



Rage of the Fallen (Beyond Mercenary #6)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: The final sin is the deadliest of all.

Sawyer and her mate Justice have battled their way through six of the Seven Deadly Sins ravaging Scotland, but nothing could prepare them for Rage.

With their usual weapons proving useless and their team pushed to the breaking point, they race against shadow dragon Maci in a desperate quest for the phoenix and the final magical artifact their only hope of banishing the demons back to hell.

But Rage isn't like its siblings.

It's stronger. Smarter. And it knows exactly how to tear their team apart.

As the final battle looms, Sawyer must place her trust in her brother one last time. Yet with Rage's influence growing stronger and Maci closing in, even their unshakeable sibling bond might not be enough to save them.

In this explosive conclusion to the Rage of the Fallen series, Sawyer and her team face their greatest challenge yet and the price of failure is eternal darkness.

Total Pages (Source): 28

CHAPTER ONE

The once-vast Aegis serpent's cave now felt suffocating. Walls seemed to close in, trapping us between the colossal serpent and something far worse. My lungs burned, each breath a struggle, as if the serpent's massive coils were squeezing the life out of me.

I won't hurt you , the serpent's voice slithered through my mind. You're not the enemy. But this one comes from the deepest, darkest depths of hell. Run.

Ice flooded my veins, and I risked a glance over my shoulder. The cave's mouth gaped barely twenty feet away, yet it might as well have been a million miles. Justice, Damon, Zara, Brody, and Lisa huddled behind me, their faces etched with the same paralyzing fear I felt.

Brody was alive again, and Lisa was on our side, but Maci wasn't done with us yet.

Maci stood before us, a vision of terrible beauty. Her long black hair cascaded over her shoulders like a waterfall of midnight. Her pale skin had an otherworldly glow, contrasting sharply with the darkness surrounding her. Her eyes, pools of deep obsidian, glittered with malice and something else. A hunger that froze my blood.

She raised a slender arm, pointing a long, tapered finger at me. Her nail was more like a claw. Sharp, curved, and stained with what looked disturbingly like dried blood.

"You don't think you can escape us?" Maci purred, her voice a hypnotic blend of silk

and venom. A cruel smile played across her lips, revealing teeth too sharp to be human. “You foolish Chosen Ones. You’ll never leave this cave alive.”

The Aegis serpent hissed, its forked tongue dancing in the air. Its ancient eyes, gleaming with otherworldly intelligence, fixed upon our true threat. The snake was terrifying, but what terrified me more was the demon of rage.

He could have stepped off Wall Street. Crisp suit, polished shoes, manicured hands. But those eyes...endless voids swallowing all light.

No light.

No soul.

Only rage.

His shadow fell over me like an eclipse, transforming me from person to prey. I felt minuscule, insignificant. An ant waiting to be crushed beneath his polished shoe. Justice, Brody, and my brother were far from short, but this thing towered over them, a skyscraper of malevolence.

As he drew closer, I could see his skin. If you could call it that. It was almost translucent, a ghastly canvas stretched over a framework of pulsing, angry red veins. The effect was horrifying, like staring at a living anatomy model from some nightmare medical school.

His deep black suit was impeccable. It clung to his towering frame perfectly, as if tailored by demons with a flair for haute couture. He looked ready for a high-end fashion show, not a hellish confrontation in a dank cave.

But it was his face that truly paralyzed me with terror. Classically handsome

features—high cheekbones, strong jaw, aquiline nose—were twisted into a mask of barely contained rage. Those eyes, like twin black holes, burned with an inner fire that threatened to consume everything in its path.

Then, he smiled.

Dear God, that smile. It was wide and predatory, filled with teeth too sharp, too numerous for any human mouth. That grin promised pain, reveled in the prospect of inflicting suffering. The smile of a beast that enjoyed playing with its food before devouring it whole.

The demon's gaze locked onto me, and I felt naked, exposed, as if he could see every fear, every weakness I possessed. He took a slow, deliberate step forward, his movement liquid grace and lethal intent.

“You're a pretty little thing,” he purred, his voice a blend of velvet and venom.

Justice was there, his broad back a wall between me and the approaching nightmare. “Stay away from her,” he growled.

At that moment, Justice's presence overwhelmed my senses. The cool aura emanating from him seemed to wrap around me, a stark contrast to the paralyzing fear that had gripped me seconds before. His scent, a mix of earth after a rain and something uniquely him, filled my nostrils, grounding me in the midst of chaos. The low rumble of his growl reverberated through my body, sending tremors of fear and comfort coursing through my veins.

Justice would do anything to protect me. I knew that with bone-deep certainty. His unwavering loyalty had been proven time and time again, each sacrifice etching itself into my heart. However, though he was a vampire with all the supernatural strength and speed that entailed, a flicker of doubt gnawed at my mind. Was he strong enough

to face this demon? The creature exuded an ancient, primordial power that made the air thick and oppressive.

My gaze traced the taut lines of Justice's back, noting the tension in every corded muscle. He stood immovable, a shield of flesh and bone between me and oblivion. The sight of him, so fierce and determined, stirred something within me. He was more than my protector. He was my knight in shining armor, my north star in a world gone mad.

Memories flashed through my mind. Justice's rare smile, the gentle touch of his hand, the softness of his lips, the depths of understanding in his eyes. Each tender moment we shared, each trial we'd faced together, had woven an unbreakable bond between us. His lips and his hands on my body, branding me, filled with a fury to protect me.

He was my life, the reason I found strength to face each new danger. The thought of losing him again, of watching him snatched away from me as he had been in the Unseelie realm, twisted my nerves into knots.

I refused to lose him again. Not to this demon, not to Maci, not to anyone or anything. My fingers twitched, longing to reach out and touch him, to infuse him with my own determination. In this deadly dance of monsters and magic, Justice wasn't only my protector. He was my heart, beating outside my chest.

"Ah, the vampire." The demon chuckled. "Her protector. Her true love." His sharp voice grated on my nerves.

Justice gritted his teeth. "Like I said, stay away from her."

I peered around Justice's protective stance. The demon's smile only widened at the challenge, his teeth gleaming in the dim light of the cave. The air thickened with fear and the stench of sulfur, making my eyes water and my throat burn.

I held the Crown of Envy and the mirror in my hands. My fingers tightened around the mirror's ornate handle, its surface cool against my clammy palm. This was my trump card, my only defense against the demon. It had banished the other Seven Deadly Sins demons, sending them back to hell. I hoped it worked on the demon of rage.

With my hand trembling, I held up the mirror and flashed it toward the demon, hoping he would scream.

The demon's laughter erupted, a sound so terrifying it seemed to shatter the air around us. The thunderous echo ricocheted off the cavernous walls, driving icy shards of fear deeper into my bones. His eyes, like twin pools of molten hatred, locked onto mine with such intensity I felt my soul withering beneath his gaze.

"Your little trinket doesn't work on me like it does my brothers." His voice was a guttural growl that vibrated through the stone beneath my feet.

Each step he took toward us sent shockwaves through the ground. The earth convulsed as if trying desperately to retreat from his corrupting touch. Stalactites shivered overhead, threatening to rain down upon us.

"No one messes with my brothers," he roared, the sound so deafening it threatened to rupture my eardrums. "And you're going to pay for this."

Shit-shit-shit-shit.

His promise of retribution made me feel like I was on an icy pond. All he had to do was step on it, sending cracks and splinters racing outward until I crashed through the surface and plunged into a frozen hell. His words chilled my breath, leaving me gasping, trying to claw me out of the abyss.

The mirror hung uselessly at my side. The demon stared at it with a superior smile. I followed his gaze to see the mirror's usual protective glow dimmed to a faint flicker.

Justice's grip on my arm tightened, his fingers digging into my skin as he pulled me back. "We need a plan. Fast."

The Aegis serpent's voice slithered through my thoughts, urgent and tinged with fear. You need to run now . He's more powerful than the other demons.

I grabbed Justice's hand. "We need to get out of here."

I can give you time to escape, the serpent told me. But it won't stop them for long.

The Aegis serpent coiled tighter, ready to strike.

Maci emerged from the shadows, her gaze locked on me. The air shimmered around her, a sight I'd seen before that never failed to make the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Her body expanded rapidly, skin hardening into iridescent, gleaming scales. Horns erupted from her elongating skull, and massive wings unfurled from her back, scraping against the cave walls. In seconds, where Maci stood now loomed a colossal dragon, her golden eyes blazing with fury and triumph.

The Aegis serpent sensed the escalating danger and sprang into action. Its massive coils tensed, muscles rippling beneath scales. With a powerful motion, it lashed its tail against the cave ceiling. The impact reverberated through the cavern like a thunderclap.

For a heartbeat, everything seemed to pause. Then, with a sickening groan, the cave began to give way.

Rocks ranging from pebbles to boulders showered down in a deadly cascade. Thick clouds of dust billowed through the air, choking and blinding. The sound was deafening, a cacophony of splitting stone and human terror.

Zara and Lisa's screams pierced the thunderous chaos, barely audible above the rain of stone and dust. Through the choking haze, I caught glimpses of my brother and Brody diving for cover, their faces contorted with panic. Suddenly, my foot caught on a rock, and I felt myself falling. Time seemed to slow as the ground rushed up to meet me, the sound of splitting stone drowning my startled cry.

Then, out of nowhere, strong arms wrapped around me. Justice. He pulled me against his chest as a massive boulder crashed down where I had been standing moments before. I felt his heart pounding as he shielded me with his body, his breath warm against my ear. A fierce protectiveness that I'd never witnessed before filled his eyes.

As the cave continued to crumble around us, Justice's grip on me tightened, his face a mask of determination. At that moment, with my own heart threatening to burst from my chest, I realized how far he would go to keep me safe.

The demon of rage, momentarily forgotten in the mayhem, seized his chance. With inhuman speed, he bolted forward, his form a blur of malevolent energy. But fate, or perhaps the Aegis serpent's calculated attack, intervened. A fresh wave of debris crashed down directly in the demon's path.

Forced to halt his charge, the demon's face contorted with fury. He threw back his head and howled. The piercing, utterly alien sound cut through the din like a knife, sending daggers of pain through my skull. I clamped my hands over my ears, but it did little to muffle the horrifying sound.

My eyes watered, and I shook my head, trying to focus. Justice pulled me tighter against him.

“Everyone, move!” Justice’s voice carried over the tumult, sharp with command. It snapped me out of my daze, reminding me of the deadly peril we were in.

As I stirred, seeking any path to safety, a furious shriek cut through the air, different from the demon’s howl but no less terrifying. Maci, in her massive dragon form, was struggling against the collapsing cave. Her wings flapped frantically, stirring up more dust and debris. Each beat sent gusts of wind through the cavern, further destabilizing the crumbling structure.

Maci’s eyes glowed with rage and frustration as they locked onto me. She blamed me for this. The look in those draconic orbs chilled me to my core. A promise of vengeance, a vow that this was far from over.

Justice pushed me ahead of him. “Keep moving. Head for the tunnel!”

The cave continued to disintegrate. The air was thick with dust, making every breath a struggle. I coughed and sputtered. The sounds of splitting rock, human panic, demonic rage, and draconic fury blended into a nightmarish symphony.

Please-please-please-please don’t let anyone else be hurt.

I didn’t want to lose anyone again like I had Brody.

As I raced toward what I hoped was safety, I had the feeling we were running from one danger into another. Were Maci’s other demons waiting for us? I clutched the mirror, ready to send every one of them back to hell.

That was if the mirror worked. Rage may have drained its power.

The tunnel mouth loomed ahead, a dark promise of potential escape. As I dove toward it, I silently prayed we’d all make it through and whatever awaited us on the

other side wouldn't be even worse than what we were leaving behind.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins, sharpening my senses and propelling me forward. I found myself moving ahead of my team.

"Sawyer, wait," Justice called from behind me.

But I had the mirror, and I wasn't going to stop.

My heart raced, but my grip was steady. If the demons were there, I was ready to send the bastards back to the fiery abyss they'd crawled out of.

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CHAPTER TWO

We burst from the cave's mouth like desperate animals fleeing a wildfire, the sounds of collapsing rock and Maci's furious roars fading behind us. The sudden transition from the cave's oppressive darkness to the open air was jarring, leaving me disoriented.

Outside, the sun was high in the sky, painting the world in its light. I spun wildly, the mirror clutched in my white-knuckled grip, my gaze darting from shadow to shadow in search of demonic threats.

The world around us was awash in vibrant greens and golds, the summer foliage in full display. Long shadows stretched from the trees, creating pockets of darkness that seemed to shift and move in my peripheral vision. But for some reason, the demons weren't there. At least not visibly.

The eerie quiet of the forest felt almost as unsettling as the chaos we'd escaped. The normal sounds of nature—birdsong, rustling leaves, the buzz of insects—were conspicuously absent, as if the wildlife sensed the otherworldly danger that had emerged from the earth.

The mirror in my hands felt warm, almost alive, as if reacting to the sudden exposure to sunlight.

"Anyone else think this is too easy?" I muttered, unable to shake the feeling we were being watched.

The contrast between the peaceful afternoon setting and the supernatural horror we'd faced was stark and disorienting. It felt wrong, as if we'd stepped out of one reality and into another. But the dirt on our clothes, the scrapes on our skin, and the racing of our hearts were vivid reminders that the danger was all too real.

"Stay alert," I warned the others, my voice barely above a whisper. "Just because we can't see them doesn't mean they're not here. The sun might slow them down, but it won't stop them entirely."

As we regrouped under the canopy of leaves, dappled sunlight playing across our dirt-streaked faces, I suspected our escape from the cave was only the beginning of a much longer and more dangerous journey.

The thick trees surrounding us loomed ominously, their branches reaching out like gnarled fingers. Perfect hiding spots for anything that might want to ambush us. Were the demons lurking there, biding their time? Or were they afraid of the mirror, keeping their distance from its mystic power?

I glanced at my team, taking in our bedraggled appearance, and released a grinding cough. The taste of grit and cave dust coated my tongue, making me grimace. I looked down at my arms, barely recognizing them under the thick layer of dust clinging to my skin like a second sleeve.

Lisa stood nearby, her usually pristine blonde hair a shocking mess. The dust had transformed her golden locks into a dull, ashen gray, aging her by decades in mere minutes. She ran her fingers through it, wincing as they caught on tangled knots.

Her gaze fixed on me. "When are we going to rescue my phoenix?"

Her accusatory tone made me tense. The recent memory of her betrayal flashed through my mind, a painful reminder of how fragile our team's trust had become. I

couldn't help but wonder if she would betray us again, given the chance.

I wiped the sweat and cave dust off my brow, buying myself a moment to gather my thoughts.

"We will," I assured her, trying to inject confidence into my voice despite our precarious situation. "I promise, but we've got to form a plan first."

Lisa's eyes narrowed, searching my face for any sign of deception. The irony wasn't lost on me, her questioning my truthfulness after her own betrayal. But I understood her desperation. The bond between a magical creature and its guardian was profound, and I could only imagine how the separation must be tearing her apart.

I turned away and looked at the rest of the team, not wanting to get into a debate with her.

Zara's fiery red hair was barely visible beneath clumps of dirt and small rock fragments. Grime smeared her cheeks like macabre war paint across her freckled skin. She swiped at her face with the back of her hand, only managing to smear the dirt further.

Brody futilely attempted to brush the dirt from his clothes, creating small dust clouds with each swipe of his hand. His usually immaculate appearance was in shambles, his designer shirt now more earth-tone than its original color.

