass at the promise of a peaceful night’s sleep. Then he shook his head and placed it back on the table. In life, he had rarely taken aspirin, and he saw no reason to break that habit now with magic sparkle dust.

“Oh, hey, I heard you’re trying to start a welcome committee for new souls.”

“I’m trying, but it’s not going that great.”

He honestly hadn't expected so much resistance to the idea. Surely the residents remembered what it had been like when they had first landed in the Underworld. As such, he had assumed they would jump at the chance to help newcomers so that they didn't have to experience that same confusion and fear.

As he had come to find out, however, most souls had no desire to involve themselves in the matters of others. They had carved out some semblance of a life in the village, and they just wanted to be left alone to enjoy it.

"Well, sign me up. I'll help."

Sunne sat up a little straighter. "Really?"

"Sure." Aster shrugged and took a long pull of his coffee. "It's not like I have anything else to do. How can I help?"

"Honestly? I need more people." Ideally, he would like to have at least two volunteers per shift to help ease the burden.

"I can do that. I'm pretty good at talking to people."

Sunne turned his head to hide his smirk. The kid was good at talking. That much they could agree on. The "people" part was where things got a little dicey. Still, he'd take whatever help he could get.

"That would be great. Thank you."

"No problem. And even if it just ends up being a sign posted on the dock, it's still better than nothing."

"I had the same idea." Which only reinforced his conviction. If other people shared

his sentiments, that had to mean he was on the right track. “Maybe we need both. Just in case.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Aster agreed. “We’d need the materials, though. When’s the next supply drop?”

Before he could answer, the front door swung open, and three enormous males—two of them dressed in solid black with daggers strapped to their hips—entered the diner.

“Looks like the fun police is here,” Aster muttered. Eyeing the group near the entrance, he slid away from the table and pushed to his feet.

A scowl pulled at Sunne’s lips. “You don’t have to leave.”

“I think I do.” Then he turned on that million-watt smile with a shrug. “I’ll talk to some people around town about the committee and let you know something in a few days.”

Sunne nodded, but it still didn’t sit right with him. Recently, he had begun to wonder if he had read the entire situation wrong. Rather than a crush, he had started to think that Aster just liked needling his grumpy mate to get a reaction out of him.

And it worked.

It also made for a lot of tense encounters that always left Sunne feeling like he was being pulled in two different directions. Of course, he understood Tyr’s irritation, at least to a point, but he’d be lying if he said he didn’t find Aster’s antics kind of amusing.

“Oh, hey,” he called when the kid turned to walk away. He grabbed the vial from the table and held it up. “Don’t forget this.”

Aster glanced over his shoulder but waved him off. “You keep it.”

He walked away then, slowing only when he passed by Tyr. While Sunne couldn’t hear what he said, he definitely heard his mate’s answering growl. With a resigned sigh, he slipped the valerian root into his jacket pocket and sipped his coffee.

His monkeys. His circus. Still not his problem.

He looked up only when the group approached his table, grinning when he received a chaste kiss to his forehead from his mate. Grabbing chairs from a nearby table, all three men dropped into them, causing the ancient wood to squeak beneath their weight.

“Lelien, you remember Rune.” Tyr jerked his head toward the male on his right.

Sunne smiled. “Nice to see you again. Did Lizzie make it across the river okay?”

Rune leaned back and stretched his long legs out beneath the table, his cerulean eyes dancing with humor. “Yeah, she made it across. Not before she gave me an earful about looking out for you, though. Kid’s got fire.”

“I don’t know what you’re smirking about,” Tyr interjected. “You’re doing a pretty shit job. We haven’t seen you all week.”

Both of Rune’s eyebrows winged upward. “And whose fault is that?”

Ignoring their bickering, Sunne looked across the table, dipping his head in greeting. “Hey, Finn. How are you settling in?”

“This place sure as hell ain’t Texas, but I’m figuring it out.”

Sunne nodded in a show of support. “What about the other thing?”

“Oh, you mean being a vampire?” Finn reclined, mirroring Rune’s laid-back posture. “Still working on that one.”

“Our best guess is that a vampire accidentally killed him while feeding,” Tyr explained, taking Sunne’s cup and draining the last dregs of coffee at the bottom. “Then they panicked and tried to change him.”

“The Ministry is a lot more lenient about converting humans than it is about killing them,” Rune added.

Well, that sounded terrible. Plausible, but absolutely brutal. It didn’t, however, explain how Finn had ended up a dead vampire instead of the regular kind.

“No idea,” Finn answered with an easy shrug when Sunne posed the question. “I remember the vamp gnawing on my neck, but not a whole lot after that.”

They spent another thirty minutes discussing theories about Finn’s demise and answering his questions about the Underworld and being an Otherling. Somewhere in the middle of the conversation, Cian brought three extra mugs and a carafe of coffee, placing them on the table before leaving without a word.

Eventually, he and Tyr said their goodbyes, and Sunne promised to check in on Finn later in the week. He didn’t know how much he would be able to help the cowboy, but he could offer friendship if nothing else.

Outside, he tucked his hands into the pockets of his wool coat and rounded his shoulders. He kept waiting, kept hoping he would magically become accustomed to the cold. He hadn’t. The iciness still clawed at him, still stung, and he still hated it as much as he had that first day.

“So, what did Aster want?”

He choked back a sigh at Tyr’s accusatory tone. “He didn’t want anything. We were just talking.”

“I don’t like him.”

“So, you’ve mentioned. Repeatedly.”

“I don’t think you should talk to him anymore.”

He appreciated his mate’s concern, even if he thought it was misplaced. He didn’t, however, enjoy being told what to do.

“I’m not a child, Tyr.”

“I didn’t say that, but I know you like to see the good in people. A lot of people don’t deserve it.”

Sunne huffed, his frustration bubbling over. “Give it a break already. He’s a mouthy teenager, not the fucking devil.”

A teenager who may or may not have a crush on his mate. He still hadn’t quite figured that part out yet. Either way, it didn’t make him evil.

“He’s not just any teenager,” Tyr argued. “He’s a mage.”

Okay, he hadn’t seen that one coming. He had assumed Aster was just a regular human like him, but it didn’t change anything.

“And you’re a magical shifter who turns into a bear the size of an SUV. What’s your

point?”

Entering the lobby of the Tower, Tyr paused and turned to face him. “I just want you to be careful.”

“No, you want to keep me locked away in my room so that no one even looks at me, let alone speaks to me.”

Tyr’s upper lip pulled back from his teeth, and a low rumble vibrated in his chest. “That’s not true. Or fair.”

No, it really wasn’t, and he didn’t know why he’d said it. His mate could be possessive, but not in a controlling way. While Tyr didn’t necessarily like when people touched him, he had never tried to stop him from talking to the residents of the village.

With one exception.

He didn’t know what Tyr had against Aster, but sniping at him wouldn’t change anything. It would just end up making them both miserable.

“You’re right. That wasn’t fair.” He took Tyr’s hand and squeezed. “I’m sorry. I’m just tired, and I guess it’s making me kind of cranky.”

Tyr’s expression softened as he pressed his other hand to Sunne’s cheek and swept his thumb over the shadows under his eye. “You’re still having trouble sleeping?”

“I sleep just fine. I just don’t ever feel rested.”

“Are you still having bad dreams?”

His eyelids fluttered, and he leaned into the comforting touch. “Not bad exactly. Just weird and really vivid.”

“What was it this time?”

“I fought an alligator with a beer bottle.”

Grasping the back of his neck, Tyr chuckled as he pulled him close, holding him tight against his chest. “Did you win?”

“I woke up before the fight was over, but it wasn’t looking good.”

The shifter laughed again. “Come on, lelien . Maybe you’ll feel better after a nap.”

Sunne allowed himself to be led away toward the lifts, but he didn’t say anything. While a nap did sound amazing, just the thought of sleep made him anxious. Would he finally find peace? Or would he descend into another nightmare filled with teeth, claws, and unsuitable weapons?

“Maybe we should talk to Paris,” Tyr suggested when the cab doors slid closed behind them.

Biting his lip, Sunne reluctantly pulled the vial from his pocket and held it out by the stopper. “Actually, Aster gave me this. He said he got it from the apothecary. Valerian root.”

He steeled himself for the suspicion. The accusations. Maybe even a threat. He hadn’t, however, anticipated that Tyr would drop the bottle to the floor and crush it beneath his boot.

“What the hell?” he demanded, staring down at the mess of yellow powder and shiny

glass shards scattered across the tiles. “Was that really necessary?”

“You’re not taking that.”

“Well, not now. You killed it.” He pressed himself into the corner, eyes narrowed and jaw clenched. “Not everything is dangerous just because you don’t like the person who gave it to me.”

“I don’t care if Hades gave it to you.”

“You don’t like him either,” Sunne mumbled under his breath. “Shocker.”

“Don’t be an ass.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it. You’re already doing enough for both of us.”

“Sunne,” he growled, his tone making it clear that he was quickly reaching the end of his patience.

Too bad Sunne didn’t give a damn.

“I just want to sleep!” he yelled, his voice cracking with exhaustion and desperation. “I don’t want to be afraid of my own pillow. Or spend all night fighting alligators. Or getting emotionally wrecked about forgetting to feed a whole farm full of animals. I want to wake up rested, not feeling like I just fought a fucking war in my sleep.”

“I know, lelien ,” Tyr responded, his tone gentling. “I know. We’ll figure it out, I promise, but—” He glanced down at the powder on the floor. “—not like this. You don’t even know what he gave you.”

“It’s valerian root,” he said, but even he could hear the lack of conviction in his

voice.

“You’re smarter than that,” Tyr snapped back, his expression tinged with disappointment. “When’s the last time you saw neon-yellow valerian that sparkled like a disco ball?”

Dropping his head, he stared down at his shoes and shrugged in defeat. “Never.” In his defense, he’d also never seen a river filled with glowing souls. “I just figured it was magic or something.”

Tyr closed the distance between them, crowding him against the glass wall of the elevator. “Sunne, look at me.”

He really didn’t want to, but he couldn’t think of a good reason to refuse. So he took a deep breath and lifted his head, forcing himself to meet the shifter’s gaze.

“I screwed up. You don’t have to say it.”

Tyr shook his head. “I don’t like Aster. Hell, I don’t like most people. But I wouldn’t stop them from trying to help you.” He reached out, his hand resting on the side of Sunne’s neck, and pressed a thumb under his chin, preventing him from ducking his head again. “I’m not trying to control you, lelien . I’m trying to protect you because I honestly don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you.”

“Probably something that involves murder,” Sunne quipped back, only half joking. “I have a feeling it wouldn’t be good for the village.”

“Exactly.” A cocky, crooked grin curved the Guardian’s lips. “And you care too much to let that happen, right?”

His breath hitched when Tyr leaned into him, his heart racing with nerves and desire.

“I care about you .”

Tyr bent, hovering over him, bringing his face closer. “ Lelien , I’ve been well past caring since the first time you smiled at me.” As he spoke, he brushed the pad of his thumb across Sunne’s lips. “You know who I am. How I am.”

Unable to move, Sunne released a shaky breath and nodded.

“I haven’t given a damn about anyone but myself in a long time. Then you came along.”

He didn’t believe that at all. Tyr had given up everything to follow Orrin into the Underworld. No one did that out of duty alone.

“What are you trying to say?” He had a pretty good idea, but he selfishly wanted to hear the words, to know he wasn’t alone in what he felt.

“I’m saying that I can’t live without you. I wouldn’t want to, and yeah, I’d probably annihilate the whole town if anything ever happened to you.” Then he closed the last couple of inches, bringing their lips together in an achingly tender kiss. “I’m saying I love you, lelien .”