My brother, ever the pragmatist, methodically dragged his fingers through his hair, dislodging chunks of dirt and pebbles. He wore a grim expression, constantly scanning our surroundings even as he tried to make himself somewhat presentable.

Even the typically unflappable Justice showed signs of our ordeal. He brushed dirt from his dark hair, his movements precise. A small cut on his forehead had left a trail

of blood mixing with the dust on his face, giving him a fierce, warrior-like appearance.

We were all covered in a uniform layer of cave dust, our clothes and skin bearing the marks of our narrow escape. Small scrapes and scratches adorned our exposed skin, stinging as the cool evening air hit them. Our chests heaved in unison as we gulped breaths of fresh air, savoring it after the stifling atmosphere of the cave.

It felt like the Grim Reaper's scythe had grazed our backs as we fled. Yet, as I met each team member's eyes, I saw the same wariness reflected back at me. The paranoia of potential pursuit lingered, an unspoken tension that kept us all on high alert. Every rustle of leaves, every shadow cast by the fading daylight, seemed to hold the promise of hidden dangers.

As we stood there, catching our breath, I couldn't help but feel a surge of relief wash over me. My gaze swept my team once more. We were a mess, no doubt about it, but we were alive. Thank god, we were alive.

Everyone had made it. The thought nearly buckled my knees.

The SUV was parked undisturbed where we had left it. Justice clasped my hand and led me to it, with the others following behind us.

A hysterical laugh bubbled up in my chest, and I had to consciously suppress it. This wasn't the time to lose it. Not when we were still in potential danger. I was supposed to be the leader, and laughing like a manic wouldn't earn me any brownie points. But I couldn't completely quash the giddy feeling of sheer aliveness coursing through me.

As if reading my thoughts, Damon gave me a cocky grin and gestured at me. "Look in the mirror and tell us our next move, Princess. 'Cause I vote for kickin' some demon ass."

“We don’t have time.” Justice whipped the car door open and stared at the cave entrance. “I can hear them. They’re going to be here any second.”

The eerie silence that had followed our escape was unnerving. I strained my ears, trying to catch any sound of pursuit, but heard nothing. However, Justice was tense beside me, his vampiric hearing far superior to our human senses.

“We need to move. Now,” he urged tightly.

We scrambled into the car, our movements frantic yet coordinated from years of working together. Justice took the wheel, with me riding shotgun. Brody, Lisa, Damon, and Zara crammed into the back, a tangle of limbs and nervous energy.

As Justice gunned the engine, I glanced back at the cave entrance. A plume of dust erupted from the opening, billowing out like the breath of some monstrous beast. My heart leaped into my throat. Was something coming?

The tires squealed as Justice floored it, the sudden acceleration pushing us back into our seats. The cave receded in the rearview mirror, but the sense of impending danger didn’t fade.

“We can’t go back to McDuff Manor.” Justice glanced between the road and the mirrors. “We’ll be ambushed for sure.”

I nodded, my mind racing. “Maybe someplace crowded,” I suggested, grasping for ideas. “Somewhere they wouldn’t risk an attack.”

From the back seat, Damon’s skeptical voice cut through the tension. “That might not help. It’s not like Maci has a penchant for preserving human life.”

I twisted in my seat to face him, meeting his challenging gaze. Damon’s face was a

mask of dirt and worry, but his eyes were sharp, questioning.

“She doesn’t want to make a move yet,” I argued, trying to sound more confident than the self-doubt that ate at me. “Not until she has control.”

Damon held my gaze, unconvinced. “Are you sure about that?”

The truth was, I wasn’t sure of anything anymore. I sighed heavily, feeling the entire team’s eyes on me. “No,” I admitted. “But I agree with Justice. We can’t go back to the manor.”

Zara sighed. “It’s obvious, isn’t it? Maci wants to destroy the artifacts. After that, she’ll be unstoppable.”

Damon chuckled. “Great. Another power-hungry monster on a world-ending field trip. Because we haven’t dealt with enough of those already. So, what’s the plan? We keep ‘em out of her scaly hands, then gank Maci before she goes full Godzilla on us? Just another Tuesday, right, Sawyer?”

I glanced back at my brother. “That’s the plan. We need to get her before she gets us.”

The car fell silent for a moment, the only sound the hum of the engine and the rush of wind outside. Then, Brody’s voice piped up from the back, tentative but hopeful. “How about Edinburgh Castle?”

Edinburgh Castle was a tourist hotspot, crowded even at this time of year. It was also a place of historical significance, possibly with its own mystical properties that could offer some protection.

“It’s public,” Lisa chimed in, her voice hoarse from the dust. “Lots of witnesses if

anything goes down.”

Zara nodded. “Plus, it’s on high ground. Good vantage point.”

I looked at Justice, seeing the same thoughts reflected in his eyes. It wasn’t perfect, but it was a plan. And right now, any plan was better than none.

“Edinburgh Castle it is,” I declared with a small surge of relief at having a destination. “Justice, you know the way?”

He nodded grimly, his hands tightening on the steering wheel. “I know every street in this city. We’ll take the long way in case we’re being followed.”

We sped through the countryside, and soon, the looming silhouette of Edinburgh appeared. It was midday, and my stomach grumbled. I couldn’t remember when I had last eaten.

However, satisfying my hunger was the last thing on my mind.

Maci was out there, changed and dangerous. The demon of rage was still a threat. And who knew what other forces were at play?

I glanced back at my team, their faces filled with determination and fear, highlighted by the harsh afternoon sunlight streaming through the car windows. Sweat glistened on their brows from the summer heat and the lingering adrenaline. We were battered, exhausted, and out of our depth. The bright daylight outside seemed to mock the darkness we’d fled, making our supernatural encounter almost surreal.

Damon squinted against the sunlight, his usual smirk replaced by a grim line. Lisa’s blonde hair, still dusty from the cave, caught the light like a tarnished halo. Zara’s gaze darted constantly between the windows as if expecting something to emerge

from the bright landscape at any moment. Brody's fingers tapped a nervous rhythm on his knee, the only outward sign of his inner turmoil.

Despite the warmth of the day, a chill crept down my spine. I took in the resolute set of Justice's jaw as he drove, the way my team instinctively leaned toward each other in the back seat, and felt a surge of something like hope.

We were together. Dirty, scared, and unsure of what came next, but together. And for now, as we sped through the Scottish countryside, that had to be enough.

"Stay sharp," I reminded them, my voice cutting through the hum of the engine and the rush of air from the open windows. "We might not even make it to the castle."

Zara opened her purse and pulled out a compact mirror. "I suggest we clean up as best we can before we get there, or we're liable to draw unwanted stares."

I opened the glove box and found some tissues. After pulling down the car's sun visor, I looked into the mirror. Dirt covered my cheeks and forehead and dusted my hair. I dragged my fingers through my hair, trying to brush it off. I wet a tissue and attempted to clean my face, but all I did was smear the filth.

"Here," Zara offered. "I've got some wet wipes. Try using these."

"Thank you." The moist cloth cleaned off the dirt, but I still looked like a little kid who had been playing in the mud.

"Maybe we should pull into a gas station," Lisa suggested as she braided her messy hair.

"We don't have time," Justice returned. "Maci would catch us for sure. Just do the best you can."

He pressed harder on the accelerator, and we raced onward, leaving a trail of dust in the golden afternoon light.

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CHAPTER THREE

Edinburgh Castle loomed before us, perched on its rocky crag at the end of the Royal Mile. As we approached, awe and trepidation washed over me. The ancient fortress stood like a sentinel against the late afternoon sky, its weathered stone walls and towering battlements a testament to centuries of Scottish history.

Parking proved to be a challenge in the busy city center. We eventually found a spot in Grassmarket, the bustling square nestled in the shadow of the castle. As we stepped out of the car, the cobblestones beneath our feet served as a stark reminder of how out of place we were. Modern warriors in an ancient battleground.

I had managed to dust most of the dirt from my hair, leaving a fine layer on the front seat. Unfortunately, dirt and dust still clung stubbornly to my clothes. I felt like a cowboy coming in from a long cattle drive.

Everyone else looked like they had been on the same cattle drive except Justice. He had used glamour to hide the dirt. I guessed that was one of the benefits of being a vampire.

Yet, I didn't have time to dwell on my appearance.

I checked my watch. "We've got about two hours before the castle closes at five. Let's make them count."

We started up the steep path toward the castle, each step bringing us closer to our temporary sanctuary. People glanced curiously at us, and I wanted to dart into a

nearby bathroom to hide my appearance. Then, dark clouds crept in and loosed a rainstorm.

At least we didn't stick out like black sheep in the middle of a white herd anymore.

I used my palm to shield my eyes. The castle grew more imposing with every meter we climbed. I couldn't help but feel a sense of reverence as I took in the sight. The castle was a behemoth of stone and history, its walls rising defiantly against the sky. Turrets and towers punctuated its silhouette, creating a jagged crown against the sky.

"It's like a giant fortress looking down at us," I murmured.

The strategic value of our chosen hideout wasn't lost on me. From up there, we'd have a commanding view of the city and its surroundings. If Maci decided to make her move in dragon form, or if the demon Rage charged in, we'd spot them long before they reached us. The thought provided a small measure of comfort.

"There'll be plenty of places to hide in there." I gestured toward the complex layout of buildings within the castle walls. "Nooks, crannies, secret passages. This place is a maze. I'll be able to use the mirror without interruption."

As we neared the entrance, I felt a strange juxtaposition of emotions. On one hand, the castle represented safety, a stronghold against the supernatural threats we faced. On the other, its age and grandeur emphasized how small and out of our depth we truly were in this cosmic battle.

"It's majestic," Lisa murmured beside me, echoing my thoughts.

I nodded, then steeled myself. "And it's our best shot right now. Everyone stay alert. Just because it's crowded doesn't mean we're safe. Keep your eyes open for anything unusual."

As we joined the throng of tourists entering the castle grounds, I felt like we were walking into another trap. But with Maci and Rage on our heels, we were out of options. Edinburgh Castle might be our last line of defense. Or our final battleground.

When we reached the top, we bought tickets and hurried toward the entrance. I kept scanning the dark skies but didn't see any shadows. It was hard to tell with all the drizzle.

Maci was a shadow dragon and could be hiding in the shadows. Her demons had taken on human form so they could blend into the crowds. Only their black eyes would set them apart.

I shifted my backpack, acutely aware of its precious contents. The Crown of Envy, the compass, the scales, the phoenix feather, the phoenix grass, and the mirror were all safely tucked away inside. There was no way I was leaving these powerful artifacts in the SUV. Not with Maci and her demonic allies on our tail.

Justice scanned our surroundings, his posture tense. "Okay, Sawyer. Where do you think we should go?"

I studied the signs scattered throughout the castle grounds, each pointing to a different attraction. National War Museum, Prisons of War, St. Margaret's Chapel, the Royal Palace. My mind raced, weighing our options against the information I'd gleaned from the brochure.

"St. Margaret's Chapel is out," I muttered. "Too small, barely any room to maneuver if we're cornered."

Damon nodded in agreement. "And the Prisons of War are a no-go. Too cramped. We'd be sitting ducks in there."

“We need somewhere with space that’s out of the rain,” Brody chimed in, his gaze darting nervously around the crowded courtyard. “Somewhere we can see them coming, but with an escape route if things go south.”

I nodded, impressed as always by my team’s quick thinking. “You’re right. We need a place that’s open but with at least two exits.”

Zara, who had been quietly studying the castle map, perked up. “How about the Great Hall?” she suggested, pointing to a large structure on the map.

We huddled around the map, considering Zara’s suggestion. The Great Hall was spacious and historically significant, so it was likely to be filled with tourists. Plus, its central location within the castle complex meant multiple potential escape routes.

“Good thinking, Zara.” I felt a small surge of hope. “The Great Hall it is.”

Justice clasped my hand. “Let’s go. Stay alert.”

The rain had intensified, pelting down mercilessly until I felt like a drowned rat. The artifacts in my backpack seemed to grow heavier with each step, a tangible reminder of the supernatural stakes we grappled with.

As we headed toward the Great Hall, I hoped the ancient stones of Edinburgh Castle would provide us the sanctuary we desperately needed.

After stepping inside, I exhaled a breath of relief at escaping the downpour. Water trickled down my temples and face, and my clothes clung to me like a wet suit.

Then, my discomfort faded into the background as I took in the sight before me.

The Great Hall took my breath away. My gaze was immediately drawn upward to the

vaulted wooden ceiling, its massive beams resting on stones intricately carved with heads and symbols. I recognized the thistle, the proud flower of Scotland, among the designs. The craftsmanship spoke of centuries of history, of battles won and lost, of a nation's enduring spirit.

At the far end of the vast room stood a magnificent stone fireplace, flanked by suits of armor, standing silent guard. Their empty visors seemed to watch us as we moved farther into the hall, and I couldn't shake the feeling we were being observed by more than these metal sentinels.

Weapons adorned the walls. Spears and swords were arranged in elegant semi-circles over the fireplace, their polished surfaces gleaming in the afternoon light that streamed through the high windows.

I squeezed Justice's hand in awe, partly to ground myself in the present. "It's incredible," I whispered.

Justice nodded, scanning the room with a practiced gaze. "Beautiful," he agreed. "And defensible. Good sight lines, multiple exits. We chose well."

As we kept going, blending with the crowd of visitors, I couldn't help but feel a strange mix of emotions. The Great Hall's grandeur and history provided a sense of security, as if its ancient stones could shield us from the supernatural threats we faced. Yet, at the same time, the weapons on display and the battle-scarred architecture were stark reminders of the conflicts that had shaped this place and the one we were currently embroiled in.

"Let's find a good vantage point," I murmured to Justice.

He led me into a corner away from the crowd. Most of the tourists stood in front of the fireplace and the display cases.

Zara and Damon strolled toward us.

Damon scrutinized the Great Hall. “Well, would you look at that? It’s like we stepped into friggin’ Hogwarts or something. Hey, Sawyer, you see any house elves running around?”

I took the mirror out of my backpack and chuckled. He still could make me laugh even in dire situations.

Brody and Lisa approached, their faces etched with concern. Brody’s posture was straight and resolute, reminiscent of a soldier ready for duty. He placed a reassuring hand on Lisa’s shoulder and spoke with a calm, authoritative tone.

“Easy there, Lisa. I know you’re worried, but we have to trust the plan. Sawyer gave her word, and that means something. We’re a team. Right now, we need to stand together.”

He turned to address us, his voice carrying a note of inspiration. “I know we’re all under pressure, but let’s not lose sight of why we’re here. Each of us has a crucial role to play. Sawyer, what’s our next move? Whatever it is, we’re with you.”

I looked past Brody, my gaze settling on Lisa. Her lips pressed into a thin line, tension radiating from every line of her body. The sight made my stomach churn with unease.

When I was at Rimespire Isle, the mystical location revealed the phoenix’s whereabouts on the Isle of Skye. The information had been our ace in the hole, the leverage that brought Lisa back to our side. However, doubt gnawed at me now. What if the phoenix wasn’t there anymore? Magical creatures, especially ones as powerful as a phoenix, were notoriously difficult to pin down. If we arrived at Skye only to find Aurora gone, what would Lisa do?

I studied her face, trying to gauge her state of mind. The palpable desperation in her eyes reflected the profound bond between a guardian and their magical charge. I understood the connection in theory, but its intensity still took me by surprise.

I kept my voice low and steady. “Lisa, I know you’re worried. We all are. But I need to know, are you with us? No matter what happens?”

She met my gaze, conflict clear in her eyes. For a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of the old Lisa, the trusted friend and ally. But the fierce, almost feral determination of a guardian separated from their charge quickly overshadowed it.

“I’m here, aren’t I?” The lines around her eyes and mouth tightened. “Sawyer, you have to understand. The longer we wait, the greater the risk. If anything happens to my phoenix...”

She left the threat unspoken, but it hung between us, heavy with implication. I nodded in acknowledgment, trying to project a confidence I didn’t entirely feel.

“I get it, and we will find your phoenix. But right now, we need to focus on staying alive and outmaneuvering Maci. One step at a time, okay?”

As Lisa gave a curt nod and turned away, I exchanged a worried glance with Brody. He wore the same uneasy look. Our truce with Lisa was fragile at best.

CHAPTER FOUR

Damon glanced around the Great Hall as more people entered. “Well, this ain’t The Grove. I say we ask Magic 8-Ball here what our next move is. Then we grab a burger, of course.”

Bringing up The Grove, our watering hole back in Colorado, made me homesick. It was a brewery and a safe house for supernatural hunters. I was far from home and needed to get back into the game.

I looked into the Mirror of Aethereal, my heart pounding with hope and dread. “Tell us what we can do against the demon of rage. Is there a way to defeat him?”

The mirror rippled like a stone tossed into a still lake, making me shiver. Damon flinched. His jaw clenched, muscles coiling with tension. A flicker of raw emotion crossed his face, quickly masked by his usual stoic emotion.

I held my breath, muscles tense, dreading yet longing to hear my mother’s voice speak from beyond.

Only music can soothe rage. Music from a harp.

The familiar timbre echoing from the mirror made my chest tighten with a bittersweet ache. I exchanged an uncertain glance with Justice, his furrowed brow mirroring my confusion. I stared at the mirror and leaned closer. “What harp?”

In Argyll, Scotland, there is a castle. Inveraray Castle. There, you’ll find Queen

Charlotte's harp. It is magical and has the power to send Rage back to hell.

My mind raced. A magical harp? I scowled, frustration creeping into my voice as I considered the logistics. "How can we get the harp out of the castle? Harps are huge and heavy."

The harp can change sizes. Then, you must go to Rosslyn Chapel. Once there, I will tell you what to do next.

Damon rubbed the bridge of his nose and released a short, humorless laugh. "Oh, fantastic. So we gotta break into a freakin' castle, steal a magical shrinking harp, and then go on a field trip to some chapel? Why don't we stop for tea with the Queen while we're at it?" He shook his head. "Sounds about as easy as ganking a wendigo with a butter knife."

I shot Damon an exasperated look, fighting the urge to roll my eyes. Sometimes, my brother's snark was exactly what I needed to cut through the tension. Right now, it only grated on my already frayed nerves.

"Really, Damon? Wendigos and butter knives?" I snapped, my voice sharper than I'd intended. Immediately, I regretted it. I drew a deep breath, trying to rein in my frustration. "Look, I know this sounds insane. Trust me, I'm right there with you on the crazy train. But Mom's voice..." I trailed off, the lump in my throat making it hard to continue.

I softened my tone. "We've faced worse odds, haven't we? Besides, I don't know about you, but I'm fresh out of butter knives. Guess we'll have to settle for a magical harp instead."

"I can get it," Justice offered, calm and assured. The vampire's confidence was almost unnerving sometimes. "They won't even notice it's missing. But how do you

make it change size? Dragging a harp out of a castle will be difficult, even for a vampire.”

I nodded, my mind racing through possibilities. Justice’s supernatural strength and speed would be invaluable, but he was right. We had to know how to shrink the harp. I turned back to the mirror, hoping it hadn’t gone silent on us yet.

“Is there a spell?” I whispered, hoping no one heard me in the crowded room.

The mirror’s surface rippled again, and I held my breath, waiting. Then, my mother’s voice spoke, reciting words that resonated with an otherworldly power,

“Instrument of royal might,

Shrink now to a traveler’s size.

By ancient power, by fae’s delight,

Compact your form before our eyes.

String of gold and frame of wood,

Heed this call and bend to will.

Shrink you must, for greater good,

‘Til spoken words this spell fulfill.

Silmaril’s light and Morrigan’s crow,

By these words, so mote it be.

Shrink, fair harp, both high and low,

‘Til ‘Crescite’ sets you free.”

I threaded my fingers through my hair in frustration. “You have to repeat that. I can’t memorize all of it.”

Damon’s eyes sparkled with mischief as he held up his phone with a triumphant grin. “You don’t have to, sis. I recorded it.”

A sudden noise near the entrance to the Great Hall snapped me from my spiraling thoughts. My head whipped around, gaze locking onto the source of the commotion. A jolt of adrenaline surged through me, momentarily pushing aside my fears about Maci and Rage.

What was happening? Friend or foe? I couldn’t tell from here. My muscles coiled, ready to spring into action at a moment’s notice. Part of me wanted to rush toward the disturbance, to face the new challenge head-on. Another part held me back, whispering caution.

The ancient stone walls of Edinburgh Castle seemed to amplify every sound, making the angry voices impossible to ignore.

“Did you shove me, asshole?” A stocky man with a ruddy complexion squared his shoulders, glaring up at a much taller opponent. The air crackled with tension, their heated exchange drawing curious onlookers like moths to a flame.

The taller man’s lip curled in disdain. “That’s what happens when you walk like an old geezer.”

“Don’t touch me.” The shorter one’s hands balled into fists as he shoved the taller

man, making him stumble back a step. The push sent ripples of excitement through the growing crowd.

To my horror, even the castle guards seemed to be spurring them on. Their deep voices joined the rising chant. “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

I stepped toward the crowd to break things up, but Brody clasped my arm.

“Stand down,” he insisted. “We can’t intervene. Not now.”

I stared at him, bewildered. ‘But they’re going to tear each other apart!’

Brody’s jaw clenched, his gaze sweeping the frenzied crowd. “Look closer. This isn’t a simple fight. It’s orchestrated chaos. The crowd, even the guards...they’re not themselves.”

He pulled me back slightly and whispered, “This is Maci and Rage’s doing. They want us to lose focus, to get swept up in this madness. We have to stay clear-headed, stick to our mission.”

I saw the conflict in his eyes, the desire to help the people warring with the need to see the bigger picture.

Brody continued, his tone heavy with resolve. “Sometimes, the hardest thing in a fight is knowing when not to throw a punch. We’ll find a way to help these people, but right now, we need to find the source of this influence.”

As the crowd’s chants grew louder, Brody’s grip on my arm tightened. “Come on. We have work to do.”

The medieval tapestries and suits of armor lining the walls stood in stark contrast to

the modern drama unfolding before us. My heart raced as I watched the scene escalate, a sick feeling settling in the pit of my stomach.

Justice's usually calm demeanor had vanished, replaced by naked fear. "We have to leave," he hissed. "Now. Rage is here."

As if summoned by Justice's words, a new figure appeared in the doorway. The crowd parted instinctively, creating a path for the newcomer. He moved with fluid grace, each step purposeful and predatory. His presence seemed to suck the warmth from the air, leaving a chill in its wake.

Rage fixed his gaze on our small group. A smile played at the corners of his mouth, but it held no warmth, only the promise of chaos to come. With growing dread, I realized he was making a beeline for us.

My breath caught in my throat. "Brody," I whispered. "It's him. It's Rage."

I felt the demon's influence spreading through the room like a toxic fog. The fighting men's movements became more erratic, their eyes glazed with unnatural fury. Even Brody's grip on my arm tightened, his knuckles white with the effort of resisting Rage's pull.

"Hold hands," Justice commanded as he grabbed mine. His grip was vise-like, betraying the fear he was trying to conceal.

My brother Damon's fingers encircled my wrist, his touch surprisingly gentle despite the tension in his arm. The others linked hands, forming a chain of anxious bodies. "My favorite transportation. The vampire train," Damon quipped, his sarcasm barely masking his nervousness.

In an instant, Justice propelled us forward with inhuman speed. My feet barely

skimmed the ancient stones of the Great Hall as we moved. The world around us melted into a dizzying kaleidoscope of colors and shapes. My stomach lurched, and I fought the urge to close my eyes against the nauseating blur.

We burst into the open air of Crown Square, the abrupt stop nearly sending me stumbling. The sudden transition from frantic motion to stillness left me gasping, my lungs burning as they fought to catch up. I blinked rapidly, willing my vision to clear as I took in our surroundings.

The square bustled with activity, tourists and locals alike milling about. To our left stood the imposing Royal Palace. Behind us loomed the Great Hall we'd fled, its grand facade contrasting the chaos we'd left inside. Across the square, the presence of the Scottish National War Memorial added a somber note to the scene.

I froze, my heart pounding as I glanced around the courtyard. Something was off. A hostile energy replaced the usual hum of excited visitors and tour guides. Near the palace steps, two women faced off, their bodies tense with fury.

"Stay away from him, you bitch. He's mine!" a dark-haired woman shrieked, her face contorted with rage as she jabbed a finger at a stunned-looking blonde.

My hands trembled as shock and secondhand embarrassment washed over me. I wanted to flee the ugliness, but I was a Grant. Grants didn't run and hide.

My stomach churned as I watched the blonde woman's face crumple, tears welling in her eyes. God, how had things escalated to this point?

I swallowed hard, trying to steady my breathing. The hostility in the air was like a virus, contaminating everyone. The fight between the women wasn't merely a lover's spat—real hatred was there. It scared me. What if it infected my team? I didn't want us to tear each other apart like we had back in the Unseelie Realm.

The blonde's shock quickly morphed into anger. She spat back a string of expletives so colorful they would have made a sailor blush. Around us, more arguments erupted, people hurling insults and squaring up to each other as if possessed by sudden, inexplicable anger.

Justice's eyes darted around the courtyard, his posture alert. "Rage is here," he muttered. "He must move at vampire speed. We need to get that harp fast."

The urgency in his tone sent a jolt of adrenaline through me. But before we could move, Lisa's voice cut through the increasing din of the square.

"No," she blurted, her eyes wide with a sudden realization. "We need to get my phoenix. She has the power to supercharge all the artifacts, including that mirror."

I could almost see the gears turning in Justice's mind as he weighed our options, the sounds of growing discord in the square a constant reminder of the danger closing in around us.

Suddenly, a piercing scream cut through the air, making us freeze in our tracks. We turned to see a woman, her eyes glowing an unnatural red, lunging at a nearby child. At that moment, the full gravity of our situation hit home. Rage wasn't merely causing fights. He was turning people into something inhuman.

Damon scowled as a fight broke out between two more guys in the growing crowd. The taller one shoved the other, yelling about cutting in line to enter the museum. His opponent retaliated with a wild swing, barely missing a bystander. The tension in the air was palpable, spreading like wildfire through the restless throng.

"This is getting out of hand fast," Damon muttered.

I felt Rage's influence seeping into the atmosphere, turning minor irritations into

powder kegs of violence.

“All right, hold up,” Damon growled. “Phoenix, magic harp, vampire speed? Sounds like we’ve got ourselves a real monster mash brewing. But listen, we ain’t got time to play Noah and round up every supernatural critter in town. We stick to the plan, get the harp, and gank this Rage S.O.B. before he turns this place into an all-you-can-eat buffet. You want your bird? Fine. But if it can’t deep-fry a demon, it’s taking a back seat. Now, let’s move before I have to start handing out wooden stakes as party favors.”

As he spoke, the sound of breaking glass echoed from somewhere nearby, followed by angry shouts. The situation was deteriorating by the second.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lisa's words hung in the air despite Damon's reaction. I felt torn, my mind racing as I tried to process what she'd said. The phoenix could supercharge all the artifacts? It sounded too good to be true, and with Lisa's track record, it definitely could be.

I glanced at Damon and saw the skepticism etched on his face. He'd always been the first to call out Lisa's lies, even when I wanted to believe her. But this time, I couldn't shake the feeling that she might be telling the truth.

Rage was unlike anything we'd faced before. Ten times more powerful than any demon we'd encountered. And the mirror, our go-to weapon, was useless against him. That had never happened before. The rules we'd relied on were crumbling around us.

But what if the phoenix could supercharge the mirror? The mythical bird held power over life and death itself. Maybe that included the power to extinguish a demon like Rage. It was a big "if," but with the stakes this high, could we afford to ignore it?

I turned away from Damon, feeling the weight of his disapproval, and looked at Justice. I had a feeling he'd come to the same conclusion I had. We needed to take this chance.

"Lisa," I began, my voice steadier than I felt. "If you're lying about this, if it's another one of your tricks..." I let the threat hang unfinished.

Lisa's eyes widened, a flash of hurt crossing her face. "Sawyer, I know I've betrayed your trust before, but this isn't?—"

“Save it,” Damon cut in. “We don’t have time for another round of ‘Trust me, I’ve changed.’ Sawyer, think about this. We go after the phoenix, and we’re splitting our forces. That’s exactly what Rage wants.”

The familiar pull of loyalty toward my brother warred with a desperate need to try anything that might work. “Damon, I hear you. But if there’s even a chance Lisa’s telling the truth...”

Justice cleared his throat, drawing our attention. “Time’s running out. We need to make a decision. Sawyer, it’s your call. Do we trust Lisa and go for the phoenix or stick to the original plan?”

I looked between Damon and Lisa, feeling like the sheriff between two gunslingers trying to stop a fight. Whatever I decided, it would change everything between us. Yet, with Rage growing stronger by the minute, indecision was a luxury I couldn’t afford.

Damon held up his hand. “Hold up, are we seriously considering chasing after some magical firebird on a ‘what if’? Come on, man! We’ve got a nuke of a demon breathing down our necks, and you want to go on a wild goose—er, phoenix chase?”

He glanced at me as if trying to drum up support for going after the harp first. “Look, I get it. Rage is one bad mother, makes our usual playmates look like fluffy bunnies. And yeah, our tried-and-true mirror’s about as useful as a screen door on a submarine right now. But for all we know, Lisa here could be playing us like a fiddle.”

Lisa stiffened her spine and crossed her arms. “I’m not. That’s one of the reasons why Maci wanted to keep the phoenix out of our hands. She understands its power.”

Damon ignored her and focused on me. “Fine, let’s say she’s not yanking our chain. Even if this phoenix can juice up our gear, how long’s it gonna take to find the damn

thing? We're not exactly working with a surplus of time here, in case you haven't noticed the pay-per-view demon smackdown brewing outside."

Justice stared at Lisa as if reading her thoughts.

Damon sighed. "Justice, man, I know that look. You're buying what she's selling, aren't you? All right, all right. If we're gonna do this, we do it smart. We split up. Half of us go for the harp. Our original plan, remember that? The other half can play bird catchers. That way, if this whole phoenix plan goes up in smoke, pun intended, we've still got a shot at this demon the old-fashioned way."

I looked at my brother. We had always been on the same playing field, but not this time. I braced my shoulders and spoke in a small voice. "I say we go after the phoenix."

Lisa gave Damon a superior smile that only spurred his frustration.

He threw his arms up in the air. "Fine. But I swear, if we end up chasing our tails while Rage turns this town into his personal playground, I'm gonna be pissed. And someone better have a spare bottle of Jack handy 'cause I got a feeling I'm gonna need it when this is all over."

Brody, who'd been silently assessing the situation, stepped forward, his muscular frame tense with urgency. He swept his gaze across the team. "All right," he stated firmly. "We need to make a call, and we need to make it now."

I gave him a nod and smiled. His ability to calm things and get the team focused was definitely appreciated. Even though I was the leader, sometimes you needed to step back and let someone else use their talents. In the meantime, I scanned the crowd, looking for Rage and Maci. Where were they? They had to be watching the scenario unfold.