Sunne thought he’d been prepared. He was wrong. Those words, spoken in that rough, needy voice, completely undid him. His head spun, his heart crashed against his ribs, and everything around him dimmed until only Tyr remained.

While he had never been in love before, he didn’t need a map and a decoder ring to understand his own heart. The fact that he had never felt this way about anyone before—like losing them would destroy him—only added more credence to what he already knew. What he’d known for a while now.

“I love you, too, Tyr.” He grinned when the doors of the cab finally slid open, as if the Tower had been waiting for just the right moment. “Make me yours.”

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Chapter seven

Entering their apartment without a word, Sunne kicked his shoes off and removed his jacket to hang it on the hook by the door. Gauntlet thrown, challenge issued, he had anticipated a lot more kissing and groping.

Tyr wanted to talk .

With his mind a tangle of nerves and frustration, he didn't immediately recognize that something had changed inside the unit. Not until he entered the living room to find a nest of thick blankets and fluffy pillows spread out on the floor in front of the fireplace.

What the hell?

Typically illuminated by a cheery light—like morning sun filtered through sheer curtains—the room was now lit with a soft romantic glow, a background ambience to the crackling fire. The magical flames that danced over the logs didn't roar but burned gently, emitting a faint pink glow that filled the space.

And right there, in the middle of the stone hearth, was the profanely large bottle of lube he had hidden under the sink in the bathroom.

Sunne fisted his hands at his sides and swallowed back a groan. His apartment was a goddamn menace, and he honestly didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or die of embarrassment.

At the same time, he still vividly remembered what had happened the last time he had disrespected a gift. Plus, it did look pretty cozy.

Settling down on the soft pallet, he crisscrossed his legs, tucking his feet under him, and folded his hands in his lap while he waited for his mate to join him.

Tyr must have seen the giant bottle placed front and center, but he pretended not to notice it as he lowered himself onto the blankets, facing him and mirroring his position.

For a long time, they just stared at each other, neither of them speaking. The longer the silence stretched on, the heavier it felt, building the anticipation until Sunne couldn't take it anymore.

“Whatever it is, just say it.”

In response, Tyr reached his hand out and wiggled his fingers. “Come over here, lelien.”

When Sunne took it, his mate pulled him across the blankets and into his lap, repositioning him so that his legs draped over the sides of the shifter's powerful thighs. Then he settled his hands on Sunne's hips, his fingers squeezing and kneading, a subtle show of nerves, even when his face remained impassive.

“I want you to listen,” he said, a slight strain in his voice. “This is important.”

Realizing this was a lot deeper than he had been thinking, Sunne nodded.

“You know what I am, right? My heritage?”

He nodded again. “A magical shifter. A berserker.”

Maybe even the origin of the Norse legends. Well, not Tyr specifically, but others like him.

“A hybrid,” Tyr added. “For shifters, claiming a mate is a blood bond, a joining of energies, of hearts. But for a mage, it’s deeper, more complicated. For a mage, the union is a soul bond, a merging of lifeforces. If I claim you, we would be bound in every way.”

Okay, that wasn’t so bad. He had been concerned Tyr had changed his mind, but it just sounded like he wanted Sunne to understand the mechanics.

And what he described sounded kind of poetic. Two hearts beating as one. Two halves of one soul. His mate looked too serious for it to be that easy, though, which meant he was probably missing something.

“Our lives would be so intertwined that if the connection was severed, if one of us died—”

“The other would too,” Sunne finished, panic surfacing as understanding dawned. “But I’m already dead.”

Tyr’s fingers tightened reflexively around his hips. “Yes.”

“What does that mean? What would happen to you if you claimed me? Would you die?” He started shaking his head before he’d even finished speaking. “No. No way.”

“Calm down, lelien .” Arching his neck, Tyr brushed their lips together. “That’s not what I meant.”

Sunne accepted another kiss with a quiet sigh. “Then what are you trying to say?”

“I don’t know anyone else in the Underworld who has claimed a soul as a mate. I don’t even know if it will work.”

“You mean, we might have missed our chance?”

“I don’t think so.” His mate’s expression turned pensive, his brow creased, and his eyes narrowed. “But I don’t know either. I just don’t want you to be disappointed if we don’t share the same kind of bond as others.”

Sunne’s breath caught, lodged behind the lump in his throat, and his heart ached with love and gratitude for the amazing gift fate had given him.

“I don’t care about anyone else,” he whispered, his voice thick with unshed tears. “You are mine, and I don’t need some magical soul bond to prove it.” Then he dipped his head, bringing their lips together in a kiss filled with all the emotions he felt but couldn’t put into words. “I just need you.”

His mate made a sound in the back of his throat, somewhere between a growl and groan, and curled his hand around the back of Sunne’s neck. “Be sure because there’s no going back.”

“I’m sure,” he answered with calm certainty. This was what he wanted, more than anything. “Claim me, Tyr. Make me yours.”

A heartbeat of silence passed. Two. Then a darkly possessive growl echoed through the room as Tyr dragged him into a kiss that both soothed and ignited.

There was no gentleness, no tender exploration. His mate attacked his mouth, waging battle as he plundered the depths. He didn’t coax or demand. He didn’t need to.

Instead, Tyr touched him like he owned him, like he had every right to completely

unravel him. Yet, beneath the dominance, woven through the confidence, there was reverence, every stroke of his tongue, every greedy caress, filled with a kind of quiet worship.

Hands calloused from the hilt of a sword, from wars fought in secret, slipped beneath the hem of Sunne's shirt, raking across his skin and spiking his pulse. He trembled, overwhelmed by sensation and pleasure, but still, he craved more.

Tingles spread through his body when Tyr tore his mouth away to trail his lips up the curve of his neck. His teeth scraped over the sensitive hollow behind his ear, then nipped at his lobe, eliciting a strangled moan.

"Want you," Tyr rasped.

"Then have me," he answered with a deep shudder.

His big hands slid up Sunne's flanks, his fingers digging into the muscles. "I'm going to make you fly, lelien . And I won't stop until you know exactly who you belong to."

The words wrapped around him like a caress, the mix of softness and carnality making his head spin and his cock throb. His hips jerked when his mate dragged his thumbnail over his sensitive nipple, the slight sting only pushing him higher.

Then Tyr's mouth was on his again, drinking down his needy moans as he continued the assault against the pebbled nub. He pinched and tugged, rolling it between his fingers, and every bite of delicious pain sent a jolt straight to Sunne's groin.

He bucked in his mate's arms, grinding against him as he chased something just beyond reach. Heat surged, the embers of desire flaring into a firestorm of instinct and primal hunger. Every touch scorched and every kiss seared as he burned for the big Guardian.

A warm breeze danced across his skin when Tyr stripped his shirt off, discarding it without ceremony. His hand vanished from Sunne's swollen nipple, replaced by a pair of warm lips, and electricity crackled through his veins when his mate sucked at the erect tip.

Sunne's head fell back on his shoulders, and he tangled his fingers in his mate's hair as he arched into his mouth. Tyr's thick beard rubbed against his chest, sending tingles racing across his torso and pulling a sharp gasp from his panting lips.

"Tyr, hurry." He already teetered on the pinnacle, right there at the edge of no return. "I need you. I need to feel you."

With another growl, Tyr leaned forward, lying him on his back in the middle of the blankets. His eyes shined with a feral light, the irises aglow with the effort of his restraint. Still, his hands were steady and confident as he stripped Sunne's jeans off and divested his own clothing.

Sweet hell, he was stunning. And big.

Bronzed skin stretched across chiseled muscles that swelled and contracted, like hard steel wrapped in velvet. His chest expanded with each harsh breath, and his ribbed abs rippled as he stretched over Sunne, blanketing him with his massive frame.

Moaning as they finally met skin to skin, Sunne spread his legs, wrapping them around his mate's waist as he welcomed him into the cradle of his hips.

Tyr kissed him again, the mating of their lips filled with a frantic urgency as they groped at each other, hands grabbing and pulling with insistence. The tension between them hummed with tautness, balancing on a knife's edge, hovering in that place of anticipation right before the snap.

He felt Tyr's weight shift above him as he leaned toward the fireplace, heard the snick of the bottle cap, the sound unusually loud in the quiet. A shiver swept over him when his mate reached between them, circling Sunne's entrance with the cool gel, and a ragged groan strained his throat when a thick finger pushed inside.

His muscles clenched around the invasion, in need rather than protest, and he rocked his hips, pulling the digit deeper. The pressure increased when Tyr added a second finger, the stretch making his cock jerk to the frenzied rhythm of his pulse.

When Tyr pulled away, he whimpered from the loss, from the emptiness, and he raised his hips, trying to follow him. Then he was lifted from the floor, pulled back across his mate's thighs as Tyr sat back on his heels.

Sunne didn't hesitate. He didn't wait for permission. Fisting the shifter's thick length, he positioned it at his hole and sank over him. The burn was intense, the pressure nearly unbearable, but he kept going, the bite of pain only spurring him on, until he was fully seated.

Planting his feet on the floor, he wrapped his arms around his mate's neck and began to move, rising and falling, taking him deeper each time. Still, it wasn't enough.

"Fuck me," he demanded. "Make me feel it."

The growl he received in answer was predatory, dangerous, and the sweetest sound he had ever heard. A powerful arm locked around his waist, caging him, and Tyr tumbled him back to the floor. His hips flexed, his control snapped, and he slammed his hips forward, driving into Sunne without restraint.

He set a brutal tempo, thrusting hard and fast, his fingers digging into Sunne's thighs as he jerked him onto his cock with every deep plunge. Sunne cried out, his voice ringing through the room, desperate and half-crazed from the pleasure.

Tyr's growls joined his moans, creating an erotic symphony as they hurdled toward the abyss in a wild storm of panted breaths and tangled limbs.

"You are mine," Tyr snarled at him. "Only mine." He punctuated every word with another hard thrust. "Say it."

"Yours," Sunne choked, his head whipping back and forth, his balls aching for release. "Only yours."

With a roar that shook the walls, Tyr fell over him, his sharp fangs piercing the skin at the apex where his neck met his shoulders.

Sunne screamed, his throat tight and raw, as he shattered, broken into thousands of glittering pieces. His eyes rolled back and his vision dimmed as his orgasm slammed into him with the force of a tsunami, dragging him beneath a violent wave of endless pleasure.

His balls contracted, squeezing against his body, and his cock pulsed with ropes of hot, sticky semen that painted his chest and abs.

Through the haze, he felt his mate still, heard his answering growl as he emptied himself into Sunne's contracting channel. In the stillness that followed, Tyr claimed his mouth again, pushing his tongue between his parted lips.

The kiss was brief, tender, and tinged with the taste of copper—with his mate's blood. And by the time it ended, Sunne was floating, drifting somewhere beyond himself, surrounded by a bright light that enveloped him with indescribable warmth.

Easing out of him, Tyr collapsed on the floor beside him and dragged him into his arms, cradling him against his broad chest as he peppered kisses over his face and head.

“You are mine now, and I’m never letting you go.”

Burying his face against the side of the Guardian’s neck, he smiled as Tyr’s voice whispered into his mind, proof of their unbreakable bond, now cemented for eternity.

“Mine,” he sent back. “All mine.”

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Chapter eight

“W ait, did you say Cerberus?”

Tyr slowed so Sunne could keep step beside him as they made their way to the diner.

“Yep.”

“Like the Cerberus? Hellhound? Guardian of the Underworld? That’s who Orrin is mated to?”

He chuckled at his mate’s reaction. The surly bastard tended to have that effect on people. Even souls in the village would often do a double take whenever his name was brought up in conversation.

“One and the same, but he goes by Erus here, and no, he’s not a hellhound. He’s not even a shifter.”