He gestured toward the chaos, his movements sharp and precise. “We’ve got two potential game-changers, the harp and the phoenix. Both could be crucial against Rage, but we can’t pursue them simultaneously.”

His eyes narrowed as he addressed Damon, giving a curt nod of acknowledgment. “Damon’s concerns are valid. We can’t afford to chase a ‘maybe’ when we’re on a tight clock. But if Lisa’s right about the phoenix, it could give us the edge we desperately need. Here’s my take—we stick together. No splitting up. That’s how people get picked off in situations like this. We need to choose one target and commit to it fully.”

Brody uncrossed his arms and leaned in slightly. “So, team, what’s our next move? The harp we know about, or the phoenix that could potentially turn the tide? We make this decision together, right here, right now.”

His fist clenched at his side, emphasizing his words. “When we decide, we move as one unit, no hesitation. Whatever we choose, we’re in this together. We watch each other’s backs, stay alert, and adapt as needed. Time’s running out, and Rage isn’t going to wait for us to debate. What’s it going to be?”

I lowered my voice, my gaze darting around the increasingly chaotic courtyard. “The Isle of Skye,” I whispered urgently. “Come on, before Rage comes after us or the people start attacking us.”

As if on cue, a bottle smashed against a nearby wall, showering us with glass shards. The crowd’s angry shouts grew louder, more frenzied. We didn’t have much time.

Wordlessly, we formed a tight circle. I gripped Lisa’s and Justice’s hands with white-knuckled intensity. I felt Lisa’s fingers trembling in my right hand while Justice’s strong grip filled me with strength on the left. Damon’s face was a mask of grim determination as he nodded to Justice.

Justice's eyes flashed. "Hold on," he growled.

In a blur of motion that made my stomach lurch, Justice activated his vampire speed. Wind whipped at my clothes and hair as we moved faster than human eyes could track, leaving the escalating madness of the castle behind.

As we raced away, a chilling thought struck me. The chaos I'd witnessed felt too potent, too all-consuming, to be the work of Rage alone. My mind raced with possibilities. With this level of chaos, Envy or Gluttony or even Pride might be here, too.

Justice didn't stop until we reached our SUV.

But we weren't alone.

An eerie stillness spread goosebumps along my arms like a spider had crawled all over me. The streets that should have been bustling with life were a tableau of unnatural inertia.

People stood frozen in place as if time itself had stopped. Some were mid-stride, arms suspended in half-completed gestures. Others sat slumped on curbs, their eyes glazed and unfocused. A woman near us had a trail of drool sliding down her chin, pooling on her shirt. She made no move to wipe it away, seeming too lethargic even for that small action.

Damon stared at the drooling woman. "Well, ain't this a picture of small-town charm. Looks like someone hit the pause button on the whole damn place. Great. As if we didn't have enough on our plate with Rage, now we've got the entire town doing their best mannequin impressions."

"Sloth," I whispered hoarsely. "Sloth is here."

Damon cursed under his breath while Brody's jaw clenched tight enough to see the muscles work. Justice glanced around, assessing the danger with preternatural speed.

Suddenly, movement caught my eye. A man in a crisp charcoal suit approached us with surprising swiftness. Unlike those around him, his eyes were sharp and predatory, fixed on Lisa with unsettling intensity.

A demon.

Time seemed to slow as the man reached out, his fingers mere inches from Lisa's arm. Without conscious thought, I found the mirror in my hand, raising it with practiced speed.

"Lisa, duck!" I shouted, thrusting the mirror between her and the advancing threat.

The effect was instantaneous and horrifying. As soon as the man's reflection hit the mirror's surface, he released an inhuman shriek. His form crumbled, flesh and bone disintegrating into fine gray ash. In mere seconds, he was a pile of dust scattering across the concrete in a light breeze.

The ensuing silence was deafening. I stared at the spot where the man had been. Sloth had been defeated, but there could be other deadly sin demons lurking nearby. I glanced at the mirror. Its power was the only thing keeping the demons away, but I had a hunch they were waiting for a tiny slip-up, a chance for the mirror to shatter or be out of my reach, to attack. The hair stood up on my arms and on the back of my neck. I didn't see them, but that didn't mean they weren't there.

I could almost taste their evil, wanting to kill everyone I loved.

Not happening.

“Everyone okay?” Brody asked as he scanned our group for signs of injury.

I suddenly realized Zara had been uncharacteristically quiet since we arrived. I turned to look at her, and the haunted expression on her face struck me. Her usual confidence had vanished, replaced by a vulnerability I’d never seen before.

“Can we get out of here?” Zara whispered, trembling with emotion. “I don’t want to become a living statue like my sister.”

The sadness in her tone was heartbreaking. I tried to imagine how I’d feel if it were Damon frozen in place, stripped of his vibrant energy and wit. The thought alone was enough to make my chest tighten with anguish.

However, Sloth wasn’t the only demon we had to worry about. Six others were waiting to take these poor people around us and my team. The question was, where were they lurking?

Zara’s gaze darted nervously from one motionless figure to another, each frozen form a painful reminder of her sister’s fate. I recalled the story she’d shared with us earlier, a tale of sisterly love and devastating loss.

“We won’t let that happen to you, Zara.” I squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. “We’re in this together, remember?”

Damon nodded. “Yeah, no one’s turning into lawn ornaments on our watch.”

Zara managed a weak smile, but the fear lingered in her eyes. “Thanks,” she murmured. “It’s just...seeing all these people. It brings it all back, you know?”

Her hands were shaking, and she clenched them into fists, trying to regain her composure. The strong, sarcastic Zara we knew was still in there, but for now, she

was overshadowed by a scared sister reliving her worst nightmare.

“We should keep moving,” Brody suggested, scanning our surroundings as he opened the SUV door. “We don’t want Maci or demons following us.”

I had a feeling it was too late for that. Maci was a crafty adversary, and I bet she’d figure out we were heading for the Isle of Skye.

As I was sliding into the front seat, Rage and Maci walked onto the sidewalk. To anyone else, they looked like an ordinary couple. Rage tipped his finger to me as if saluting, and Maci smirked.

They didn’t attack, and that scared me most of all.

CHAPTER SIX

Justice pulled away from the curb, and we sped off.

My heart pounded as I glanced at him. “I bet they know where we’re headed.” I rubbed my forehead. “Why do you think they’re not following us? This doesn’t make sense.”

He nodded. “Unfortunately, I think you’re right.”

Brody caught my eye in the rearview mirror, his expression determined. “We can’t let their intimidation tactics work. As long as we stick together and stay true to our mission, we’ve already won half the battle. They might think they have the upper hand, but our strength lies in our unity and resolve.”

“It’s going to take us half a day to get to the fairy pools on the Isle of Skye. That will give Maci, Rage, and the other demons time to either move the phoenix or set a trap for us,” Justice grumbled.

“Too bad we can’t use the hourglass,” Damon remarked as he folded his arms. “A time machine would have been nice.”

Zara and Lisa exchanged a loaded glance, their eyes flickering with unspoken concerns.

My stomach dropped. I’d seen enough of their silent witch communication to know when something was seriously wrong. The air around us seemed to thicken, charged

with an energy I couldn't place but definitely didn't like.

"Maybe not," Zara offered tightly. Two simple words, but the way she said them with that edge of fear in her voice made my skin crawl.

Lisa inhaled sharply, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. "There's...a possibility we could conjure a spell," she began, her words measured and cautious. "To activate the hourglass."

She paused. "But the risks are severe. If the spell isn't potent enough, it could backfire catastrophically. We might not all make it through. Some of us could be left behind, or worse, trapped in the folds of time itself."

Her words hit me like a physical blow, sucking the air from my lungs. The car suddenly felt too small, too confining. I looked at the faces around me. Friends, family, people I'd die for. The thought of losing even one of them made my chest constrict painfully.

Memories of past losses flashed through my mind. Faces I'd never see again, voices forever silenced. I clenched my fists, my nails digging into my palms. Losing someone again wasn't an option. It couldn't be.

Yet if there was even the slightest chance this would work, the risk would be worth it. Wouldn't it? The fate of everything we knew hung in the balance. I swallowed hard, tasting the bitterness of fear and determination.

"Even if we manage to cast it correctly, there's no guarantee it will work at all," she added.

I turned, not sure how to answer that.

“Well, ain’t that peachy.” Damon’s voice dripped with sarcasm. He scrubbed his face, then locked gazes with Lisa. “So, our choices are to sit here twiddling our thumbs or risk becoming time confetti. Great.”

He paused for a beat, then added with grim determination, “You know what? I say we do it. We’ve faced worse odds before. Hell, being trapped in time might even be a fun vacation from the usual crap we deal with.”

Damon smirked at me. “What do you say, Sawyer? Ready to add ‘time refugee’ to our resumes?”

It would take four to five hours to even get to the Isle of Skye, and that was if Justice sped through the countryside. Maci and her demons would get to the fairy pools long before we did. If there was even a chance...

The witches had laid out the possible catastrophes.

“I vote for time travel,” I replied, studying each of my team members.

Damon’s jaw clenched, his dark eyes fixed on some distant point outside the window, conflict etched across his features.

Lisa twisted a strand of hair nervously around her finger, her other hand clasped tightly with Zara’s.

Zara’s face was a mask of concentration, her free hand tracing invisible sigils on her knee as if already preparing for the spell.

Brody sat unnaturally still, his usual optimism replaced by a solemn determination.

“Anyone object?” I asked.

No one said anything. Their pressed lips and grave expressions spoke volumes. For better or worse, we were doing this.

Justice glanced at me, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. “I’ll pull over at that gas station and park in the back. Maybe Maci and her minions won’t spot it.”

“Maybe.” I settled back in my seat, trying not to let pessimism creep into my voice, but my gaze instinctively scanned the sky. The clouds above seemed to shift and darken ominously. Maci could be anywhere. Lurking in the shadow of a cloud, melding with the darkness between trees, or even hiding in our own shadows. The thought made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

Lisa asked, “Do you think Maci’s tracking us?”

I shrugged. “Possibly. A shadow dragon isn’t exactly easy to shake.”

Damon chuckled bitterly. “Right, these suckers are like supernatural bloodhounds. Once they’ve got your scent, they don’t easily lose it.” He paused, thinking. “We need to muddy the trail somehow. Anyone got any ideas for throwing off a shadow dragon’s nose?”

I glanced over my shoulder. “Time travel.”

“If it works,” he mumbled. “Too bad we can’t roll around in some deer musk or whatever hunters use. Though I gotta say, that might be preferable to some of the other things we’ve had to do to ditch monsters.”

Justice took the turn into the gas station he’d noticed and pulled around behind it. It was a small station with tall trees in the back, so hopefully it would hide the SUV. We got out of the car, and I pulled the hourglass from my backpack, wondering if the spell would work. The hourglass time travel was supposed to be a one-time thing.

Lisa and Zara spoke in soft voices, then stepped apart from each other.

Zara wiped her palms on her jeans. “We have decided on a spell.”

“Wait, ‘decided on?’” Damon drawled, narrowing his eyes. “I thought you witchy types had this spell stuff down pat. You’re telling me you’ve been flipping through your magic cookbook this whole time?”

Lisa met his hostile stare. “We are from two different covens with different spell books, but we found one that meets both styles. Happy?”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re the witches.” He shrugged, then fixed them with a stern look. “Make sure it works. I’m not looking to star in my own ‘Back to the Future’ blooper reel.”

Brody shielded his eyes as he looked at the sky. “Team, we’ve got incoming. Large shadow overhead. Lisa, Zara, if you’ve got a plan, now’s the time. Everyone else, be ready to move on my signal.”

“Sawyer, put the hourglass on the trunk of the car,” Zara commanded tightly.

I complied swiftly, the cool metal of the car in stark contrast to my clammy hands. My eyes darted skyward, searching for any sign of Maci’s shadow form. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, an eerie sensation of being watched prickling across my skin.

The screech of tires suddenly shattered the relative quiet. Car doors slammed in rapid succession, sharp and foreboding. Angry voices rose in a cacophony, growing louder with each passing second.

“Shit,” I muttered. “Rage is here.”

Lisa and Zara flanked the hourglass, their faces etched in concentration. They raised their hands, fingers splayed over the ancient artifact. The air around us seemed charged with an electric tension that made my teeth ache.

Their voices rose in unison, clear and powerful.

“Tempus fluit, aqua currit,

Horae vitrae, viam aperit.

Per umbras et lucem,

Ad fontes faerie nos ducent.

Crystalli potestas, temporis nexus,

Iter nostrum nunc perfectus!”

As they chanted, the sand in the hourglass glowed and pulsed. A faint mist swirled around our feet, gradually rising and enveloping us. The witches’ eyes blazed, their hair whipping in a wind that seemed to affect only them.

The angry voices grew closer, a crescendo of threats and curses. A dark shadow passed over us, and my heart leaped into my throat. I looked up to see the massive outline of a dragon silhouetted against the sky, its wings blotting out the sun. Time was slipping through our fingers like sand.

Rage rounded the corner of the gas station, his eyes gleaming with malicious triumph. “Going somewhere without me?” He put his hand on his chest in mock hurt. “I’m offended.” His casual tone belied the dangerous glint in his eyes.

“Everyone,” Lisa yelled, her voice cracking with urgency. “Touch the hourglass. Now!”

Adrenaline surged through me as I snatched my backpack and slammed my hand on the hourglass. The ice-cold glass sent a shiver up my arm. Justice and Damon flanked me, forming a human shield against Rage’s advancing threat.

Brody backed up and pulled Zara and Lisa away from their spellcasting stance, guiding them urgently toward the hourglass. The moment their fingers made contact, the air crackled with energy. Sparkles of light danced across my vision, swirling faster and faster until they became a dizzying vortex.

“You’re not going anywhere without me,” Rage roared in fury and desperation. He lunged forward, fingers outstretched like claws, grasping for any part of us he could reach.

My stomach lurched as the world dissolved into mist. Rage’s snarling face faded, his fingers passing through me like smoke. The last thing I saw was his expression of red-hot rage, a silent howl of frustration as I slipped beyond his reach.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Colors spun around me, a kaleidoscopic whirlwind faster than an out-of-control merry-go-round. Reds bled into blues, purples swirled into greens, all blurring together in a dizzying maelstrom. My stomach lurched, and I squeezed my eyes shut, fighting the urge to be sick.

As suddenly as it began, the technicolor tornado vanished, and pinpricks of light blinked into existence. Stars? No, not stars. They were too close, too erratic. They danced and flickered like fireflies caught in a cosmic wind, swirling around me in patterns I couldn't begin to comprehend.

Time seemed to stretch and contract, seconds feeling like hours, then compressing into milliseconds. I lost all sense of up or down, my body weightless in this strange in-between place.

Then, without warning, it stopped.

Reality slammed back into focus with brutal force. I crashed into something unyielding. Rock, maybe, or packed earth. Pain exploded through my body, radiating from my hip and ribs where I'd impacted. The shock drove the air from my lungs in a silent gasp.

For a terrifying moment, I couldn't breathe. My diaphragm spasmed, refusing to cooperate. Spots danced in my vision, real this time, born of oxygen deprivation rather than magical transport. As panic began to set in, my lungs remembered their job. I sucked in a ragged breath, the cool air burning as it rushed in.

Gradually, the pain ebbed to a dull throb, and I became aware of my surroundings. The smell of damp earth and vegetation. The sound of running water nearby. The feel of a light breeze against my skin.

Where—and when—had we landed?

Darkness engulfed me like a thick velvet curtain drawn across the world. The only light came from the moon, its silver glow barely penetrating the gloom.

“Sawyer?” Worry tinged Justice’s voice as he scooped me into his arms. His cool fingers brushed the hair from my flushed face. “Are you hurt?”

I blinked, trying to focus on him. The concern in his eyes made my chest tighten with emotions I couldn’t untangle. Gratitude for his unwavering support. Shame for being so weak when everyone needed me to be strong. And something deeper, more intense, that I wasn’t ready to name.

I leaned into his touch, allowing myself this brief moment of comfort. The steady beat of his heart against my side was reassuring, a reminder I wasn’t alone in this fight.

“No,” I managed to gasp, shaking my head. “Just...got the wind knocked out of me.” Fear swelled inside me. “Damon and the others?”

“I’m not sure,” Justice tensed as he set me down and turned, trying to pierce the darkness.

“Sawyer? Justice?” My brother’s voice cut through the night, and relief swelled inside me, so intense it was almost painful.

“We’re over here,” Justice called back. “Near the running water.”

After a pause, Damon shouted, “‘Over here’ doesn’t work, bloodsucker. I can’t even see my hand in front of my face.”

The frustration in Damon’s tone masked an undercurrent of fear. We were all out of our element here, lost in time and space, separated in a strange, dark place.

“Okay, everyone, stay where you are,” I called, trying to inject calm into my voice. “Let’s use sound to find each other. Justice and I will keep talking. Everyone else, call out so we can locate you.”

Voices sounded in the darkness, but still, I couldn’t pinpoint anyone.

“Call out again, Damon.” Justice’s cool hand gripped mine reassuringly. The darkness pressed in, making every sound seem muffled and distant.

“Keep coming, vampire.” Damon’s voice rang out in irritation and relief. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once in the pitch-black night.

I strained my eyes, willing them to adjust to the darkness. Slowly, shapes emerged from the gloom. A tall, muscular silhouette gradually took form against the slightly lighter backdrop of the night sky. My heart leaped as I recognized the familiar outline, the broad shoulders, the stance I’d know anywhere.

A smile spread across my face, warmth blooming in my chest despite the chill of the night. “Damon,” I whispered, squeezing Justice’s hand. “I see him.”

We moved carefully toward my brother’s shape, mindful of the uneven ground beneath our feet. The sound of the nearby stream grew louder, providing a constant backdrop to our cautious approach.

As we drew closer, more details came into focus. The tilt of Damon’s head as he

listened for our approach, the tension in his posture gradually relaxing as he recognized us. The relief of finding each other in this strange, dark place was a ray of victory.

It was the first step in defeating Maci.

A small glow pierced the darkness, approaching us slowly. My muscles tensed instinctively as years of experience facing supernatural threats kicked in. Justice stiffened, his hand tightening around mine.

The chill of the night air seeped into my bones, and I hugged myself, suddenly aware of how exposed we were. I glanced around, and panic rose in my chest. “Where’s my backpack?” I whispered, fear making my voice quiver.

“Right here,” Justice reassured me, holding it up. The fabric rustled in the quiet night. “I think it somehow got ripped off your back. Not sure how.”

With trembling hands, I sat up and tore the bag open. Relief washed over me as my fingers brushed the familiar shapes of the mirror, the crown, and the other artifacts. But something was missing. My heart skipped a beat. “Where’s the hourglass?”

Justice scanned our immediate surroundings, his vampire sight piercing the darkness better than mine. He moved toward the gentle burble of water. Moments later, he returned, the hourglass glinting dully in the moonlight.

The light grew closer, and I braced myself for a fight. It had to be Maci. Or worse, Rage.

Yet, as the light drew nearer, familiar silhouettes took shape beyond the glow. The tension in my body eased as I recognized Lisa and Zara’s outlines. Lisa held what looked like a pulsing orb of white light in her palm, its radiance pushing back the

oppressive darkness.

“Oh, thank goodness,” I murmured, relief washing over me.

I made out their faces in the ethereal light. Lisa’s brow furrowed in concentration, her lips moving as if maintaining the spell required constant focus. Zara walked close beside her, alert for any potential threats.

“Are you guys okay?” Zara called.

I nodded, then realized they might not be able to see the gesture clearly. “We’re fine. Have you seen Brody? Did he make it?”

Please say yes, please say yes, please say yes

Zara looked around. “I thought I saw him, but I lost track.”

God, I didn’t want to lose Brody again. He had the heart of a hero and brought this team together when we lost all hope.

“We’ll find him,” Justice insisted, putting a hand on my shoulder.

Lisa held up the light and slowly moved it around. There was a dark shape that looked like Brody.

Justice tilted his head. “I think that’s him over there.”

I exhaled in relief. “Lisa, that light is incredible.”

Lisa managed to smile a little, though strain showed in the corners of her eyes. “Only a simple illumination spell,” she replied modestly. “It’s taking more energy than I

expected, though. This place is different.”

Something in her tone didn’t sit well with me. “Meaning?”

“There are fairies here,” she told me. “I can feel them impacting my magic.”

I glanced at Justice, not sure if I believed in fairies. What if they were here, though? I wasn’t a witch, and maybe Lisa could sense them. I looked around uneasily, the shadows seeming to deepen around us.

“You’ve never encountered fairies before?”

A chill slid down my spine at Lisa’s words, one that had nothing to do with the cool night air. My eyes met Justice’s, and I saw my concern mirrored in his gaze.

Damon scoffed. “Fairies don’t exist.” He grunted, crossing his arms.

Zara’s head snapped toward him, her eyes wide with alarm. “Actually, they do.” She glanced nervously at the darkness around us before continuing. “And you’d be wise not to say anything bad about them. Fairies take offense easily, and you don’t want them to take you . We might not ever find you.”

A heavy silence fell over our group as the weight of Zara’s words sank in. The gentle burble of the nearby stream suddenly seemed ominous, as if hiding whispers beyond our hearing.

I swallowed hard. “Okay,” I replied, trying to keep my voice calm. “So, we’re dealing with easily offended, potentially kidnapping fairies. Anything else we should know, Zara?”

“They become angry if you trespass on their homes, especially if you damage them.

They also like to leave gifts, and if you refuse, it will stir their anger,” she explained.

“Great,” Damon muttered. “A bunch of touchy, kleptomaniac Tinkerbells. Fan-friggin-tastic. Let me guess. They also get pissy if you step on their fairy dust or forget to clap?”

“I mean it, Damon.” She straightened and scowled. “Are you listening to me? You don’t want to make a fairy angry unless you want to be taken to their realm and become a slave.”

“I get it, Zara,” he snapped. “Your rules are crystal clear.”

My mind raced. If Lisa’s magic was being drained while she maintained the light spell, what did that mean for our mission? For our safety? I unconsciously tightened my grip on my backpack, acutely aware of the artifacts inside.

“We should be careful,” I stated, addressing the group. “If this place is interfering with Lisa’s magic, who knows what other surprises it might have in store for us? Let’s stick close together and keep our eyes open for anything unusual.”

I turned back to Lisa, concern etched on my face. “Don’t push yourself too hard with that light. We need you at full strength. Maybe we can find another way to illuminate our path if it becomes too draining.”

Soft, measured footsteps approached us, and Brody emerged from the darkness. He scanned each of us, exuding calm authority despite the strange circumstances.

“Is everyone accounted for?” he asked as he moved closer, placing himself centrally within the group. “Sound off. Any injuries?”

“No,” I told him. “Luck was on our side.”

He glanced at us, his gaze searching and comforting. “Good work on the light, Lisa,” he added with a nod of appreciation. “It’ll help us get our bearings. Justice, what’s our situation?”

Justice pointed, his keen vampire sight piercing the darkness thanks to the light boost from Lisa. “There’s a path that goes up next to the fairy pools. It will be slow going unless Lisa can make more lights.”

The glowing orb in Lisa’s hand pulsed erratically, its light waxing and waning like a feverish heartbeat. One moment, it cast long, eerie shadows that danced around our small group, creating a fragile island of illumination in the vast darkness. The next, it dimmed to barely a spark, plunging us into near-total blackness.

“Come on,” Lisa muttered through gritted teeth, her face contorting with concentration as she struggled to maintain the spell.

The orb flared for a second, then sputtered out completely. We held our breath in the sudden darkness. When the light flickered back to life, I caught glimpses of worry etched on my companions’ faces.

In the intervals of illumination, I tried to make out our surroundings. The air carried the crisp scent of wet stone and verdant moss. A symphony of nocturnal sounds enveloped us. The gentle burble of cascading water, the whisper of wind through unseen foliage, and the occasional rustle that could have been a small animal or something else entirely.

As Lisa’s magic continued to flicker unpredictably, I couldn’t help but feel we were exposed and vulnerable. Each time the light failed, my heart raced, imagining what might be lurking beyond the reach of our faltering radiance. The unreliability of our only light source added a new layer of tension to an already nerve-wracking situation.

As my eyes adjusted, I glimpsed the silhouettes of jagged rocks and the glint of moonlight on water. The fairy pools were a series of natural, crystal-clear pools stepped down the glen. In the day, they would be a tourist's dream. Now, shrouded in night, they held an otherworldly, almost menacing beauty.

I thought of my vision back at Rimespire Isle. The phoenix was in a cave, but nothing looked familiar. Had the vision been wrong? Had I led my team on a wild goose chase?

Doubt crept into my mind. What if the phoenix wasn't here? Had Maci guessed our plans and moved it? I shook it off and tried to concentrate on the mission.

A cool mist clung to my skin, raising goosebumps along my arms. The taste of pure mountain water lingered on my lips, carried by the light breeze. Beneath our feet, the ground was uneven and slick, a treacherous mix of smooth stones and damp earth.

"We need to be careful. According to my vision, the phoenix is at the end of the fairy pools in a small cave," I whispered, as if speaking too loudly might disturb whatever magic lingered here. "The path will be slippery, and who knows what might be hiding in those shadows?"

It was bad enough fighting demons and a shadow dragon. I didn't want to add fairies to my list of enemies.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lisa led the way, the flickering glow from her palms casting long, wavering, intermittent shadows across the white pebbled path. Its mercurial radiance painted the surrounding landscape in shifting hues of silver and azure.

As we approached the fairy pools, the magical light grew more intense, as if responding to the mystical energy of the place. It sent prismatic reflections skittering across the water's surface, creating a mesmerizing light show rivaling the aurora borealis. The pools seemed to come alive, their waters no longer merely bubbling but swirling with an inner luminescence that pulsed in harmony with Lisa's light.

The cascading waterfalls appeared truly enchanted. Each droplet caught the magical light, creating cascades of liquid starlight that tumbled down the dark rocks. The mist rising from the falls shimmered with rainbow hues, forming diaphanous veils that drifted on the cool night air.

I picked my way carefully along the path, my eyes constantly drawn to the fantastical scene around us. The white pebbles beneath our feet seemed to absorb and reflect the magical light, turning the trail into a winding ribbon with a soft, pearlescent glow. When we reached a small stream crossing our path, the slippery rocks glistened like polished opals, their surfaces alive with swirling patterns of color.

Justice followed close behind me. I could sense the others behind him, all moving in a hushed procession through this transformed landscape.

A gust of wind swept over us, carrying the crisp scent of heather and the earthy

perfume of moss. I shivered, partly from the chill and partly from sheer wonder. The breeze seemed to whisper ancient secrets as it rustled through the surrounding vegetation, stirring the magical light into swirling eddies that danced around us like mischievous spirits.

The night air here reminded me of skiing in Colorado, where no amount of clothing could keep the air out. When I exhaled, I could see my breath, and my teeth chattered. I suspected this wasn't natural. As I moved through the darkness, my heart pounded so loudly that I feared it might give us away.

I still felt we were being watched. Every shadow seemed to conceal a potential threat, every rustle of leaves a sign of Maci's cunning traps. Knowing she wouldn't leave the phoenix unprotected made my palms sweat. We wouldn't be able to waltz in and rescue it. That much was painfully clear.

Lisa's past words echoed in my mind, fueling a spark of hope amid my anxiety. The phoenix could supercharge our artifacts, giving us an edge we desperately needed. It was the only way to defeat the demons.

Yet, with that hope came a new wave of worry. If we knew this, Maci did too. The thought of her using the phoenix's power to strengthen her demons made my stomach churn. We couldn't let that happen. The consequences were too terrible for me to contemplate.

As we carefully moved down the path, something unexpected happened. A sense of serenity washed over me, momentarily pushing back my fear and doubt. It was as if the ancient magic of this place recognized our purpose and offered its silent support. Each tranquil pool we passed seemed to infuse me with renewed strength, steeling my resolve for the challenges ahead.

Yet, even as this calm flowed through me, a nagging voice in the back of my mind

whispered warnings. Was this serenity real or another of Maci's traps? Were we walking into an ambush, lulled into a false sense of security by the enchanting surroundings?

Despite my conflicting emotions, one thing remained clear. We didn't have a choice. The fate of so much hung in the balance. With each step deeper into the heart of the fairy pools, I silently prayed our determination, and perhaps a bit of fairy luck, would be enough to see us through this perilous night.

From the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a dark shadow move. It was blacker than the night, as if a fabric had been torn away, showing the depths of hell. My heart leaped into my throat, and a cold sweat broke out across my skin. Was it my imagination, or had something really shifted in the darkness? It could be Maci or another demon.

Then came the smell, a nauseating mixture of copper and sulfur that made my stomach lurch. The unmistakable scent of blood mingled with brimstone grew stronger with each passing second, reminding me of the same stench back in the Shadow Mine.

My ears strained in the eerie silence that had fallen. The usual nighttime sounds had all ceased abruptly. In their place, I heard something that made my blood run cold. A low, guttural growl, barely audible above the bubbling fairy pools but undeniably real. It was a sound that didn't belong in this world, a hungry noise that spoke of unnatural hunger and otherworldly malice.

I could almost taste the fear, metallic and bitter on my tongue. My mouth went dry as I fought the urge to call out to the others, worried that any sound might draw whatever it was closer to us.

"Justice, do you smell that? The gluttony demons..." I whispered, trailing off.

“They’re here.” Justice gripped my arm. “I don’t see them, but I suspect they are lurking where Maci imprisoned the phoenix.”

His movement startled me, and I put a hand over my mouth to keep from screaming. I gasped between my fingers as he pulled me back against his chest. The firmness of his body was both reassuring and anxiety-inducing.

Lisa hurried to the edge of the fairy pool and looked like she was about to jump into the water without thinking, like a little kid.

“Lisa, stop,” Justice’s low voice called near my ear. “The demons are tracking us and can see us. They’ll capture you before you get close to your phoenix.” He tightened his grip on my arm. “Sawyer, you need to look in the mirror.”

His words sent a chill down my spine. I scanned the area frantically, trying to spot what Justice had sensed. The shadows danced and shifted, playing tricks on my eyes. Every rustle of leaves, every whisper of wind felt sinister.

My hands trembled as I opened the backpack and pulled out the Mirror of Aethereal. “Show me where the phoenix is.”

The surface rippled like a lake under a silver moon, an eerie sight that never failed to send a shiver down my spine. In my mom’s voice, it said, “The phoenix is hiding behind a single waterfall cascading into a fairy pool, and you shall see.”

The mirror continued. “Seek the Veil of Whispers, where water cascades from ancient stone. A spell is over the phoenix. To retrieve it, you must swim under the waterfall and down to its prison. Only your blood has the power to release the phoenix. The bloodline in the women of your family is stronger. Trust in it. It’s your destiny.”

Lisa's eyes widened with recognition. "The Veil of Whispers? I've heard of it. It's said to be one of the most magical of the fairy pools, a tall, narrow waterfall that spills into a deep, circular pool. The locals say the sound of the falling water carries whispers from the fairy realm."