“I’m guessing he doesn’t have three heads either.”

“Correct.”

While still the OG—the Original Guardian—the stories got a lot wrong about Erus. He hadn’t been born into power, nor had he inherited it. He had just been a regular soul, wandering the Underworld, until Hades had plucked him from obscurity and given him purpose.

A purpose he’d lost sight of until he’d met Orrin.

“But he has powers, right? So, what is he?” Sunne asked. “A god?”

“Pretty much, but don’t let him hear you say that. He hates it.” Tyr could already picture the male’s murderous expression, could practically feel the vein that throbbed in his temple when someone dropped the G-word. “Actually, you know what? I take it back. You should definitely ask him if he’s a god.”

Sunne shook his head and snorted out a laugh. “I’m guessing you two don’t really get along.”

“He’s fine.” He respected the asshole, but no, he didn’t particularly like him. “Orrin says we’re too much alike.”

“That explains a lot, actually,” Sunne muttered under his breath. “And why are we going to talk to him?”

“I need some information,” he hedged. Information only Erus could provide.

Sunne still hadn’t been sleeping. Not the deep, restorative kind anyway. Every night, he drifted off, only to battle his way through disturbing dreams that felt all too real.

Since Tyr had claimed him and cemented their bond, he had been experiencing snippets of those nightmares for himself. Not in the same way Sunne did, but he would often catch brief flashes from his mind as the dreams bled through their connection.

He could also feel the echoes of the male’s weariness and fatigue. He could sense Sunne’s rising fear that he might be slowly losing his mind.

And there wasn’t a damn thing he could do to stop it.

He'd tear the Underworld apart and fight the gods themselves for his mate. But this? This was different. This wasn't something he could punch his way through. Without a tangible enemy to fight, he was fucking drowning.

That didn't mean he hadn't tried. Over the course of the past week, they had made multiple trips to the apothecary for a remedy. The first thing they'd tried had been actual valerian root, and as he'd suspected, it hadn't looked like radioactive rave dust.

He still didn't know what had been in the vial Aster had given Sunne. Even Paris had been at a loss when he'd described it, but the fae had speculated it likely hadn't been anything dangerous. Possibly even something as innocuous as colored sugar.

But why? Had Aster thought he'd been helping by giving Sunne a placebo? Or had he been manipulating him so he would be less inclined to seek help? Gods, he hated not having the answers.

Unfortunately, even real valerian hadn't worked. Nor had the ground poppies or the lemon balm tincture.

They had tried half a dozen different teas, going for walks along the river before bed, and he had even started reading to Sunne while he drifted off at night. Still, the dreams persisted.

"Do you mean information about Aster?" Sunne asked, staring up at him with sunken, bruised eyes.

"Yes," he growled.

"So, why did you want me to invite him to the diner? Doesn't that kind of defeat the point?"

“Erus needs to see him.” He didn’t want the witch anywhere near his mate, but he doubted Aster would have come if he had issued the invitation himself. “I don’t trust him, lelien . He’s up to something, and I want to know what it is.”

“I admit the vial he gave me is suspicious.” He tilted his head and shrugged. “Even if it was just sugar, I’d like to know why, so I’m in. What do you need me to do?”

Winding an arm around his shoulders, Tyr pulled him close and kissed the top of his head. “Just talk to him.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” Sunne mumbled around a wide yawn. “The kid never shuts up.”

Stopping outside the entrance of the diner, Tyr turned his mate to face him. “Just keep him busy for a few minutes. That’s it. And if things get weird—”

“I’ll let you know,” Sunne promised, his voice whispering into Tyr’s mind.

He still felt a shiver in his stomach every time Sunne addressed him through their bond. Of course, he enjoyed the connection for practical reasons, like safety and privacy. Mostly, however, he loved that he alone shared something so intimate and personal with the male.

A part of him no one else could touch.

“Ready?”

Sunne took a deep breath and released it slowly as he straightened his spine and pulled his shoulders back. “Ready.”

They found Aster already waiting when they entered, seated at Sunne’s favorite table

by the fireplace. His eyes lit up when he spotted them, and he lifted his hand in greeting, motioning for Sunne to join him.

It took everything in him to release his grip on Sunne's shoulder and purposely send him toward the mage. "Be careful how much you tell him."

Sunne pasted on a bright smile and returned Aster's wave. "Don't worry. I've got this."

They parted ways when they reached the table, Sunne sliding into the seat nearest the fire while Tyr continued to the booth at the back of the room. He kept his gait smooth and confident, forcing himself to look straight ahead, even when every instinct he possessed railed against him.

But at least he wouldn't be far away if things did go sideways. Reminding himself of that fact, he dropped onto the bench seat across from Orrin and his mate.

"What do you know about that kid?" he demanded without preamble.

"Well, hello to you, too," Erus deadpanned before lifting a chipped mug to his lips. "It is a nice day, isn't it?"

Tyr growled at the cocky god. "Cut the bullshit. You know why I asked you here."

"Ah, yes, your new mate." His dark eyes flashed across the room to Sunne. "Cute."

When Tyr growled again, Orrin placed a hand on Erus' elbow and smiled imploringly. Though they didn't speak, at least not out loud, the moment their eyes met, Erus sighed as if he had just lost an argument.

"Very well," he said a moment later. "You're lucky my mate likes you."

And the asshole was lucky Tyr didn't rip his throat out. Seemed like they all had something to be grateful for. Maybe they could bond over it later.

"What do you want to know?" he asked as he adjusted the gold cufflinks on his pretentious three-piece suit. "And why don't you just ask him? He is your mate, after all."

"Not Sunne," Tyr bit out through clenched teeth. "The kid sitting with him."

Orrin's eyebrows drew together, and his nose wrinkled as if he smelled something foul. Though he didn't comment, the subtle expression spoke volumes. The prince didn't like the bastard either.

"Aster Hornby." Erus leaned back in the booth as he studied the male. "Mage. Powerful."

Well, at least the kid hadn't lied about his name. Still, Erus hadn't revealed anything Tyr didn't already know. He gritted his teeth and waited, grasping at the threads of his fraying patience.

As a death deity, or maybe more death-adjacent, Erus didn't need ledgers or a directory. With one look, he knew a person's name, age, and other key details about them. If anyone in the Underworld could get to the heart of Aster's secrets, it was him.

"Very old."

Tyr stiffened, alarm bells ringing in his head. "How old?"

The god shrugged. "Hundreds of years. Let's just say he's been around the block more than once."

Not a kid. Not some lost, confused teenager who hadn't had enough time in life to learn boundaries or manners.

"What else?"

"He's a cunning little shit. Deeply committed to himself." Erus turned back to him with a bland expression. "And he seems quite attached to your mate."

Tyr sat up straighter, his muscles tense, and every sense on high alert. "What does that mean?"

The god shrugged. "Nothing, really. Just an observation."

"Sunne? Is everything okay?" He gripped the edge of the table until the wood creaked, only sheer force of will keeping him in his seat.

"I'm fine. We're discussing the welcome committee. He asked about the valerian root. What should I tell him?"

Tyr thought it over quickly. If Aster suspected duplicity, he might lash out, putting Sunne in the crossfire. Besides, all Erus had given him was proof that the mage was a self-serving liar.

In a place like the Underworld, that didn't exactly count as damning evidence.

"Tell him the truth."

"That you smashed it?"

Despite the seriousness of the situation, his lips twitched at the snarky comeback.

"Just tell him it didn't work. He doesn't need to know which version."

“Got it.”

“Anything else you want to know?” Erus asked, drawing Tyr’s attention back to him.

“Yeah, what’s his flavor of magic?”

Most witches gravitated toward spellcasting and potions, but some had been born with intrinsic abilities beyond the usual. Some could siphon powers and energy from others. Necromancers had been touched by death, giving them a unique set of capabilities. Others specialized in elemental enchantments or protection charms.

Knowing Aster’s magical leanings might provide some kind of clue about his goals.

Erus pursed his lips, a shadowed expression passing over his countenance. “It’s tangled. There’s something else that shouldn’t be there, but I can tell you, at his core, he’s a dream spinner.”

Tyr was on his feet before he had registered the intent to move, a dark, primal growl spilling from his lips.

Dream magic wasn’t just rare or unique. It was a brand of magic most witches didn’t advertise, the kind that made everyone a little uneasy when they heard it. It infected the mind, eroding and manipulating. In its darkest form, it turned dreams into hellscapes and planted seeds that shouldn’t be there.

It all made sense now. Aster’s unusual attachment to his mate. Sunne’s relentless nightmares. He didn’t know what the witch wanted or what he hoped to accomplish, but he wouldn’t rest until he found out.

“Tyr? What is it?” Rushing across the room, Sunne ran directly into his arms, stroking his chest, his neck, and his beard in soothing caresses. “What happened?”

He clutched Sunne to his chest, wrapping him in the protective circle of his arms.

“Where is he?” he demanded, his gaze landing on the empty table by the hearth.

“Where the fuck did he go? He was right there!”

He snarled in frustration, his body primed for a confrontation that had never come. Still, he took comfort in the knowledge that Sunne was safe, and for the moment, that would have to be enough. As soon as he got him somewhere more secure, however, he planned to hunt down the slippery bastard.

And when he found him, he would enjoy teaching him why it was a bad idea to fuck with a Guardian’s mate.

“You couldn’t have led with that?” he insisted, jerking his head around to glare at Erus.

“Why would I?”

Though he wanted to growl and rage, it was a fair question. Without context, asking about a witch’s particular variety of magic was about as useful as asking what color eyes they had.

“Led with what?” Sunne asked, his head whipping back and forth between Tyr and Erus. “What happened? What’s going on?”

Recognizing the rising panic, Tyr smoothed the silky strands back from Sunne’s face and stroked his soft cheeks. “Everything will be okay, but we’re going to go stay at the castle for a little while.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ll be safe there.”

When Sunne continued to stare at him, his gaze questioning, Tyr sighed and gave him the abridged version of what he had learned from Erus.

“Okay,” Sunne said when he finished.

“That’s it?”

“What do you want me to say? You were right.” Sunne pursed his lips and glared.
“Don’t let it go to your head.”

Smirking at his wry tone, Tyr shifted to the side to speak to Orrin. “I’m taking him to the castle.”

It wasn’t a request, but Orrin nodded. “I’ll come with you.”

“And I have a meeting,” Erus announced.

“Please be tactful this time.”

“Asteraki, you wound me.” The god made a big show of pressing his hand over his heart and adopting a sullen expression. “I am the epitome of tact.”

“Of course.” A sardonic grin curved Orrin’s lips as he brushed an imaginary piece of lint from his mate’s shoulder. “That’s why you came home with a black eye and a bruised lip last time.”

“It’s not my fault Hades can’t take a joke.”

Leaving the gods to their bickering, Tyr led his mate across the diner to the exit.

Orrin could take them to the castle with a snap of his fingers, but at this rate, it would probably be faster to walk.

Outside, he searched the streets, growling when he didn't find any sign of Aster. The guy might be powerful, but he was still just a mage. As such, he shouldn't have been able to poof himself out of the fucking room. So, where the hell was he?

They had only taken a couple of steps when Sunne stumbled, falling against Tyr's side, his entire body limp.

"Sunne!"

With a quiet groan, he pressed a hand to his temple and jerked his head like he was trying to shake off a bad memory. "I'm okay."

He didn't look okay. The blood had drained from his face, making his complexion appear pale and waxy, highlighting the deep shadows underneath his eyes.

When Tyr continued to fret over him, Sunne brushed his hands away and stood straight, an odd smile on his lips. "I'm okay, really. Just got a little dizzy."

He sidestepped when Tyr reached for him again and clasped his hands together behind his back. "Come on. Let's go home."