Justice nodded grimly. "I've seen it. The water falls from a height taller than three men, creating a curtain of mist. The pool below is deceptively deep. No one knows how far down it goes."

"I don't care what the mirror says. My phoenix is down there. I have to save her. She needs me," Lisa insisted, her voice thick with emotion.

Brody placed a firm but gentle hand on her shoulder. "Stand down, soldier. We can't let our hearts cloud our judgment. The demons are counting on us to fracture. We're stronger together, and that's how we'll win this fight. Your phoenix is brave. She'd want you to make the right call here."

Lisa's reaction didn't help my nerves. Her stubbornness to push forward despite the danger made my stomach churn with worry. I was torn between the desire to flee and the need to continue our mission.

"Follow me." Justice slipped in front of Lisa and Brody.

Relief and apprehension filled me. His confidence in his ability to see in the dark was reassuring, but it also highlighted how vulnerable the rest of us were.

Lisa's light illuminated Justice's broad back, and I couldn't help but stare at the taut muscles visible through his shirt. His tension seemed to seep over to me, heightening my own anxiety. I wished he could use his vampire speed to whisk us away from danger, but I was the only one who could retrieve the phoenix.

Every step forward felt like a risk. The darkness beyond Lisa's light seemed to press in on us, full of unseen threats. I strained my ears for any sound that might betray the presence of demons or a dragon, my imagination running wild with every rustle or snap of a twig.

A shiver shook my spine as I imagined the task ahead. Swimming under a powerful waterfall, then plunging into unknown depths, was a daunting prospect, even without the threat of demons lurking below.

Justice stopped and pointed. "That's the waterfall."

I followed his gaze. "So, I need to get past the waterfall, dive into the pool, find this prison, and use my blood to free the phoenix," I summarized, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice. "All while avoiding any traps Maci might have set, not to mention the gluttony demons."

Lisa inhaled sharply. "Blood? That can't be good."

Justice's eyes narrowed. "Gluttony demons feed on blood. Maci must be using them as guards."

Zara paled. "Gluttony demons?"

I nodded grimly, feeling every nerve standing at attention. I didn't want to become an enslaved vampire. "Yes. Gluttony demons were the first Seven Deadly Sins demon we encountered, and they're always hungry. Their type of demon devours prey like vampires, sucking their blood until there's nothing left but an empty shell."

The memory of the drained victims in the Shadow Mine still haunted my dreams, and a shadow of fear fell over me.

Lisa stepped closer and whispered, “We need to be careful. Fairy pools are dangerous enough on their own. They’re gateways to the fairy realm. One wrong move, and we could be trapped there forever.”

I peered into the darkness, trying to spot the pool Justice had gestured to. As if on cue, faint moonlight broke through, illuminating a small, circular pool nearby. Its surface was mirror-smooth, reflecting the starry sky above. An ethereal mist hovered above the water, giving it an otherworldly appearance.

Its beauty both awed and terrified me. The last thing I wanted to do was to crawl down there by myself.

Justice placed a protective hand on my shoulder. “You need to be careful. Swimming down is risky enough, but with gluttony demons waiting...maybe you should take the mirror.”

“I can’t swim and use it at the same time.” I swallowed hard, “Besides, I think you need it. The demons could attack you. To do this, I need to know all of you will be here when I get back.”

He lifted my chin. “I promise I’ll keep everyone safe. You’re the one who needs to be careful.” He clasped my chin. “Call for me, and I can whisk you out of there. Remember, you’re not doing this alone.”

“I know, but it’s my destiny.” My voice sounded braver than I felt. All I wanted to do was turn tail and run, but that went against everything I had been taught.

The fairy pools gleamed like liquid starlight, their serene beauty a deceptive veil over the danger that lurked beneath. I felt the enemy’s eyes upon me, waiting with bated breath for my desperate attempt to save the phoenix. The air crackled with tension, and I knew my next move would either be our salvation or our doom.

CHAPTER NINE

Time seemed to slow as I stood at the edge of the fairy pools, staring into the darkness, knowing I might not survive. But I didn't have a choice. I would do anything to protect Justice, my brother, and the others, even risk my own life.

I closed my eyes, steeling myself for what was to come. When I opened them again, determination had replaced fear. It was time.

After a deep breath, I turned to Justice and gestured toward the backpack. Our eyes met, and frustration flared in his. "Keep them safe," I whispered. The 'them' hung in the air—not merely the contents of my bag, but also our friends, should I fail.

He pulled me close and pressed his lips to mine. His kiss was fierce and unyielding as if he feared I would disappear from his grasp. I clung to him with equal fervor, grasping his strong shoulders as I hungrily absorbed the taste of him. His body radiated strength and determination, and I couldn't help but feel drawn to it. Nothing else in the world mattered but being with him.

Someone cleared their throat, then my brother blurted, "Whoa there, lovebirds. I hate to break up this Hallmark moment, but we've got a phoenix to save and a big bad to gank. Save the makeout session for when we're not knee-deep in magical crap, all right?"

He faced me, his tone softening but maintaining its urgency.

"Look, sis, I get it. Destiny's a pain in the ass, and being the 'chosen one' or

whatever? It sucks. But right now, you've got a job to do. So how about we table the teen drama, gear up, and go save our feathery friend before things go from bad to apocalyptic? 'Cause trust me, that's a road you don't want to go down."

I drew a deep breath, feeling the weight of a legacy I couldn't fully recall. A sad smile tugged at my lips. "I don't know, Damon. I can't remember." The admission felt like a punch to the gut, a reminder of the void where my memories of our father should be.

Sympathy and fierce protectiveness flashed across his face. He squeezed my shoulder, his grip firm and reassuring. "Dad would never give up. You might not remember him, but you're a carbon copy of him. Believe me." His voice dropped lower, thick with emotion. "You've got his stubbornness, his courage, and definitely his knack for finding trouble."

A chuckle escaped me. "Gee, thanks."

"I mean it, Sawyer," Damon continued. "Dad faced impossible odds more times than I can count, and he always found a way through. The same strength is in you. I've seen it."

He pulled me into a fierce hug, and I held on tight, drawing strength from his unwavering belief in me. I might not remember Dad, but Damon had always been there for me. My rock, my protector, my link to a past I couldn't recall.

As we embraced, fragments of shared memories flashed through my mind. Damon teaching me to ride a bike, bandaging my scraped knees, staying up late to help me with homework. He'd been more than a brother. He'd been a father figure in his own right.

When we finally pulled apart, I saw a glimmer of moisture in Damon's eyes that he

blinked away. “Now go show that phoenix and whatever else is down there what a Grant is made of,” he insisted.

I nodded, squaring my shoulders. The fear and uncertainty were still there, but now determination tempered them. I might not have my father’s memories to guide me, but I had Damon’s faith and the Grant legacy coursing through my veins. Whatever awaited me in those fairy pools, I would face it head-on.

Zara winked at me. “You’ll be fine. I believe in you, Sawyer.”

Her words washed over me, a balm to my frayed nerves. “Thank you,” I told her. “Your faith in me means so much.”

I meant what I said. The team had thought she’d been a traitor, but she’d proven she wouldn’t turn her back on me or anyone else. I was grateful for her unwavering support.

Zara reached out and squeezed my arm, her touch grounding me. “We’ve come too far to fail now,” she stated. “You’ve got this, and we’ve got your back.”

I nodded, drawing strength from her confidence. My impending task still prickled my skin, but I knew if I got into trouble, my team had my back. I drew a deep breath, letting it out slowly as I turned to face the shimmering fairy pools again.

Brody stepped forward, his movements hesitant yet purposeful. In one fluid motion, he pulled out a blade that gleamed ominously in the glow surrounding us. His expression was apologetic but determined. The weight of what we were about to do seemed to hang heavily on his shoulders.

“The mirror said only your blood would break the spell,” he murmured. The words hung in the air, heavy with implication.

Justice's reaction was immediate and vehement. "This is ridiculous," he growled, stretching his hand toward Brody. His eyes flashed with anger and a protective instinct. "I'll cut her."

A moment of tense silence ensued as Brody and Justice locked gazes in an unspoken battle of wills. Brody nodded, and a flicker of relief crossed his face as he handed the blade to Justice. He was glad to relinquish this particular responsibility.

Justice took the blade, its weight appearing more than physical in his hand. He turned to me, and the fierce look melted into something deeper, more vulnerable.

"If anything goes wrong, you cry out, and I'll be there."

My heart swelled with love, and I wanted to wrap my arms around him and hang onto him for dear life, but my job was to protect him as much as he wanted to protect me.

I swallowed hard, fighting the lump in my throat. His protectiveness both thrilled and terrified me. Part of me longed to give in, to let him shield me from the dangers we faced. But I couldn't. I wouldn't.

"I will. I promise." My voice came out stronger than I felt, bolstered by the unwavering support surrounding me.

My fingers itched to reach out and trace the line of his jaw, to feel the warmth of his skin. Instead, I clenched my fists at my sides, nails biting into my palms. The pain helped ground me, reminding me of the gravity of our situation.

His eyes softened, a flicker of vulnerability crossing his face. It made my resolve waver, but I stood my ground and relaxed my hands.

Then, with a movement that seemed both too fast and agonizingly slow, he slashed

across my palm.

The pain was sharp and immediate. I couldn't help but wince, a small hiss escaping through clenched teeth. The cut wasn't deep, but it stung fiercely, and blood welled up almost instantly.

"Sorry," Justice murmured. His free hand moved as if to comfort me but stopped short, hovering uncertainly.

I inhaled deeply, pushing past the pain. "I can handle it," I insisted, meeting his concerned gaze with what I hoped was a reassuring look. He would do anything to protect me, but this wasn't his path. It was mine.

I straightened my shoulders, steeling myself for what was to come. The pain in my hand was already fading to a dull throb.

Justice, Brody, Zara, and Damon watched silently. The air around us crackled with anticipation.

Lisa tapped her foot. "What are you waiting for, Sawyer? You need to go now. My phoenix needs me."

Before I could respond, Damon stepped forward, his eyes flashing with barely contained anger. "Back off, Lisa," he growled, positioning himself in front of me. "My sister's about to risk her life for your bird. She'll go when she's ready and not a second before."

I placed a hand on his arm, both in gratitude and as a gentle restraint. "It's okay, Damon. She's right. It's time."

Damon's jaw clenched, but he nodded and stepped back. However, his gaze never left

Lisa, watching her with a mixture of wariness and warning.

Justice clasped my shoulders. “Remember, just call out my name, and I’ll be there.”

My heart raced, and the depth of emotion in his eyes made my breath catch. I wanted to stay in this moment forever, safe in his presence, but I couldn’t. I had a job to do.

The moment of truth had arrived.

As I turned toward the shimmering pool, my bleeding hand outstretched, I felt their fears and their hopes. The cut on my palm was more than a means to break a spell. It was a symbol of the sacrifices I was willing to make to save those I loved.

With one last deep breath, I stepped down the misty rocky embankment toward the fairy pool and scanned the shadows and the water, looking for any hint of danger.

Nothing moved. It was too still, as if something was waiting for me.

CHAPTER TEN

As I edged closer, the roar of cascading water grew louder, seeming to swell with each step I took. The sound pressed against my ears, drowning out the worried voices of my team behind me. Their words of encouragement and caution became distant murmurs, lost in the thunderous symphony of the falls.

A pang of longing shot through me. I desperately wished Justice was by my side, his steady presence a comfort in the face of the unknown. But this was my task alone, and I had to steel myself for what lay ahead.

Lisa held up her ball of light so I could make out what was down there. The light cast an eerie glow off the water and the embankment. I didn't see any demons, but they could be hiding. Or maybe Maci was tucked in the shadows, waiting to pounce on me when I was away from my team.

The pool stretched before me, a mirror of liquid obsidian. Mist rose in ghostly tendrils, carrying the crisp, clean scent of water and something else, something ancient and magical that I couldn't quite place. As I approached the water's edge, I felt the cold emanating from it, a promise of the icy shock that awaited me.

I drew a deep breath, my heart pounding a frantic rhythm. If I wanted to rescue Aurora, to save the phoenix, I had no choice. I had to get into the pool.

If I failed, Maci wouldn't simply destroy the artifacts. She'd pick off my team one by one. Her penchant for revenge was legendary, and anyone who stood in her way inevitably ended up six feet under. The thought turned my blood to ice.

With trembling fingers, I reached for the zipper of my coat. Its sound seemed unnaturally loud, even against the backdrop of the waterfall. I shrugged off the garment, the weight of it falling away leaving me strangely vulnerable.

Next came my boots. I kicked them off, my bare feet meeting the cold, damp stone beneath. The chill seeped into my bones, a preview of what was to come.

I grabbed the hem of my shirt, hesitating before pulling it over my head. The mist clung to my bare skin, raising goosebumps along my arms and back. I shivered, not only from the cold but from the eerie sensation of being watched. Whether by my team or unseen eyes in the magical darkness, I couldn't be sure.

Finally, I stripped off my pants, leaving them in a crumpled heap with the rest of my clothes. While standing there in my underwear, I felt exposed and vulnerable. The cold mist swirled around me, its icy fingers trailing across my skin.

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to conserve what little warmth I had left. The cut on my palm stung in the damp air, a sharp reminder of the task ahead. I flexed my fingers, watching as a drop of blood welled up and fell, disappearing into the darkness at my feet.

The pool waited, still and silent, its depths hiding secrets and dangers I could only imagine. As I stood on the brink, poised between the safety of the shore and the unknown depths, I couldn't help but wonder. Was I really ready for this?

There was no time for doubt. Aurora needed me. My team was counting on me. With one last deep breath, I steelled myself for the plunge.

The icy water drove the air from my lungs in a rush of bubbles. Cold pain shot through me, a thousand needle-sharp sensations assaulting every inch of my skin. It felt like frozen fingers were squeezing my lungs, constricting my chest. My heart,

hammering frantically, seemed to stutter with each stabbing pulse of frigid agony.

Fighting against the instinct to gasp, I forced myself to take a deep, controlled breath. The air burned in my throat, a stark contrast to the numbing cold surrounding me. With grim determination, I swam toward the thunderous waterfall, each stroke a battle against the water's paralyzing chill.

I kicked my feet, propelling myself forward with desperate energy. The roar of the falls grew louder with each moment. As I drew closer, droplets of water sprayed into my face like a barrage of icy pellets, stinging my eyes and blurring my vision.

The absence of Lisa's comforting ball of light compounded my misery. Darkness pressed in around me, broken only by the faint, diffused glow of the moon struggling to pierce the gloom. Shadows danced at the edges of my vision, playing tricks on my mind. Every ripple and eddy seemed to hide potential threats, unseen dangers lurking beyond my perception.

Keep moving. Keep moving. Keep moving.

Suddenly, a flicker of movement caught my eye. On the edge of the embankment, something shifted in the shadows. I stopped swimming, treading water as my eyes strained to make sense of what I was seeing.

Red eyes stared at me from the darkness, gleaming with malevolent intelligence. The hatred in that gaze stirred a whirl of fear in my gut, sending a chill through me, far colder than the frigid water. A gluttony demon.

For a moment, I was frozen not by the cold but by sheer terror. The demon was exactly as I remembered in the Shadow Mine, wearing a finely tailored suit that seemed bizarrely out of place in this primal setting. But there was nothing human about those eyes or the aura of wrongness surrounding it.

I had never seen a gluttony demon's true form. Even now, I knew I wasn't seeing its real appearance. This human disguise was a mask, a thin veneer of normalcy hiding something far more horrifying. The suit stretched and shifted in unnatural ways as if struggling to contain something much larger and more monstrous than the human shape it mimicked.