Tyr watched him walk away with a frown. "We're going to the castle."

"Right. That's what I meant." He chuckled, the sound distant and hollow. "Sorry. I'm so tired I can't even think right now."

While his explanation made sense, Tyr couldn't shake the feeling that there was something more, something Sunne wasn't telling him. Before he could work it out,

though, the door opened behind him, the screech of the hinges reverberating down the empty street.

“Do you prefer to walk?” Orrin asked, shaking back the sleeves of his silver robes. “Or should I speed things along?”

It went against every instinct he possessed, but Tyr shook his head and took a step back. “Take Sunne to the castle. I have to find Aster.”

“I’ll keep him safe,” Orrin vowed, walking forward to join Sunne. “Should I send Rune and Sindri?”

Tyr shook his head again. He’d feel better knowing they were at the castle protecting his mate.

“I love you,” he said, sending the words directly to Sunne’s mind.

Sunne stared back at him, his eyes glazed and vacant. He didn’t respond or react in any way.

Then...he was gone.

Chapter nine

S unne came awake with a gasp, the remnants of a dream still clinging to the fringes of his mind.

While all his dreams these days tended to leave him vaguely unsettled, this might have been the most disturbing one yet. In it, he had been standing in a stone courtyard beneath a full moon, a thick book with frail, yellowed pages clutched between his hands.

Across from him, bound in a circle of runes and candlelight, there had been a cloaked figure. Though he hadn't been able to make out the face, he had felt the rage radiating from beneath the robes.

After that, the details became a little murky. He remembered that they had struck a deal. For power, maybe? Magic? Whatever it was, it had come with an underlying sense of something dangerous and forbidden. Something he wasn't supposed to have.

"It was just a dream," he reminded himself, speaking the words out loud to ground himself in reality.

Sitting up in the bed, he rubbed his eyes, then stretched his arms over his head with a quiet groan. His exhaustion must have finally caught up with him because he didn't even remember falling asleep. Worse, he didn't remember making it home.

No, not home. Not the apartment he shared with Tyr. He was at Orrin's castle, which explained why the mattress beneath him felt...wrong.

Tossing back the blankets, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and spent a few seconds contemplating if he really wanted to get up. Eventually, his demanding bladder won out, and he pushed to his feet and went in search of a bathroom.

He found the door to the en suite on the other side of the room, the doorway illuminated by white light that invited him across the threshold. Shuffling across the cold tiles, he lowered his head and squinted as his eyes adjusted to the brightness.

While he had never been inside a castle before, he had expected it to be a little more luxurious, or maybe charmingly rustic in a historical kind of way. In actuality, the bathroom was pretty normal.

While it had the basics—a toilet tucked away in the corner across from a standard shower, and an unframed oval mirror over a pedestal sink—it lacked that extra touch. In fact, it reminded him of the bathroom in his tiny studio apartment back in Louisiana.

Once he had relieved himself, he stumbled toward the sink, his eyes heavy, and his brain still foggy from sleep. Reaching for the tap, he glanced up, curious if the dark circles under his eyes had improved with rest.

And his entire world ground to a screeching halt.

On the bright side, the deep purple lines had definitely vanished, but only because the face staring back from the mirror didn't belong to him. Eyes the color of spring grass widened, and a face round from youth slackened with shock. Though he knew he controlled the expression, he still couldn't process what he was seeing.

“What the hell?”

He clapped a hand over his mouth, his heart racing as his adrenaline spiked. Yes, he

had spoken the words, but the voice that had come out of his mouth didn't belong to him.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he chanted, tangling his fingers in his shaggy curls as he spun away from the mirror. "This is not happening. It's just a dream." His vision blurred, and blood roared in his ears as he gasped for every breath. "I'm dreaming. It's just a dream. This isn't real."

It felt pretty goddamn real, though. Even if he had no explanation for why he was wearing Aster's face like a Halloween mask.

Maybe his mind had finally cracked from the strain of too many sleepless nights. If not a dream, perhaps he had descended into waking hallucinations.

Turning back to the mirror, he gripped the edges of the sink and screwed his eyes closed. Then he took several deep breaths before forcing them open again. Aster's face still stared back at him, the expression a mixture of shock and horror.

"This is fine," he told the reflection. "Totally fine. No need to panic." He was absolutely panicking. "It's just a little bodysnatching. I can fix this."

But he couldn't do it on his own. He needed help, the magical kind, because he didn't even know how to start unraveling this. He also needed to find his mate...and his body.

"Oh, shit."

The idea of Aster strutting around the village, cosplaying as him, made his hands shake and his stomach churn. He didn't even want to think about what the guy was doing while pretending to be him.

No, this kind of stuff didn't happen in real life. Right? It was probably just a glamour spell, an illusion to make him look like Aster. They hadn't actually switched bodies because that would be insane.

And pointless.

Sunne didn't have any powers or influence. What could the witch possibly hope to accomplish by trading places with him?

He didn't know, and moreover, answers would have to wait. Right then, he needed to find Tyr. Maybe Orrin. Probably an exorcist.

In the doorway of the en suite, he paused, realization finally sinking in that this wasn't a spare room in the castle. Rather, he was inside Aster's apartment at the Tower. He recognized a pair of the witch's boots in the open closet and the jacket hanging on the back of the bedroom door.

Otherwise, it appeared completely mundane. No candles, spellbooks, or runes scribbled on the floors and walls. Nothing that would suggest the witch had been plotting against him this whole time.

Striding down a short, narrow hallway, he came to the main part of the unit. Utilitarian in design, with sterile white walls and sad gray tiles, only a single beige sofa and a rickety coffee table occupied the room. A postage-stamp-sized kitchen took up the back wall, comprised of a tiny stove and an outdated refrigerator that appeared to be held together by magic and hope.

Tyr had tried to tell him. He had tried to explain that most apartments in the Tower looked and functioned like this one. Sunne hadn't believed him. To do so would have meant accepting that something about him was different, special, and he could more easily believe in bodysnatching than he could that.

Debating whether he should search the closets before leaving, he jerked back, stumbling several steps, when three loud bangs rattled the front door.

“Aster, open this fucking door!”

Despite the ire dripping from every word, relief flooded him at the sound of the familiar voice. He rushed to the door and jerked it open, ridiculously happy to be standing face to face with over six and a half feet of enraged shifter.

“Tyr, something happened. I don’t—”

His words came to an abrupt halt when long fingers closed around his throat and slammed him against the wall beside the doorframe.

“What do you want with Sunne?” he demanded, his eyes dark with anger.

“Tyr, it’s me,” he screamed through their bond, grabbing his mate’s wrist while his toes groped for purchase on the floor. “It’s me. Sunne.”

The shifter pulled him forward by the throat, then slammed him against the wall again. “You did something to him. You’ve been fucking with his head for weeks. Why?”

“Tyr!” he gasped aloud. “Tyr, it’s really me. It’s Sunne. I don’t know how, but I swear it’s me.”

“Bullshit,” his mate snarled back. “I just left Sunne with Orrin.”

He tried to shake his head, but the hand on his throat kept him immobile. “You left Aster with Orrin. You have to believe me. He switched us.”

“You’re lying.”

But Sunne could see the flash of doubt in his mate’s eyes, and he felt the fingers loosen around his neck. A small crack in his certainty, but it was enough.

“Can you hear me?” he asked, trying to reach him through their mating bond again.

He was met with deafening silence. Something was blocking him, cutting off his connection to his mate. Even without evidence, he could feel it, an empty ache inside him where something important should have been.

He didn’t have time to mourn the loss, though, not when he needed to find some way to plead his case. Talking about himself wouldn’t prove anything, and he doubted it would convince the Guardian. So, he searched deeper, grasping for something that only the two of them would know.

“Our first kiss was by the river.” Even if Aster or someone else had witnessed the moment through a clouded window, they wouldn’t have known it was their first. “It’s also where you told me I can’t save everyone, which I’m still kind of annoyed about. You make it sound like I’m out here trying to be Captain Save a Soul, when really, I just wanted a fucking sign at the pier.”

The hand on his throat vanished, and he suddenly found himself enveloped in a pair of strong, muscular arms.

Sighing, he burrowed into Tyr’s embrace, letting the warmth and comfort soothe his frazzled nerves. “Was it the kiss or the Captain Save a Soul that convinced you?”

Tyr’s whole body vibrated with his laughter. “As soon as this is over, I promise we’ll put up a sign.”

But first, they needed to find Aster.

“We need to go. I really don’t want to think about what that asshole is doing with my body.” Pulling away, he tilted his head back and glared up at his mate. “You didn’t kiss him, did you?”

With a snort, Tyr grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him toward the open doorway. “No, I didn’t kiss him.”

“Well, you can’t kiss me either. Not while I’m in this body.” He shuddered. “Gross.”

“Duly noted. Can we go now?”

They jogged out of the unit and down the corridor to the bank of elevators, Sunne lengthening his strides to keep pace with his mate. Taking the lift didn’t have the same gravitas or urgency as charging down seventy-seven flights of stairs, but it was certainly more practical.

Besides, the Tower didn’t even have stairs.

The gold-plated doors slid closed behind them when they entered the cab, then immediately opened again with a clear view of the lobby. Sometimes, he really loved magic.

“Thanks,” he said, patting the wall fondly before hurrying after Tyr.

Outside, the shifter pivoted to the right, choosing the most expedient path instead of following the winding cobbled road. Sunne turned on a burst of speed but still struggled to keep up as his feet sank into the loose sand.

They had just cleared the edge of the village when Tyr came to an abrupt stop.

Lagging behind, Sunne didn't immediately understand why until Tyr shifted his weight to the side, giving him a clear view of the figure standing in front of him.

"Sunne is gone," Orrin said, his voice strung tight with anxiety.

"What the hell do you mean he's gone?" Tyr demanded, taking a threatening step forward.

Orrin didn't retreat, and he didn't try to placate either. "I mean he's gone. When we arrived at the castle, he wasn't with me." A quiet, understated growl filled with annoyance spilled from the prince's lips. "Rune and Sindri are out looking for him now."

"That's not Sunne." Reaching behind him, Tyr took hold of his arm and dragged him forward. "This is Sunne."

He lifted his hand and offered a little wave. "Hi."

Orrin cocked his head, his brow creased, and a mask of total bafflement etched into the lines of his face. A valid response, but he didn't know where to begin explaining the situation he'd found himself in.

"They soul shifted?"

Sunne blinked at the prince. "Is that a thing? Like, this has happened before?"

"Not here."

Oh, good. He wouldn't want this to be easy or anything. "So, how do we shift our souls back?"

“We need to find Aster.”

Yeah, no shit. He had kind of worked that much out for himself. “Where would he go? What is he even trying to do?”

No one, it seemed, had an answer.

“We’ll find him,” Orrin assured. “He can’t have gotten far, and there are only so many places to hide in the village.”

“Unless he’s not in the village.” Dread turned his veins to ice as he stared out over the river at the bottom of the hill.

Tyr immediately started shaking his head. “No. No, he wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t cross.”

Only he sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than Sunne.

Taking Tyr’s wrist, he gave it a comforting squeeze, but he addressed the prince when he spoke. “Is there a way we can know for sure? Someone we can ask?”

Orrin dipped his head, and in the next instant, Sunne found himself standing on the rickety pier, Tyr’s arm still clutched in his hand. Then, before he could even shake off the disorientation, a longboat appeared from the darkness, gliding silently over the surface of the water.

It came to a smooth stop beside the dock, a shadowed, hooded figure at its helm.

“Did you ferry a soul across the river just now?” Orrin asked, his tone surprisingly conversational, all things considered.

“I am bound by the laws of Hades to ferry the dead to their eternal resting place,” the figure answered, his tone deep, hollow, and ringing.

Tyr growled. “Knock it off, asshole. I don’t have time for your community theater. Just answer the fucking question.”

Sunne held his breath when the cloaked male reached for his hood and slid it back from his face, but the reveal ended up being pretty anticlimactic. Rather than a skull or a twisted visage, he found himself staring into a pair of bright amber eyes that twinkled with mischief.

Wearing a disarming smile, the ferryman ran a hand through his blond hair in a futile attempt to tame the wild curls. “Chill, man.”

“Charon.”

“Fine, yes, I took a kid across the river. What’s the big deal?”

Damn, this place just kept getting weirder. Sunne had expected Charon, the fabled ferryman of the dead, to be...well, not this. The guy looked and spoke more like he should be crushing beer cans against his forehead at a fraternity kegger.

“What did he look like?” he asked, stepping around Tyr.

Charon shrugged. “Young. Dark hair.” His smile stretched a little wider. “Pretty eyes, but kind of a dick.”

Aw, he thought Sunne had pretty eyes? That was nice. The dick part, not so much.

“Yeah, that sounds like him.”

“Did he give a name?” Orrin asked, ever the practical one.

The ferryman bobbed his head. “Asher? Usher? I don’t know. Something like that.”

Tyr didn’t even wait for him to finish speaking before stepping off the dock and into the boat. The craft didn’t rock or sway. It didn’t even sink deeper into the water under his weight.

“Come, lelien .” He held his hand out, urging Sunne into the longboat with him.

Gripping one of the splintered posts, Orrin shook his head. “Are you sure you want to do this? You know the laws.”

“Fuck the laws,” he growled back. “I’m going to get my mate.”

Sunne glanced between them, his pulse racing at the tension simmering beneath their words. “What laws? Tyr, what is he talking about?”

“Your knight in shining rage bear isn’t allowed to cross the river,” Charon answered with a cheery smile. “Big no no. Zero stars. Would not recommend.”

“What will happen if you cross?” he demanded.

Tyr didn’t offer him platitudes or white lies about how everything would work out. Instead, he tugged on Sunne’s hand, pulling him into the boat and wrapping an arm around his waist.

“What will happen if I don’t?”

Sunne knew he couldn’t do this on his own, and he really didn’t want to be stuck in Aster’s body for the rest of eternity. He also had a little voice in the back of his head

whispering that this wasn't over. The real reason Aster had switched places with him had yet to reveal itself, and that thought alone terrified him.

Still, he couldn't ask Tyr to risk everything for him.

"Maybe there's another way."

"Maybe, but there's no time."

"But Hades—"

"Will get over it," Tyr interrupted. His eyes softened, and he reached up to cup Sunne's cheek in his big hand. "You would do it for me."

Without hesitation. Without claws or fangs or magic. If someone had taken Tyr from him, he'd wage wars to find him and bring him home.

"Then let's go get my body back and make that little witch pay."

His mate chuckled and cuffed him gently on the side of the head. "Now you're speaking my language."

"I'm coming with you." Orrin lifted the hem of his robes and prepared to enter the boat.

"No," Tyr and Sunne barked in unison.

Sunne appreciated the prince's willingness, but he wouldn't put anyone else in danger. Not for him.

Tyr, however, had other reasons for keeping the prince on that side of the river. "I

need you to get a message to Hades. Let him know what happened.”

Taking a step back, Orrin dropped his robes and answered with a sharp nod. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Oh, we’re breaking all the rules.” Charon laughed and rubbed his hands together. “I knew I liked you guys.”

Tyr rolled his eyes and shoved the guy toward the back of the boat. “Just go.”

“Lighten up, my dude.” He held his hands up in a pacifying gesture when Tyr snarled at him. “Fine. I’m going. I’m going.”

Without warning, the boat slid away from the pier and started gliding back across the river. There was no sound, and no waves broke against the hull. In fact, if Sunne hadn’t seen the shoreline shrinking in the distance, he wouldn’t have guessed they were moving at all.

Disembodied souls floated past, their eerie glow the only light that illuminated the way as they crossed the River Acheron. And as the pier disappeared behind them, swallowed by the darkness, Sunne felt something shift inside him, something cold and penetrating.

His vision blurred, and a high-pitched hum rang in his ears. Aching pressure built in his temples, then a wave of dizziness washed over him, forcing him to grab onto Tyr’s arm or risk toppling over the edge of the boat.

“What’s wrong?” Tyr demanded, holding him upright with steady hands. “Lelien , what is it?”

“I don’t know.” Shaking his head to clear the fog, he stared up at Tyr, his body taut

with anxiety. “Something’s happening.” He could feel another consciousness pressing at him from all sides, creeping, slithering, searching for a way inside. “I think...we’re changing back.”

Chapter ten

Aster's eyes rolled back in his head, and he sagged forward, his body wilting against Tyr's side. While concerned about what this meant for his mate—wherever he was now—he couldn't stop the feral grin that split his lips.

Aster had thought himself clever, able to fool even the gods, and that hubris would be his downfall.

Tyr suspected the spell reversal had been intentional. He doubted, however, that Aster had expected it to happen on a boat in the middle of the river. The little bastard had nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and he had just delivered himself right into the hands of the one person in the Underworld he most wanted to avoid.

The mage stirred with a quiet groan, stretching his neck and rubbing his arms as if settling back into his own body. "Ah, that's better."

"Everything okay?" Tyr asked, enjoying the way Aster's eyes flared with apprehension.

"Uh, yeah, sorry. I think I passed out there for a second."

"No need to be sorry," Tyr told him. "Everything will be over soon."

Aster nodded, his eyes darting from side to side. "Right. You know, maybe this isn't such a good idea. We don't even know where he went."

“Don’t worry.” He took a step toward the witch, forcing him back, herding him toward the front of the boat. “I have a good feeling we’re going to find him.”

“Love.” He choked the word out, his lips twisting as if he had tasted something sour. “I think we should go back. This is dangerous.”

“Oh, it’s very dangerous.”

Aster seemed taken aback for a moment, but he recovered quickly, giving him a saccharine smile. “Exactly. It’s not worth it. We can find another way.” He reached toward Tyr with a trembling hand. “Let’s go home.”

“Okay,” he answered easily. “I just need to know something first.”

The mage blinked back at him, his gaze filled with false innocence. “What is that?”

In one swift, lethal move, Tyr caught him by the collar of his shirt and lifted him over the edge of the boat, dangling him above the river.

“Whoa!” Charon called. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Back off,” he barked when the ferryman tried to approach, his gaze never leaving Aster. “Tell me where my mate is?”

Holding Tyr’s arm in a frantic grip, he glanced down at the water, then back, his eyes bulging with panic. “Tyr! What are you doing? It’s me. It’s Sunne!”

“Where is my mate?” he asked again. “What did you do to him?”

“Tyr, this is crazy! I swear, it’s me! Ask me. Ask me anything.”

A deep, resonating growl shook his chest. “If I were you, I’d choose my next words carefully.”

Their eyes locked, understanding passing between them. Tyr knew the truth, and Aster had realized it. One move away from checkmate, and everything came down to the witch’s next play.

“Oh, okay.” Abandoning the frightened fawn act, he adopted a cocky grin as he studied Tyr through narrowed eyes. “What gave me away?”

Tired of the game, Tyr shook him roughly. “Where is Sunne? I won’t ask you again.”

“Right where he’s supposed to be,” he answered cryptically. “One soul judged and remitted to the afterlife. That’s how the system works, right?”

Tyr stilled, every muscle in his body clenched with rage.

He had been working off the assumption that the body swap had been a distraction. Something to keep them chasing their tails while Aster snuck across the river. Maybe in search of an artifact or talisman, or maybe even a loophole to this whole death thing.

If he had passed through the Gates of Judgement, though, it was so much worse than anything Tyr could have imagined.

The scales that determined a person’s fate weighed the soul. Not the vessel. Once judged, the results—good or bad—were immediate and immutable. The dead received no appeals, no do-overs, and no chance to plead their case.

Aster had just pulled off a soul heist that had the potential to shake the very foundations of the Underworld. He had hijacked Sunne’s body to face his own

judgment, then reversed the spell, leaving Sunne to pay for his sins for the rest of eternity.

Now, he could only hope Aster had even a shred of decency in him, just enough goodness to land him a lesser sentence. While still places of eternal punishment, at least Sunne had a chance in the Whisper Woods or the Catacombs.

No one survived the Tombs.

“Start talking, or so help me—”

“You’ll what? Kill me?”

“No. You’re already dead.” But Tyr could make sure he no longer existed.

Aster watched him, an unreadable expression in his eyes. “So, you’ll what? Erase me? Throw me in the river?” He pressed his lips together and shook his head. “What would your mate think?”

“He’ll get over it.”

“Maybe, but will you? Can you live with that guilt?” His chest heaved with a deep sigh. “I don’t think you can.”

Tyr smirked. “You’re wrong.”

Then he uncurled his fingers and pulled his hand back, watching with a kind of primal satisfaction as Aster fell toward the water with a startled gasp. There was no splash, no disturbance. Only a shower of emerald light that flared and dissipated when he broke the surface.

“We’re almost there,” Charon said into the silence that followed.

Tyr turned and raised an eyebrow at his casual tone.

“What? He panicked and jumped into the river. Happens all the time.”

Tyr could only shake his head at the ferryman.

As they neared the far shore, thin rays of silver light began to break through the darkness, casting a cold hue across the sands. Overhead, blackness gave way to a sky of glittering stars and iridescent clouds, while a warm, fragrant breeze blew over the lake.

The longboat slowed, gliding to a stop next to a wide dock, its polished wood gleaming in the starlight.

“Good luck,” Charon told him as he stepped out of the boat. “I hope you find your mate.”

Then he sailed away, disappearing into the darkness once more.

“You aren’t supposed to be here,” a voice rang out from the other end of the landing.

Though he had only met Hades on two other occasions, he wasn’t the kind of person someone forgot. A mane of hair the color of moonlight swept behind him in the wind, and his eyes narrowed when Tyr approached.

“And yet, here I am.”

“Here you are.” The god rested his hands on his hips, his leather jacket in an offensive shade of neon pink bunching at the hem. “What happened to the witch?”

“I threw him in the river,” Tyr answered without a hint of remorse. “He had it coming.”

To his surprise, Hades grinned. “You’re not wrong. Still, a shame that it ended so quickly.”

Tyr shrugged. “It was efficient. What did he do anyway? I mean, besides soul snatching my mate.”

Which he doubted Hades cared about. If he had taken an interest in Aster, it had to be something bigger.

“Oh, not much. He just murdered thirteen people, rode their souls to the Underworld, then loopholed himself right the fuck out of judgment.” A quiet, menacing growl punctuated his words, and his obsidian eyes flared with an orange glow.

Tyr perked up. Yes, murder, spells, soul-jacking—all bad. Very sad. But he only cared about the last part of that little rant.

“What judgment? What was his punishment?”

Hades sighed. “Your mate is in the Whisper Woods.”

“How do I get there?”

“I’ll take you. Save your mate, if you can, but this isn’t over.” He wagged his thumb between them. “You broke the rules. There will be consequences.”

Tyr nodded his understanding. Once he brought Sunne back, he’d face whatever Hades had waiting for him.

“Take me to my mate.”

“Very well.”

The stars blinked out, the breeze stilled, and the sparkling shoreline disappeared as a vast field opened up before him. At its edges, a stone archway that seemingly led nowhere loomed in the darkness, surrounded by an ominous, ancient forest of twisted trees.

Tyr cast a sideways glance at the god. “This is it?”

“This is it,” Hades confirmed. “Careful you don’t get lost.”

“You know he doesn’t deserve this.”