The demon's mouth curved into a smile that was all teeth and no warmth. It stepped toward the water's edge, its movements too smooth, too predatory to be human. Every instinct screamed at me to flee, to turn and swim as far and as fast as I could.

But Aurora was still out there, somewhere in this watery darkness. And above me, my team waited, counting on me. I couldn't fail them now.

With a supreme effort of will, I tore my gaze from those hypnotic red eyes. I took another deep breath, ignoring the burning in my lungs and the trembling in my limbs. Then, with a powerful kick, I plunged back into my swim toward the waterfall.

Behind me, I heard a half-laugh, half-snarl that could never have come from a human throat, but I didn't look back. I couldn't afford to. All I could do was swim and hope whatever protection I had would be enough to see me through this nightmare.

I finally reached the thundering waterfall, its roar drowning out everything else, including my ragged breathing. The curtain of water was an opaque wall, hiding whatever secrets or horrors lay beyond. I couldn't see through the relentless torrent, but I knew I had no choice. With one last gulp of air that tasted like fear and desperation, I dove beneath the pounding cascade.

The force of the falling water hit me like a physical blow, threatening to push me back, to deny me passage. For a heart-stopping moment, I was disoriented, tumbling in the churning water, unsure which way was up. My lungs burned, crying out for air as I fought the current.

Then, suddenly, I was through. I broke the surface on the other side, gasping and sputtering. Relief flooded through me, but only for a moment.

Something cold and slimy brushed against my ankle. Before I could react, it wrapped around my foot, yanking me downward. Panic surged through me, electric and paralyzing. I kicked out wildly, my foot connecting with something solid yet yielding. The grip loosened, and I shot back to the surface, heart pounding so hard I thought it might burst from my chest.

I treaded water frantically, glancing around in the gloom. The sound of the waterfall was muffled now, replaced by the loud splashing of my movements and the blood rushing in my ears. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I looked into the murky depths below.

A dark shape, sleek and sinister, circled beneath me. It moved with a predatory grace that sent shivers down my spine. In the dim light, I couldn't make out its exact form. Was it serpentine? Shark-like? Or something far worse, something that had no place in the natural world?

Shit-shit-shit-shit.

Desperate for escape, for any kind of salvation, I spun around. My hands found a rough surface, a rock face slick with moss and algae. Remembering the mirror's words about blood breaking the spell, I pressed my bleeding palm against the stone, praying for something, anything to happen.

Nothing. The rock remained cold and unyielding under my touch, indifferent to my plight.

A ripple in the water caught my attention. The shape was moving again, circling closer. I felt a brush against my thigh, so light it could have been seaweed, but I knew

better. I kicked out violently, my legs churning the water into froth. My movements were panicked, uncoordinated, driven by pure animal fear.

The rational part of my mind knew I was only drawing more attention to myself, presenting a more tempting target. Yet rationality had no place here. Not with that thing in the water with me.

It brushed past me again, closer this time. I could almost feel its intent, its hunger. Was this a guardian set to protect the phoenix? Or something older, something that had always lurked in these waters, waiting for unwary prey?

My breath came in short, sharp gasps. The cold was seeping into my bones, my limbs growing heavier with each passing second. I couldn't keep this up much longer. Soon, exhaustion would claim me, then...

No . I gritted my teeth. I couldn't let that happen. Aurora needed me. My team was counting on me. I had to find a way out, keep fighting. But as the dark shape circled ever closer, panic tightened its grip on my heart.

Death was coming, and if I didn't move fast, I wouldn't escape its clutches.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I glanced at the wet rocks surrounding me, each one a potential key to this watery prison. Which stone held the magic I needed? They all looked the same. Slick, dark, indifferent to my plight. My bleeding hand trembled as I reached out, desperation making my movements clumsy.

The creature wiggled by me again, so close I felt the displacement of water against my skin. My heart leaped into my throat, choking me with fear. With a stifled cry, I slammed my palm against another rock, watching as my blood smeared down the stone in crimson rivulets. For a heartbeat, hope flared in my chest, then died as quickly as it had come. Nothing happened.

Suddenly, the creature struck. It wasn't a gentle brush this time but a hard, deliberate bump that sent me reeling in the water. I gasped, inhaling a mouthful of icy liquid. As I sputtered and coughed, trying to keep my head above water, a flash of color caught my eye.

I looked down, blinking away tears of pain and fear, and my world tilted on its axis. The creature, which I had imagined as some nightmarish leviathan, was red. A vibrant, familiar red that stirred something in my memory. Red like flame. Red like a phoenix.

Understanding crashed over me like a wave. Without thinking, driven by instinct and hope, I drew a deep breath and dove under the water. The cold hit me anew, but I pushed past it, my eyes straining in the murky depths. There—a flash of red. I kicked hard, propelling myself toward it.

Time seemed to slow as I reached out, my bleeding palm extended toward the creature. For a moment, I thought I had missed, that this last mad gambit had failed. Then, my hand connected with something smooth and leathery.

The effect was instantaneous and extraordinary. A burst of light exploded from the point of contact, so bright it was visible even through my closed eyelids. The water around us vibrated with energy, tingling against my skin like static electricity.

I opened my eyes, squinting against the glow, and watched in awe as the creature transformed. It twirled in the water, faster and faster, becoming a whirlwind of light and color. The leathery skin rippled and changed, scales giving way to something softer, more delicate.

Feathers. They unfurled like blooming flowers, each a masterpiece of red and gold. The serpentine body reshaped itself, becoming more compact, more birdlike. A beak emerged where once had been a nightmarish maw.

The eyes captivated me the most. As the creature's face reformed, the predatory hatred vanished from them. The red glow faded, replaced by a deep, vibrant green that seemed to swirl with inner light. And in those eyes, I saw something that made my heart swell. Gratitude. Pure, unbridled gratitude.

I smiled. I was looking at Aurora. A jolt of joy shot through my numbed limbs. She hadn't been imprisoned behind a rock as I'd thought. No, Maci's cruel magic had gone further, transforming the majestic creature into something designed to terrify and mislead me.

The phoenix now stood, freed by the spell-breaking power of my blood. As I watched, the last vestiges of the shark-like form melted away, revealing Aurora in all her glory. She was magnificent, more beautiful than I could have ever imagined.

Her feathers shimmered, reds and golds dancing in the dim light of the underwater cavern. Her eyes gazed at me with an intelligence and gratitude that took my breath away. At that moment, I understood why these creatures were so revered, so sought after. Aurora wasn't simply a magical being. She was magic itself, personified in a goddess form.

As we floated there, human and phoenix, a profound connection grew between us. I'd never felt like this with any other animal. Her very presence chased away the fear in the face of this miracle. I tilted my head back and exhaled a breath of exuberance. Despite Maci's little tricks, I had found Aurora and broken the spell.

She was free, and she was on our side.

The phoenix soared from the water, a bright ball of hope. She lit up the embankment, and my heart nearly stopped.

There wasn't only one gluttony demon. There were six. Six men dressed in suits, ready to kill me.

Their eyes glowed with an unholy red light, fixed on me with murderous intent. They stood arrayed along the embankment, a gauntlet of evil between me and safety.

For a moment, despair threatened to overwhelm me. How could I possibly fight six demons? Even with Aurora by my side, the odds seemed insurmountable.

Then, like an answer to an unspoken prayer, a figure leaped onto the embankment. Justice! His sudden appearance sent a jolt of hope through me. He landed in a crouch, then straightened, his face a mask of determination. In his hands, he held the Mirror of Aethereal.

The demons hissed and snarled. They rushed at him, their hands stretched out. Justice

raised the mirror high. Its surface caught Aurora's light, magnifying it and directing it toward our enemies.

The effect was instantaneous and horrifying.

The gluttony demons released a collective screech of agony, a sound that seemed to claw at the fabric of reality. Their forms wavered and distorted like images in a funhouse mirror. Then, in a grotesque display of unmaking, their bodies dissolved into black smoke.

The smoke writhed and twisted in the air as if fighting against an unseen force. But it was a losing battle. With one final, unearthly howl, the smoke was sucked downward, disappearing into the ground as if the earth itself was reclaiming some long-banished evil.

In the sudden silence that followed, I heard my own ragged breathing and the gentle lapping of water against the shore. Aurora circled overhead, her light now gentle and soothing. Justice stood on the embankment, the mirror still raised. Power radiated from him.

As I struggled to stay afloat in the frigid water, my gaze locked with his. His expression held a mixture of relief, triumph, and love.

I reached the embankment, and Justice was there in an instant. With one powerful motion, he lifted me from the water, his strength making me feel as light as a feather. He cradled me to his broad chest, and I felt the rapid beat of his heart against my cheek. His warmth seeped into my frozen limbs.

"Sawyer, are you all right?" He scanned me for injuries.

I tried to respond, but my teeth were chattering uncontrollably. "Ye-yes," I managed.

“Just fr-freezing.”

Relief washed over his face, softening his features. He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. “Let me warm you up,” he murmured, his breath ghosting over my skin.

Justice rubbed his large hands over my trembling form, the friction generating blessed heat. His touch was determined yet gentle, each movement deliberate and caring. It felt like magic, chasing away some of the bone-deep cold that had settled into me.

“You did it,” he murmured, a note of pride in his voice. “You found Aurora and made it back. I knew you could.”

I nestled closer to him, seeking more of his warmth. “It was close,” I admitted. “If you hadn’t shown up with the mirror when you did...”

He tightened his arms around me. “I’ll always be there when you need me,” he promised fiercely.

After a moment, Justice reluctantly loosened his hold on me. He reached over and snatched my clothes piled on the edge of the pool. “Here. You need to get dressed before you catch your death.”

My fingers were still numb and clumsy, but I managed to pull on my jeans and shirt. Justice knelt to help me with my socks and shoes, his touch lingering a moment longer than necessary.

As I stood, feeling somewhat more human now that I was clothed, I caught sight of Aurora circling overhead. Her presence reminded me of the gravity of our situation.

“Justice.” I caressed his muscular chest and leaned in closer, feeling his warmth and

strength. “We did it. We rescued Aurora.”

His gaze softened, and he gently cupped my face with his rough hands. “No, you did it. You’re amazing.” He kissed me, then pulled back to look into my eyes. “All we need is the harp, and we can stop Maci. We’re stronger now, thanks to you.” He brushed his lips over mine again. “After this is all over, I’m taking you somewhere peaceful and far away from monsters.”

I smiled at him, lost in his dark eyes. “Somewhere tropical?”

His lips traced a path down my neck, leaving a trail of tingling kisses in their wake. As his sharp fangs grazed my skin, an electric current shot through me. “You drive a hard bargain, my stunning mate,” he muttered.

“Hey,” Damon called from above, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Sorry to interrupt your little Twilight moment there, but we’ve got bigger fish to fry. You know, like the army of demons probably heading our way?”

Justice wrapped his arms around me and jumped, carrying me to where the others waited.

Aurora, resplendent in her newly restored form, perched regally on a rock next to Lisa. The sight of the mythical creature seemed to have a profound effect on the witch. She wore the biggest smile I’d seen in a long time. The tension etched into her features for so long appeared to have melted away, replaced by wonder and relief.

As I watched them, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of accomplishment. We had done it. We had rescued Aurora, and in doing so, we’d given Lisa back a piece of herself.

Yet our moment of triumph was short-lived. Brody approached, his face set in lines of concern. He stopped beside Lisa, scanning our surroundings warily.

“There’s something not quite right,” he claimed. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up at his words. Brody’s instincts had saved us more than once. If he sensed trouble, we’d be fools to ignore it.

He faced us with a grave expression. “We need to move to our next task and retrieve the harp.”

Zara gestured toward the backpack Damon held in his hand. “We have to charge these first. Especially the hourglass.”

Lisa moved away from the rock and gestured toward the grass. “Put them down, and Aurora will charge them.”

I took the backpack from Damon and laid out the five artifacts, including the phoenix feather, the phoenix grass, the scales, the hourglass, and the crown. Justice knelt and set the mirror beside the others.

The phoenix glided gracefully toward them, her iridescent feathers shimmering in the light. As she drew closer, I noticed her eyes brimming with pearly tears. The sight was both beautiful and unsettling.

I turned to Lisa, my voice hushed with awe and concern. “Why is she crying? Is something wrong?”

Lisa’s expression was calm, even reverent, as she gently stroked Aurora’s feathers. Her hand moved in long, soothing motions along the phoenix’s back. “The phoenix’s tears are more powerful than you can imagine. They’re not a sign of sadness but of magic. Watch closely,” she whispered.

As if on cue, Aurora tilted her head, angling it precisely over the artifacts. Time seemed to slow as the first teardrop fell. It splashed onto the nearest object, and the

effect was immediate and mesmerizing.

The artifact shimmered as if lit from within by an otherworldly fire. Its surface rippled with color, first turning a deep, passionate red that reminded me of embers in a dying fire. Then, as quickly as it had appeared, the red shifted, blooming into a vibrant orange that pulsed with energy.

I held my breath, transfixed by the transformation. The colors began to fade, retreating like the tide. Within moments, the artifact had returned to its original appearance. Or so it seemed at first glance.

“Look closer,” Lisa murmured, noticing my puzzled expression.

I leaned in and realized the artifact wasn’t quite the same. There was a subtle glow to it now, a hint of power that hadn’t been there before.

One by one, Aurora’s tears fell on each artifact, and each underwent the same spectacular metamorphosis.

“What...what happened?” I asked in wonder.

Lisa smiled. “The phoenix’s tears have awakened these artifacts, unlocking their true potential. They’ve been imbued with a fraction of Aurora’s power. The power of rebirth, renewal, and purification. These aren’t mere relics anymore. They’re vessels of phoenix magic.”

I looked at Aurora, who was watching us with what I could swear was a look of satisfaction. “Will they always glow like this?”

“No,” Lisa replied. “The visible effects will fade, but the power remains. These artifacts are now more than they appear. Much like Aurora herself.”

As if to confirm Lisa's words, Aurora released a soft, melodious trill. The sound seemed to hang in the air, filled with promise and ancient secrets.

I smiled at Justice. He gave me a handsome grin that warmed my heart. For once, the sun was shining our way, its rays blessing this moment of peace and hope.

However, our respite was short-lived. A chill ran down my spine as a dark shadow suddenly rose behind Justice. An ominous voice, dripping with malice, shattered our brief happiness.

"Did you really think it would be this easy?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Oh, shit. It was Rage. As usual, he had on a three-piece suit, but this time, he wore a white rose with splashes of what looked like blood on his lapel. I wasn't sure why, but it had to have some significance. He stepped around Justice, his movements fluid and predatory. His black eyes didn't reflect the rising sun. It was as if they were the pits of hell themselves.

"Stay behind me." Justice immediately stretched out his arm, pushing me back.

Rage grinned and gestured toward the rose. "Would you like to know why I'm wearing this?"

Before Justice could respond, Damon stepped forward, positioning himself in front of us. "Well, well, if it isn't the demon world's answer to the Joker," he drawled. "Let me guess, you're here to audition for 'Hellspawn's Got Talent'?"

Justice tensed, his grip on my arm tightening. I felt the conflicting desires radiating from him, the need to protect me warring with the knowledge that Damon was better equipped to handle this kind of confrontation.

Damon's eyes never left Rage, but his stance was loose, almost casual. A predator ready to strike at a moment's notice. "How about we skip the fashion commentary and get to the part where you tell us what you want? Unless you're here to show off your new threads, in which case, sorry pal, but the whole 'blood-spattered psycho' look is so last apocalypse."