“I do.”

“You could bring him back yourself.”

“I could,” Hades agreed with a nod.

Tyr grunted in frustration. “Then why don’t you?”

Hades stared straight ahead, his eyes trained on the archway. “Things like this exact a price.” Finally, he turned, his black gaze boring into Tyr’s soul. “If you want your mate back, only you can pay it.”

Taking a deep breath, Tyr released it slowly and squared his shoulders. If the Underworld wanted payment, he would give it with interest.

With a last look at the god, he turned and began marching across the field toward the

forest.

“Oh, one more thing,” Hades called after him.

He paused and looked over his shoulder.

“A little brute force wouldn’t go amiss.”

Nodding his understanding, he continued forward, feeling a familiar but neglected surge of power course through him.

His muscles bulged and expanded, rending the fabric of his shirt and ripping his leathers at the seams. His bones cracked, shifted, and realigned. Paws the size of hubcaps shredded the leather of his boots, leaving only scraps to trail behind him. His skin rippled as thick fur the color of midnight blanketed his body, the pelt absorbing the ambient light around him.

The transformation took only seconds, and when it was finished, he towered over the field, the top of the archway now at eye level. Every breath came as a harsh, deep rumble, and his powerful limbs crashed through the underbrush as he strode toward the entrance of the Whisper Woods.

Prepared to take back his mate by whatever means necessary.

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Chapter eleven

O n a positive note, Sunne had woken up in his own body this time. Unfortunately, his body happened to be in hell. And he knew exactly who to blame for it.

As he and Aster had traded places for the last time, the mage had left him with a smug parting shot.

“Enjoy the Whisper Woods, sunshine.”

While he didn’t normally condone violence, in this instance, he might be willing to make an exception.

Black trees with knotted trunks crowded together, leaving only winding paths through the dense woods. Leaves rustled in the breeze, whispering to him as he passed, but no matter how much he strained, he couldn’t make out their words.

And it never stopped.

The voices followed him, a constant murmur that filled his ears and burrowed into his mind. Sometimes, he would hear his name called, or so he thought. When he would turn to look, however, he found only trees and thorny, tangled undergrowth.

The thick canopies blotted out the sky, yet a steady rain covered the forest. The icy drops pattered against the ground, soaking everything it touched and forming puddles along the muddy trails.

Tightening his hood, Sunne ducked his head as he traveled the worn path, searching for...something. Food? Shelter? A way out? He didn't know, but he felt compelled to keep walking.

The scent of damp moss and rotting wood swirled on the wind, along with something sickeningly sweet he couldn't quite place. It lingered, saturating the air, and every breath pulled the odor deeper into his lungs, stinging his nose and making his stomach roil.

He didn't know how long he'd been wandering the forest, but it felt like eternity, and he had yet to encounter another soul. Still, he swore he heard footsteps—creeping, stalking, keeping pace with him from somewhere within the trees. Twice, he'd caught a flash of green, a pair of glowing eyes, but when he'd stopped to investigate, they had vanished from sight.

Back in the village, he had heard murmurs about a place called the Tombs, spoken in only hushed tones like a story told around a campfire. It was a place of damnation, of punishment, reserved for only the most wicked. A place where hope went to die.

People feared it, and for good reason, but he had never heard them speak about the Whisper Woods. Maybe they didn't know of its existence. Or maybe they pictured it as more of a slap on the wrist, a timeout given for bad behavior.

They'd be wrong.

While not physically painful—a fact for which he was immeasurably grateful—he didn't know how long he could withstand the psychological torment. Constantly on edge, paranoia had already started to pollute him, making him suspicious of every creak and groan of the forest.

Rounding a bend in the path, he came to a sudden stop, his heart thundering inside his

chest when he felt a familiar presence pushing at his mind.

“Tyr? Tyr, can you hear me?”

His only reply was the constant whispering of the leaves.

Sunne sighed and shook his head. Of course, Tyr wasn't there. While he had no doubt his mate would come for him if he could, he didn't think the Whisper Woods was a place the shifter could follow.

Sighing, he rounded his shoulders against the rain and started walking again.

Still, no matter how much he tried to convince himself that he had imagined it, the familiar feeling stayed with him, pressing against him with a comforting weight. It built, growing stronger with each step, until he couldn't ignore it any longer.

“Tyr!” he shouted inside his mind. “Tyr! Where are you? I can feel you. I know you're here. Please answer me.”

Again, he was met with only silence.

Maybe it was a trick of the forest, a mimicry designed to elicit a flicker of hope, only to extinguish it. To make him think someone was coming for him, when in fact, Tyr probably didn't even know where he'd gone. Cunning, cruel, and highly effective as a means of torment.

Then, when he thought things couldn't get worse, the Whisper Woods once again proved him wrong.

A frigid wind howled through the trees, cutting through his jacket and stinging his exposed skin. Rain whipped around him, pelting his face like tiny shards of glass, and

a dense, impenetrable fog rolled out of the forest to swallow the trail. It swirled around his ankles and up his legs, rising from the ground and dispersing until it blanketed everything in its path.

The icy fingers of fear crawled down Sunne's back, and his heartbeat pulsed in his throat, but he kept going, compelled deeper into the unknown. He moved slower now, every step uncertain, but he never stopped, driven by a desperate need to find something—or someone.

“Tyr!” he tried again, still grasping to his last shred of hope. “Tyr!”

This time, he was met with not silence, but a crackling buzz, like static on the radio.

His breath caught, and he spun in a circle, squinting through the fog, but he could make out only the blurred shadows of the surrounding trees.

“Tyr! Can you hear me? Tyr!”

“I hear you, lelien . There's no need to shout.”

A sob tore from his throat, the sound deadened by the fog, and his legs trembled, threatening to give out from under him. By some miracle, he managed to remain upright, stumbling forward blindly with renewed determination.

“Where are you?”

“I'm coming for you,” Tyr promised. “Stay on the trail. I'll find you.”

Sunne clung to the promise as he stumbled through the fog, his mind a wild, vibrating tangle of emotions. Cold water seeped into the denim around his ankles as he splashed through the deep puddles. It sloshed inside his sneakers, numbing his toes

and making every step echo with an uncomfortable squelch.

“What if you can’t find me?” he asked, giving voice to his clawing anxiety. “What if we’re both trapped here forever?”

“Just stay on the trail,” Tyr repeated. He sounded calm, confident, leaving no room for niggling doubts. “I will find you.”

Suddenly, a low, rasping growl pierced the quiet, reverberating through the mist and sending chills down Sunne’s spine. He froze, his breath hitching, his eyes darting frantically in search of the source.

Then everything went quiet. Even the whispers stopped, plunging him into the kind of eerie silence that squeezed and suffocated.

“Tyr?” he called into the gloom.

That revoltingly sweet aroma intensified, reminiscent of spoiled honey drizzled over something long dead. The putrid stench invaded his nostrils and clogged his throat, provoking a violent gag that made his eyes water. Saliva flooded his mouth when his stomach revolted, forcing bile back up his esophagus, but he swallowed thickly, refusing to give in to his body’s weakness.

“It’s not real,” he told himself. “It’s just a trick.”

Another illusion. Another mindfuck, courtesy of the damned forest, meant to keep him on edge, afraid, and paralyzed.

He took a step, then another, putting one foot in front of the other, his confidence growing when nothing horrible happened.

Until it did.

Something hard and sticky slammed into him from the side, the impact lifting him off his feet and sending him sailing through the air. He smashed into the thick trunk of a nearby tree, the bark scraping against his hands and cheeks, then crumpled to the ground with a wet thud.

He wheezed out a sharp breath as the air was forced from his lungs, but he didn't have time to collect himself or regroup. Rolling through the mud, he pushed into a semi-upright position and scrambled away from the path, crab-walking until his shoulder blades met with the tree again.

It emerged from the fog, silent, predatory.

Prowling through the mist, it towered over him like an inky shadow, its black fur matted and patchy, revealing the rotting flesh that sloughed in sheets from its body. Stark white vertebrae protruded from the skin along its spine, and its face had disintegrated in places, revealing a misshapen skull beneath.

Once upon a time, it might have been a wolf, but only in the loosest sense of the definition.

The beast's lips had rotted away, leaving only rows of sharp, yellowed teeth tinged in red and dripping with things Sunne would rather not contemplate. Every breath sounded like a death rattle, a garbled huff that caused black foam to bubble at the corners of its gaping mouth.

Sunne pressed himself against the tree, his heart pounding in his ears and thudding against his sternum. The fact that he was already dead did nothing to lessen the chilling terror that consumed him.

The Whisper Woods were supposed to be a place of eternal punishment. Being ripped apart by a hellspawn didn't feel all that eternal, meaning he would likely survive the attack, and somehow, that was even more horrifying.

Would he become like the wolf? Wandering the forest while he slowly rotted from the inside out? Or would he simply respawn like some unhinged video game, only to repeat the process again and again until he went mad?

His breaths came in ragged gasps now, his chest heaving as he struggled to come to terms with his own impending fate. The wolf crept closer, its crimson eyes burning with a feral light that promised pain. Though it moved silently, every step seemed to echo throughout the forest like a ticking clock.

He squeezed his eyes closed, unable to face the inevitable, but the darkness didn't bring relief. Instead, it became a blank canvas for his imagination to paint the carnage that awaited him.

Time slowed, stilled, each second dragging out into an eternity. Even with his eyes closed, he could feel the beast closing in, could smell the decay on its breath. He clawed at the sodden earth, his fingers digging into the mud as he grasped for something real to hold on to.

And then there was silence. A final, deafening pause before the world exploded around him.

Branches snapped and trunks splintered, the ancient trees bowing to the raw power that ripped through the forest. Then a loud, primal roar rent the air, echoing through the mist like a thunderclap that shook the ground and sent a shiver through the woods.

Startled out of his panic, Sunne's eyes snapped open, and his lips parted in a silent scream as dirt, leaves, and rotted wood exploded out of the darkness. The reprieve

from sudden death triggered survival instincts that had been rendered numb, and he launched to his feet to dive behind the tree. Crouched away from the danger, he peeked around the massive trunk, his body primed for flight as he watched the battle rage.

At least eight feet tall at the withers and covered in glistening ebony fur, the bear charged out of the woods like a dark, vengeful god. The very fabric of reality seemed to bend around his hulking frame, and the atmosphere crackled as it reacted to his fury.

But Sunne wasn't afraid, not anymore. Salvation had arrived in a blur of fangs and claws...and one very pissed off mate.

Grunts, growls, and threatening chuffs rang out, and blood painted the nearby trees as the beasts bit and clawed at each other. Again and again, they came together in a clash of teeth and rage, rolling across the ground and slamming into trees as they vied for dominance, for victory.

Though brutal, the fight didn't last long, concluding with a fearsome roar and an ear-splitting howl, the latter cut off abruptly with hollow finality.

"You can come out now, lelien ," Tyr whispered into his mind a few moments later.

Still shaking, Sunne stepped out from behind the tree and took a reluctant step back onto the path. "Is it dead?"

The bear—his mate—chuffed, almost like a laugh, as it turned to face him. "Of course. Did you doubt me?"

"Not even for a second." Rushing forward, he wrapped his arm around the creature's front leg and burrowed into the thick fur. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

The air shimmered and vibrated when his mate transformed, his bones crunching and grinding as they realigned. When the shift was complete, Tyr stood before him, naked, battle-worn, and wearing a smug, content grin.

“I told you I’d find you.”

Relieved laughter bubbled up inside him and burst from his mouth. “Cutting it a little close, don’t you think?”

Tyr shrugged. “You know I like to make an entrance.”

Eyes swimming with unshed tears that blurred his vision, Sunne couldn’t hold back any longer. He couldn’t keep pretending that he didn’t need his mate like he needed to breathe.

With a hiccupping sob, he threw himself into Tyr’s arms, clinging to him like he was the only safe harbor in a violent storm. The Guardian clutched him tight, crushing him against his chest in a bruising hold as he buried his face in Sunne’s hair and inhaled deeply.

“Don’t ever fucking scare me like that again,” he demanded, his voice deep and guttural.

Sunne laughed, and even to his own ears, he sounded a little unhinged. “Promise.”

Leaning back, he stared up at Tyr, drinking in the sight of him. Their eyes met in the kind of soul-deep communication that had been written about in books and poems.

In his mate’s eyes, he saw relief, love, and an unwavering devotion that blurred lines between right and wrong, love and death. In those mismatched pools of deep brown and bright amber, he saw a future he had never dared to hope for, and he wanted it.

All of it. More than he had ever wanted anything.

Then Tyr's mouth was on his, hard and demanding, forcing his lips apart as his mate ravaged him. Sharp fangs scraped his bottom lip, and the coarse hairs of his mate's beard rubbed against his chin, his cheeks, adding a delicious friction he had come to crave.

One hand slid into his hair, the other wrapping gently around his throat, holding him immobile as Tyr undid him, taking him apart piece by piece. And as the realization of what he'd almost lost sank in and took root, those soft feelings took on a sharp edge, turning darker, greedier.

They had survived the impossible. Against all odds, they had found each other in a godforsaken wasteland. But it wasn't enough to know. He needed to feel it.

He grasped at Tyr's naked body, scraping his blunt nails across the shifter's skin, desperate to mark him in some way. To exclaim to the world that this man belonged to him, and him alone.

Tyr growled, and his hand tightened around Sunne's throat. Not painfully, but in a way that said he understood...and he approved.

Then the hand was gone, sliding between them to fumble with Sunne's waistband. Working to free him from the denim, Tyr walked him backward, their mouths still fused together in a tangle of tongues and lips.

Sunne gasped when his back collided with a nearby tree, his pulse pounding out a frantic rhythm that vibrated through his body. His jeans were shoved down his hips, freeing his swollen cock, and Tyr spun him around, securing him against the trunk.

A loud groan tore from his throat when Tyr fisted his erection, the cold fingers doing

nothing to dim his desire. His hips bucked, and he thrust forward, fucking into the tight grip.

His fingers clawed against the tree, clutching for stability when the bark peeled and crumbled beneath his touch. Steam rose from his overheated skin as the rain continued to fall, pelting against his face and neck, and clouds of vapor puffed from his lips with every panted breath.

He pressed his thighs together when he felt Tyr's thick length slide between them, providing a narrow tunnel as his mate rutted against him. Every hard thrust pushed his cock through the circle of Tyr's hand, dragging him under a wave of pleasure that stole his breath and made his head spin.

"I'll always give you what you need," Tyr growled next to his ear, his hips grinding against Sunne's upturned ass. "Now come for me, lelien . Let go and come for me."

Sunne tensed, every muscle in his body contracting as he came apart. Throwing his head back, he cried out his mate's name to the sky, his cock erupting in streams of thick, pearly cream.

Behind him, Tyr snarled, the sound more animal than man, his massive body shuddering around him. Then he thrust forward once more and stilled, a groan echoing through the forest as he spilled wet heat between Sunne's clenching thighs.

Then corded arms wound around his waist, holding him gently as the urgency dimmed and faded.

"Fuck, I needed that."

Tyr chuckled, resting his brow against the back of Sunne's neck. "Same."

Before they had even caught their breath, though, the forest exploded into a frenzy of sound again, reminding them why lingering wasn't a good idea.

Pulling his jeans up, he grimaced at the stickiness that coated the inside of his thighs. Once he had his clothes put to rights, he turned and rested a hand on his mate's chest, urging him closer to brush their lips together.

"I love you." He punctuated the statement with another whisper of lips. "Now, let's get the hell out of here."

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Chapter twelve

Naked, wet, cold, and exhausted, Tyr stepped through the stone archway with his mate by his side, Sunne's hand clasped inside his own.

The rain ceased immediately, and the relentless whispers quieted, a hush settling over them as they emerged into the vast, overgrown field. There were no stars in that part of the Underworld, no ethereal clouds. Only stillness. Only a last breath of hope before the descent into madness.

In the center of the meadow, Hades had carved out an area among the waist-high weeds, a glass of port in one hand and a heavy, leather-bound book in the other. Dressed in a silk robe of deep sapphire, he lounged in a winged-back chair, the picture of ease and eccentricity.

He glanced up as they approached, his dark eyes reflecting the ambient light. Smooth, graceful, he rose, the chair, book, and wine vanishing as if they had never existed.

Tyr squeezed Sunne's hand. "Just so you know, he can hear our thoughts."

"Great," Sunne sent back, his body tensing. "No pressure or anything."

"Took you long enough," the god said as if they had just arrived late for an important meeting. His gaze flickered to Tyr, and he looked almost disappointed. "I told you not to get lost."

"I wasn't lost."

“Wait.” Sunne looked back and forth between them. “How long were we in there?”

Hades shrugged. “Three days, give or take.”

Tyr understood Sunne’s gasp of disbelief. To them, no more than a few hours had passed, even if it had felt like a lifetime.

Hades’ attention settled on Sunne, sharp, calculating. “So, you’re the one causing all this trouble.”

It took everything in Tyr to choke back his growl. Threatening the King of the Underworld wouldn’t do them any favors. Still, his fingers curled at his side, his hand forming into a fist as he fought the urge to teach the god some manners.

Of course, his reaction didn’t go unnoticed, and Hades smirked, his expression filled with challenge.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Sunne explained, tripping over the words in his rush to get them out. “I didn’t mean to cross the river. I kind of got soul-napped, and well, I guess you already knew that.”

“You’re referring to the troublesome little witch.” Hades bobbed his head slowly. “Unfortunately, thanks to your enterprising mate, he’s not here to accept the punishment for his misdeeds.”

Sunne shook his head quickly. “You make the laws,” he argued. “Aster just exploited the loopholes. So, if you think about it, this is kind of your fault.”

Torn between amusement and dismay, Tyr closed his eyes and groaned. “Maybe you should stop talking now.”

“Right.” Sunne shuffled closer to his side and hid behind his arm. “Good idea.”

Too bad he couldn’t seem to help himself, and in the next heartbeat, he blurted into the silence, “Are you going to smite us now?”

“Tempting,” Hades mused. “But no. Not today.”

“Thank you,” Sunne breathed. “You are kind and merciful. A legend among—”

“Don’t be a kiss-ass,” Hades interrupted. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“Yep. Got it. Shutting up now.”

Turning to Tyr, Hades shook back the sleeves of his robe and clasped his hands together, templing his index fingers “And you. You had one rule. Just one.”

And, for his mate, he’d break it again without a second thought.

Knowing nothing he could say in his defense would matter, he stood there silently, stoically, awaiting Hades’ verdict, and ultimately, his judgment. Even if the god banished him to the mortal world, he knew the way back. It might not be pretty, but nothing would keep him from Sunne.

“I had an inkling you’d feel that way,” Hades said, plucking the thought from his mind. “Which is why I’m not banishing you to the mortal world. I’m banishing you from ever returning to it.”

“Done.” It wasn’t like he had anything waiting for him back there anyway.

“What? No.” Releasing his hand, Sunne stepped forward, his voice trembling but his spine straight. “He’ll be dead. That’s what you’re saying.”

Hades dropped his hands and shrugged one shoulder. “Essentially, yes. And no more crossing the river.”

“No.” Sunne shook his head. “That’s not fair. He didn’t—”

“Enough, lelien .” Taking his mate by the shoulders, he turned him, waiting for the male to meet his gaze. “I knew the risks when I crossed, and I’m prepared to accept the consequences.”

The mortal world had lost its appeal the moment he’d met his little ray of sunshine. What could it possibly offer him without Sunne by his side?

“But you can’t go back to the village either. What about Rune and Sindri? What about Orrin?”

Yeah, that part stung, but it wasn’t like he would never see them again. Even immortals eventually met their end. In the meantime, while he waited, he had everything he needed right there in his arms.

“We’ll meet them again,” he promised. “Besides—” He glanced up, smirking at the god over Sunne’s shoulder. “Orrin is very much allowed to cross the river.”

“Clever bastard,” Hades muttered under his breath.

Sunne frowned and spun around, head cocked and hands resting on his hips. “This seems a little too easy. What’s the catch?”

He was smart to question it. With the gods, there was always something lurking in the fine print.

“No scales. No judgment.”

And no Glade. No eternal sunshine in the Underworld's version of heaven.

"Then where do we go?" Tyr asked.

"You stay here."

"In this fucking field?" Sunne demanded, his lip curling with revulsion.

To everyone's surprise, Hades chuckled at the outburst. Hell, even he looked a little startled by his reaction.

"No, not the field. Just...in between."

"In between what?"

Sensing the god was reaching the end of his tolerance, Tyr pulled Sunne back and tucked him against his side. "We accept. Thank you."

"Good answer." Then Hades swept his arm out to the side, manifesting a glowing emerald trail that led across the field and disappeared into the night. "Follow the path. It'll take you where you need to go."

Yep, definitely time for them to leave. Tyr gave Sunne a gentle push to get him walking, but they made it only a few steps before Hades called them back.

"If you break the rules again, I will erase you."

Tyr clapped a hand over Sunne's mouth when he started to speak and dipped his head in understanding. "Let it go," he told his mate. "It's not worth it."

Sunne glared back at him. "Fine."

Still, he didn't remove his hand until Hades had disappeared, leaving them alone in the meadow.

They walked in silence, following the illuminated path out of the field and through more woods. Understandably, Sunne clutched his hand as they navigated the trees, jumping every time the wind kicked up or a branch cracked in the distance.

Beyond the forest, they descended into a lush valley filled with wildflowers, and as they crested the hill on the other side, the first light of morning broke over the horizon. It wasn't really the sun, but that didn't matter. Tyr still lifted his face to the golden rays, soaking in their warmth.

"Maybe you should shift," Sunne suggested as they trudged down another hill toward what looked like a quiet, sleepy hamlet. "You're naked."

Otherlings in general didn't have a lot of hangups when it came to modesty, and shifters had even fewer boundaries than the rest. In fact, he had forgotten about his nudity until Sunne had brought it up.

"I think a tank-sized bear wandering through town might cause more of a stir than my naked ass."

"Good point." Unzipping his jacket, he shrugged it off and tied it around Tyr's waist by the sleeves. "I guess that will have to do."

He honestly didn't see why it mattered, but it made Sunne happy, so he just smiled and took his hand as they continued toward the village.

Eventually, the dirt path and plush grass gave way to brick-paved streets lined with enchanted trees and streetlamps made of glowing orbs inside brass lanterns. The buildings were simple but well designed, constructed largely of clay and smooth

stone...and maybe a touch of magic.

Carved signs hung from the awnings, pride evident in the care and craftsmanship of each one. They passed a cafe, the scent of freshly brewed coffee spilling from the open windows, and a bakery that smelled of cinnamon and yeast.

“Cinnamon rolls!” Sunne exclaimed, tilting his head back and inhaling deeply. “I need a shower and about three days of sleep, but we are definitely coming back.”

Tyr grinned. Hades called this a punishment?

They continued down the wide lane, still following the emerald path, and Sunne pointed out every shop, his excitement growing with each new discovery.

An apothecary. A florist. A small grocer. A barber. A blacksmith. The town really seemed to have everything.

“No way!” Sunne gasped. “A bookstore? Are you kidding me?” He chewed his bottom lip and peeked up at Tyr through his lashes. “Do you think they’re hiring?”

Tyr caressed his hair, brushing it back from his face, and pressed a kiss to his temple. “It doesn’t hurt to ask.”

And he’d make sure the owner had a reason to say yes.

Past the shops, the lanterns, and the quiet coziness, they stepped onto another dirt lane, this one narrower and only slightly worn. The grass curved lazily over the edges, and tufts of Kelly green grew down the center of the trail.

In a quiet hollow on the edge of the forest, their journey ended, the glowing path leading them to...absolutely nothing. Just another open field set against the backdrop

of rolling hills.

“I hate him,” Sunne grumbled. “I hate him so much.”

Tyr sighed and rubbed his tired eyes. Sadly, it didn’t even surprise him. Hades could be a royal dick, and sending them on a trek to nowhere would definitely fit his idea of a punchline.

“Come on.” He placed a hand on his mate’s shoulder in comfort and solidarity. “Maybe there’s somewhere we can stay in the village.”

“Yeah, I—wait.” Lifting his arm, Sunne pointed toward the hills. “Look.”

The air shimmered and sparkled, like a spray of golden fireworks, and a small cabin materialized in the middle of the field, complete with a wide porch and a set of wooden steps. Warm, orange light glowed from the windows, beckoning them closer, and tendrils of smoke curled skyward from the stone chimney.

“Wow,” Sunne breathed. “Is this ours?”

“It would appear so.” Taking his mate’s hand, he pulled him along the path toward their new home. “Let’s check it out.”

It wasn’t large or lavish, but it had a charm all its own, and it fit Sunne perfectly. Decorated in rich colors of gold and teal with a leather sofa and matching chairs situated around a cozy fireplace, it radiated warmth and safety. Large windows with cream-colored drapes provided a beautiful view of the forest and the hills, while also opening the space to an abundance of natural light.

A teak bookcase took up one of the corners, the shelves only half-filled, leaving plenty of room for Sunne to add his own treasures from the bookstore. Beside it, a

soft cotton throw had been draped over the back of a wooden rocking chair in front of a recessed window.

The kitchen was small but functional, and the cabinets and pantry already contained all the necessities. A round table with two place settings occupied an area in front of the back door, a natural separation between the two spaces.

The cabin contained only one bedroom, just big enough for a king-sized bed and a couple of matching nightstands, though the walk-in closet was a nice touch. The attached bathroom boasted stone tiles and oil-bronzed fixtures, with a massive clawfoot tub perched beneath the window.

Sunne, however, rushed right past it without so much as a glance, going directly to the shower to turn on the faucet. Hot water sprayed from the showerhead, the steam instantly fogging the glass enclosure.

“I take it back,” he muttered as he stripped out of his dirty, wrinkled clothes. “I love Hades. He’s amazing. I will never say another bad word about him.”

Removing the jacket from his waist, Tyr followed his mate, groaning when he stepped under the heated spray. Together they washed the dirt away, using soap from unmarked bottles that smelled of sandalwood and amber, sharing soft kisses as they scrubbed each other clean.

Closing his eyes, Sunne hummed a song under his breath that Tyr didn’t recognize, and he wore a strange smile, as if he knew a secret but wouldn’t tell.

“You seem happy.”

“I died. Switched bodies with a murderer. Almost got eaten by a zombie wolf in a haunted forest.” He opened his eyes and stared up at Tyr, his expression filled with

quiet reverence. “And I’m still here. With you. That seems like a pretty good reason to be happy.”

“Well, when you put it that way...”

Pushing him against the tiles, Tyr claimed his lips in a soft kiss, a whisper of devotion that held the promise of things to come. He bent, gripping Sunne’s pert backside, kneading the globes as he lifted him from the floor to anchor him against the wall.

His mate moaned when their erections pressed together, a strangled sound filled with need and hunger. Then he wrapped his arms around Tyr’s neck, dragging him closer to slant their mouths together in a blistering kiss that sent a shiver of desire racing through him.

They ate at each other in a clash of tongues and teeth, propelling the quiet moment into a frenzy of urgency and desperation. Hands grasped and fingers clutched, every touch deliberate and filled with tension.

The hot water cascaded over them, creating a delicious slide as they undulated together, hands gliding over slick skin, mapping, searching, relearning. Steam filled the enclosure, swirling around them in thick clouds, cocooning them from the rest of the world in this one perfect moment of time.

“Need you,” Sunne panted, reaching between them to palm his swollen shaft. “Now, Tyr. Right now.”

Tyr fumbled on the shelf to his left, searching for the small bottle of gel he’d seen tucked among the soaps and creams. He’d definitely have to thank Hades for that later.

Finding it easily, he popped the lid open and upended the glass bottle, spilling the

contents into his palm. With a shaking hand he slicked his cock from base to tip before pressing the crown to Sunne's clenching hole.

Then he sank into his mate, inch by glorious inch, growling as the tight heat enveloped him. The velvet walls contracted in rhythmic waves, wrapping around his length and pulling him deeper.

Hooking his arms behind Sunne's knees, he pushed his legs wider, spreading him open as he grinded against him, pulling a choked moan from the male that echoed off the tiles. He started slow, a gentle but steady rhythm, giving Sunne time to adjust before increasing his pace. Their mouths collided again, their tongues thrusting and dueling as he drove into his mate, hammering him against the wall with every hard snap of his hips.

"Close," Sunne panted, a warning or a plea, Tyr couldn't tell. "More. I need more."

Instinct took over, and a growl reverberated in his chest. Tangling his fingers in Sunne's wet hair, he jerked his head to the side, exposing the side of his neck. His upper lip pulled back over elongated canines, his gaze locked on the pale mating mark that scarred his mate's skin.

A primal, possessive need overwhelmed him, a desire to reclaim what already belonged to him, to reestablish their bond after everything they had been through. He struck hard and fast, embedding his fangs in the delicate skin as he plunged into Sunne's welcoming heat, pushing them both higher until they teetered on the precipice.

Sunne screamed, the sound raw, powerful, as if purging the past twenty-four hours from his heart and mind. His fingers scrabbled for purchase against Tyr's slick shoulders, and a shudder ripped through him. Muscles tight, voice strained, he tumbled over the edge, his release painting the space between them.

Extracting his canines, Tyr followed with a deafening roar, pumping hard and fast, his heart thundering in his chest as he spilled himself into his mate's clenching depths.

Spent, sated, and utterly at peace, he slumped against him, his breath ragged against the side of Sunne's neck. "Gods, I can't get enough of you."

"I know what you mean," Sunne answered, clinging to him. "I love you, Tyr. More than anything."

He lifted his head to brush their lips together. "I love you, too, Ielien. I'd fight a zombie wolf for you anytime."

Their laughter ended in mutual groans when Tyr's flagging erection slipped from its sheath. Still, they held to each other, unwilling to let go, savoring the reward of a hard-won battle.

They had walked through fire and emerged on the other side. They hadn't just survived either. They had built something better and stronger from the ashes. And this moment, wrapped in softness and maybe a hint of teeth, was proof of what he'd already known.

Death wasn't the end.

For him and Sunne, it was just the beginning.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:44 pm

Six Weeks Later...

The bell chimed over the door when Sunne entered the bookstore, a magical sound that rang to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Extra, but so was the shop's owner.

"Did you get it?" he asked, making his way through the shelves to the counter at the back of the store. "Do you have it?"

"I have it," Dorian confirmed, placing his hand atop a book of bound parchment, the pages glowing with a faint, silver light. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

As the overseer of the Hall of Records, only Dorian could give him the answers he sought. But his new boss had been dragging his feet for weeks, reluctant to show him what the Fates had recorded.

"Definitely," Sunne answered, rounding the curved desk to stand beside him. "Besides, it's less about what I want. I need to know."

It was the last piece of the puzzle, the closure he needed to fully let go of the past and embrace his new afterlife in Watcher's Grove.

"Okay." Dorian's lips pulled back into the semblance of a smile, but his hazel eyes tightened with concern. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

He waved his hand, and the pages began to turn, flipping with a quiet rustle before coming to a stop. Sunne bit his lip, his eyes rounding when he realized the faint glow emanating off the pages came from the inked words written there.

Well, not words exactly. At least, not in any language he recognized.

“Can you read this?”

Dorian snorted, flattening the collar of his pink undershirt and smoothing down the front of his charcoal sweater vest. “Of course.”

Of course. How silly of him to question it.

Honestly, he still hadn’t figured out what the guy was, and Dorian hadn’t volunteered the information. Certainly not human, but not Otherling either. More like...something in between. A god maybe? A lesser deity?

“Okay, here we are.” He pressed his index finger to the page, skimming it over the words. “Aster Hornby. Last known physical location was Salem, Massachusetts.”

Sunne rolled his eyes. Not very original. “What do you mean physical location?”

“Do you want to hear this or not?”

He held his hands up, palms out. “Sorry. Keep going.”

“The Aster you met here in the Underworld was not a soul. You might think of him more like an astral projection.”

“So, he wasn’t dead?”

Dorian shook his head, his eyes still moving across the parchment. “No, he wasn’t dead. He invoked forbidden magic to enter the Underworld.”

“And murdered thirteen people in the process,” Sunne muttered, the words bitter on his tongue. While all very interesting, it didn’t answer his most pressing question.

“Why?”

Tyr had told him some parts. That was how he'd learned about the sacrifices, and that Aster had planned the soul-grab to trap Sunne in eternal punishment. Other things, he had worked out for himself. Like the fact that Aster had used his innate abilities to manipulate Sunne's dreams, keeping him tired, weak, and on edge so he'd be more receptive when it came time to trade places.

The end goal, he understood. It was the catalyst that still confused him.

“He summoned and bound a Reaper,” Dorian read. “Then he forced the Reaper to give him the powers of necromancy.”

Sunne chewed his lip, his eyes glazing over as he pictured the candlelit courtyard, the hooded figure, and the circle of runes. When he had awoken in Aster's apartment, he had thought it was a dream. Now, he realized, it had been remnants of a memory.

“But that kind of exchange demands a price.”

“Are we talking like crossroads deals? Fame and fortune in exchange for your soul?”

Dorian glanced at him from the corner of his eye, his expression dull...and vaguely disheartened. “Every soul, good or bad, ends up in the Underworld, Sunne. Reapers don't have to make deals to meet a quota.”

“Right.” How stupid of him. Because any of this made sense. “Sorry. You were saying?”

“He was never meant to have that type of magic. It festers and corrodes the soul.”

“He was dying,” Sunne surmised. Similar to the wolf in the Whisper Woods. Rotting from the inside out.

Dorian dipped his head. “Yes.”

“And after he strapped me with his sins, he planned to return to his body.”

“Correct again.”

“Would it have worked?” Not that it mattered now. Poor timing had ended his plan. Permanently.

“I don’t know.” With a shrug, Dorian closed the book and turned to face him. “That’s where the record ends.” His expression softened, a sympathetic smile curving his lips. “Did you get your answers?”

Sunne considered the question, giving it the gravity it deserved, before finally nodding. “I did. Thank you.”

He had wondered why Aster had targeted him, and if he could have done something differently to prevent it. Now, he understood that it had never been about him. Not really. He had simply been...convenient. New to death, too fresh to have become numb. Too willing to trust.

The bell chimed again with its familiar melody, drawing Sunne’s attention toward the front of the store. He smiled when he spotted his mate at the threshold, his towering frame illuminated by the light that spilled through the doorway.

Their eyes met across the room, and the shifter arched an eyebrow at him, a smirk crooking one side of his mouth.

Cocky bastard.

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” Dorian asked.

Sunne shook his head, his gaze still locked on Tyr, his chest aching with the depths of his happiness. “No. Nothing. I already have everything I need.”