I couldn't help but feel pride and fear watching my brother. His ability to face down danger with a smirk and a quip was both impressive and terrifying.

Rage's grin widened, his black eyes gleaming with malice. "Oh, Damon," he purred. "Always so quick with the jokes. I do hope you're still laughing when I'm done here."

Brody moved to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Damon, presenting a united front. "That's enough. Whatever game you're playing ends now, Rage. We're not here for your amusement or your threats."

I couldn't see around the wall of muscle in front of me, but I turned, scanning the area behind us for Maci or any other demons.

Lisa held onto the phoenix, and Zara stayed close to her. They were whispering to each other, and I suspected they planned to conjure some kind of protective spell.

Or maybe that's what I hoped they were doing.

Rage walked around them, but Brody and Damon weren't letting him through.

"I don't know what your endgame is," Brody snapped. "But I can guarantee it's not worth the lives you're putting at risk. If you're here to talk, then talk. If not, leave. Either way, we're not intimidated by your theatrics." He tilted his head. "Everyone, stay alert. We don't know what he's capable of, but we're stronger together. Lisa and Zara, protect the phoenix. Sawyer, Justice, be ready to move if things go south."

"Ah, but it's going to go south before you know it," Rage taunted. In a blur of motion, he skidded around Damon and came at Justice and me.

Justice immediately planted himself in front of me, his body tense. "Stay away from

her,” he growled.

Rage’s laughter sent icy tendrils of fear crawling down my spine, rooting me to the spot. His cruel words sliced the air like a knife.

“She’s not the one I wanted.”

Justice’s piercing glare faltered for a heartbeat, a flicker of vulnerability crossing his usually stoic face. “What?” he uttered.

Before I could process what was happening, Rage lunged with terrifying, inhuman speed. My breath caught in my throat as his hands shot out, gripping Justice’s face. “Now, you’re my slave,” Rage hissed, his words dripping with a dark satisfaction that made my stomach churn.

I watched in abject horror as Justice’s eyes widened in panic, then slowly glazed over, losing their spark. My heart thundered, threatening to burst through my ribcage as the sickening realization dawned on me. Rage’s true target had been in front of me all along, and I had been powerless to stop it.

“Release him!” I screamed, my voice raw with fury. I raised my fist, ready to smash it into Rage’s smug face, consequences be damned.

Blinded by rage and fear, I charged at Rage but suddenly felt strong arms wrap around me as Damon yanked me away from danger.

His fingers dug into my arms, his grip betraying his own fear and determination. “No. You can’t help him, sis,” he rasped.

A primal scream of frustration tore from my throat as I twisted my arm, fighting against my brother’s restraint. I stomped on his foot, driven by a desperate need to

save Justice. “Yes, I can!” I snarled, tears of anger and helplessness stinging my eyes. “Let go of me!”

Damon grunted, his grip on me tightening like a vise. “Will you listen to me for once in your friggin’ life?” he growled, his voice a perfect mix of frustration and concern, just like Dean Winchester’s. “I swear, you’ve got a death wish, sis.”

Rage released Justice and tilted his head back and forth slightly, inspecting his new “masterpiece” with pride. The sight made my stomach lurch.

“Justice, Justice, fight it!” I pleaded, my voice cracking. Tears slid down my cheeks, leaving hot trails on my skin.

Rage offered a thin, cruel smile that sent shivers down my spine. “Now, kill them,” he commanded.

Justice clenched his fist, his knuckles turning white with the effort. “No,” he managed to grind out, defiance flashing in his eyes.

Rage flicked his hand dismissively, confidence oozing from every pore. “You can’t fight me, boy. You’re mine.”

Justice dragged his feet, slowly turning to face me. His movements were jerky, like a puppet on strings fighting an invisible force.

My body trembled as I faced him, my brother still hanging onto my arm with an iron grip.

“I don’t like this one bit,” Damon muttered. “This is some serious mojo we’re dealing with here.”

Zara and Lisa backed up slowly, fear evident in their eyes. The phoenix fluttered its wings as it perched on a rock beside Lisa, but it didn't fly away. Its presence was both comforting and unnerving, as if it knew something we didn't.

Justice shook his head and spread his arms, his entire body trembling with effort. "I can't fight it," he gritted out through clenched teeth. His chest heaved, and sweat poured down his face as if drawing on every last bit of energy to fight Rage's control.

He looked at me, his eyes a storm of emotions. Love, fear, determination. "You need to...go...now."

"No." I shook my head vehemently, my heart racing. "You can suck my blood. It will cure you."

"It won't, Sawyer." He gave me a fierce look. "I'll kill you. Go. Now, while you have time."

Damon's grip tightened even more. "Listen to your bloodsucker boyfriend, Sawyer. We need to haul ass outta here before things go from bad to apocalyptic."

I struggled against Damon's hold, torn between my instinct to save Justice and the rational part of my brain screaming at me to run. "But we can't leave him!"

"Damn it, Sawyer!" Damon's voice rose, sounding more like Dean than ever. "Sometimes you gotta make the hard call. We leave now, we live to fight another day. We stay..." He let the implication hang in the air.

Justice's body jerked forward, his face contorted in pain and determination. "Please," he rasped. "Run!"

The air crackled with tension as we stood on the precipice of a decision that could

change everything. My heart felt like it was being torn in two, caught between my love for Justice and the survival instinct Damon was desperately trying to awaken in me.

Brody stepped forward, his stance wide and authoritative. His gaze swept the chaotic scene.

“We’re not leaving anyone behind,” he declared. He placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder, his touch conveying strength and support. “That’s not how we operate.”

“You can’t help me...” Justice gritted his teeth. His fangs lengthened. “A hunger... I can’t control it.” His head tilted back again, and his eyes turned red. “I want blood.”

Damon shot Brody an exasperated look. “Are you kidding me? This isn’t the time for heroics, Boy Scout!”

Brody stood his ground, unfazed by Damon’s outburst. “There’s always time to do what’s right,” he countered. “Justice is one of us, and we don’t abandon our own.”

He looked at me, a spark of hope in his eyes. “Sawyer, your blood might be the key. We simply need to create an opening.” Then, he turned to Damon, “We need your hunter skills now more than ever. Can you distract Rage?”

Damon grumbled but nodded reluctantly, “Fine, but if we all die, I’m blaming you, Captain Optimism.”

Brody’s lips quirked into a small smile before he addressed Zara and Lisa. “You two, be ready to support us. And that phoenix might be our ace in the hole.”

He turned back to the struggling vampire. Determination and compassion filled his voice as he called, “Justice, I know you’re in there. You’re stronger than this control.

Fight it!”

For a split second, something flickered in Justice’s eyes. A glimpse of recognition, perhaps even a silent plea for help. Then, as quickly as it appeared, it vanished, replaced by a predatory gleam that sent chills down my spine.

With inhuman speed, Justice lunged at Brody. Despite his quick reflexes, Brody couldn’t dodge in time. Justice’s powerful arms wrapped around him, pinning Brody’s arms to his sides. I watched in horror as Justice’s fangs elongated, glinting in the dim light.

“No!” I screamed, but it was too late.

Justice’s fangs sank deep into Brody’s neck. Brody released a pained grunt, his face contorting in agony. Blood trickled down his neck, staining his shirt crimson.

But Brody wasn’t going down without a fight. His jaw clenched, muscles straining as he fought Justice’s iron grip. With a surge of strength, he managed to free one arm. In a swift motion, his elbow came up hard, catching Justice under the chin.

The impact loosened Justice’s hold. Brody twisted his body, using the momentum to throw Justice off balance. As they stumbled, Brody’s fist connected with Justice’s jaw in a powerful uppercut. The sound of the impact echoed through the air.

Justice staggered back, momentarily dazed. Brody’s blood stained his lips and chin.

Brody pressed his hand to his bleeding neck, his breath coming in short gasps. “Justice, this isn’t you. You have to snap out of it!”

But Justice’s eyes remained glazed, Rage’s control still firmly in place. He crouched, ready to spring at Brody again.

Damon's voice cut through the tension. "Brody! We gotta go, now!"

Brody glanced between Justice and the rest of us, torn between saving his friend and protecting the group.

Justice lunged again, but this time, Brody was ready. He ducked under Justice's outstretched arms and delivered a powerful blow to his solar plexus. As Justice doubled over, Brody used the opportunity to put some distance between them.

"I'm sorry, Justice," Brody's voice was heavy with regret. "We'll come back for you. I promise." He turned and sprinted toward us. "Use the hourglass!" he shouted, urging us to retreat.

Zara picked up the backpack that had fallen behind Damon and me as we struggled. She reached into it and pulled out the hourglass.

"Use it, Sawyer. It's our only chance," she stated as she handed it to me.

Fresh tears slid down my cheeks. "I love you, Justice. Come back to me."

As I clutched the hourglass, the air began to shimmer and vibrate. Suddenly, a swirling vortex of golden light erupted from the artifact, enveloping my team, including the phoenix, in its warm glow. The wind picked up, whipping our hair and clothes as the vortex grew stronger.

"Take us to Inveraray Castle," I whispered, my words barely audible over the whooshing of the magical wind.

The world blurred into streaks of color as the vortex lifted us off our feet. We were suspended in a cocoon of swirling golden light punctuated by flecks of what looked like glittering sand. The vortex spun faster and faster, creating a tunnel of light that

stretched before us.

I looked down. The last thing I saw was Justice, standing eerily still, watching us leave with those haunting, glazed eyes. Rage's laughter echoed behind us, a chilling reminder of the battle we'd lost—but not the war.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The hourglass spun me around, and I landed on hard ground. The impact that jarred my bones was nothing compared to the shattering of my heart. My emotions were wrecked, my soul torn apart. Justice had slipped through my fingers into the enemy's grasp, and with him went a piece of me I feared I'd never get back.

Overhead, a blanket of stars hovered, twinkling with an indifference that felt like a mockery of my pain. I dug my fingers into the thick grass beneath me, desperate for any anchor to this new reality. Tears carved hot trails down my cheeks as I gazed up at the tall pines standing sentinel around us, their silhouettes stark against the night sky. Beyond them loomed the towers of a gray castle, our supposed destination, but it felt meaningless now.

The mirror had spoken of a harp we needed to steal, a mission that had seemed so vital moments ago. Now, the weight of failure and loss pressed on me, draining every ounce of energy and hope from my body. I had lost my strength, my purpose, my other half.

I tried to push myself up, but my arms trembled and gave way. The cool grass pressed against my cheek, and I released a choked sob. The scent of earth and pine filled my nostrils, so different from the last place Justice and I had been together. It felt wrong to be here without him, wrong to breathe this air or see these stars when he was trapped in some hellish realm with Rage.

"Justice," I whispered into the uncaring night, his name a prayer and a curse on my lips. The vastness of the Scottish landscape suddenly felt oppressive, a reminder of

the impossible distance between us. How could I go on? How could I face this mission, this team, this world, knowing he was out there suffering?

Yet, even as despair threatened to swallow me whole, a tiny spark flickered in the depths of my heart. Justice wouldn't want me to give up. He'd want me to fight, to rage against the dying of the light. With a shuddering breath, I clenched my fists in the grass, drawing strength from the solid earth beneath me.

Justice might have been possessed, but I'd find a way to save him. There had to be a way.

Soft footsteps approached behind me. I looked over my shoulder, not sure if I had the strength to fight.

My brother crouched beside me.

"Hey, Sawyer. I know you're hurting, but we can't stay here. We've got a job to do." Warmth tinged his gruff voice.

I turned away from him, unable to bear his concern. His words, meant to motivate, only twisted the knife deeper into my wounded heart.

"A job to do?" I whispered, my voice raw with grief. "How can you talk about jobs when Justice is..." I couldn't finish the sentence.

He paused, looking at the looming castle, then back at me. His jaw clenched, fighting his own emotions.

"Look, I get it. Losing Justice is like losing a piece of yourself. But you're not alone in this fight. We're gonna get him back, you hear me? We're gonna march into whatever hell Rage is hiding in, kick his demon ass, and bring Justice home."

Damon gripped my shoulder firmly.

Slowly, I pushed myself up to a sitting position, wrapping my arms around my knees. I stared blankly at the distant castle, its gray stones a reflection of the emptiness I felt inside.

“I failed him, Damon.” My soft words trembled. “I was right there, and I couldn’t... I couldn’t save him.” A fresh wave of tears threatened to spill over, and I blinked hard, trying to force them back.

My blood and the mirror had healed him before, but if they couldn’t heal him now, what would? Was he lost to me forever?

Damon sat fully. “Right now, we need you. That harp isn’t gonna steal itself, and every second we waste here is another second Justice is in Rage’s clutches. So, come on, sis. On your feet. We’ve got a world to save and a vampire to rescue.”

“Damon, I’m tired. We’ve been going nonstop, and I need to rest.” I gripped his arm, desperate for an anchor in the storm of my emotions. “What if we’re too late? What if Rage... What if he...” I couldn’t finish the thought, the possibilities too horrific to contemplate.

My gaze dropped to the grass, my fingers idly plucking at the blades. “I don’t know if I have the strength for this, Damon. I don’t know if I can be who you need me to be right now. I feel...broken.”

Damon’s expression softened as he listened to my words. He sighed, running a hand through his hair, a gesture so familiar it made my heart ache for simpler times.

“All right, Sawyer.” His voice was gentler now. “We’ll rest, but only for a while. We can’t lose sight of why we’re here.” He squeezed my hand, his grip firm and

reassuring. “And don’t you worry about being strong right now. That’s why you’ve got me. We’ll get through this together, okay?”

More footsteps approached us. I was too tired to look. If it was Justice and Rage, I didn’t know if I had the heart to fight them.

Damon glanced over his shoulder. “The rest of the team made it through the vortex, too.”

Zara and Lisa sat beside me. They looked as exhausted and defeated as I felt. The phoenix landed next to Lisa and regarded us curiously as if wondering what we were going to do next.

Brody was the last to join our circle, his steady footsteps coming to a halt as he surveyed our group. Even in the dim light, I saw the concern etched on his face, mixed with the unwavering determination that always seemed to radiate from him.

“Listen,” Brody began, his voice low but firm. “I know we’re all feeling the weight of what happened. Losing Justice was a blow we weren’t prepared for.” He paused, looking each of us in the eye. “I can see we’re all running on empty.”

He crouched, joining our huddle on the grass. “We need to rest and regroup. We’re no good to Justice or anyone else if we push ourselves to the breaking point.”

A wave of relief washed over me at his words. Brody always seemed to know what the team needed, even when we couldn’t admit it ourselves.

“But Brody,” Zara started, her voice tight with worry. “Every minute we waste?—”

“Isn’t wasted if it means we’re at our best when it counts,” Brody finished, his tone gentle but brooking no argument. “Two hours. We rest, we eat if we have provisions,

and we make a solid plan. Then, we hit that castle with everything we've got."

The phoenix trilled softly as if in agreement with Brody's strategy.

Damon nodded, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "Brody's right. We're no use to Justice like this."

I felt Brody's hand on my shoulder, warm and reassuring. "Sawyer, I know you're hurting the most right now. But I need you to hold onto hope. We're going to get him back."

For the first time since landing in this new place, a tiny spark ignited in my chest. With Brody's steady leadership and the team around me, maybe we did have a chance. I nodded, meeting his gaze. "Okay," I whispered. "Two hours. Then we save Justice."

Brody smiled and stood. "All right, team. Let's set up a perimeter and get some rest. We've got a big fight ahead of us."

As the team moved with renewed purpose, I realized sometimes strength wasn't about pushing forward relentlessly. Sometimes, it was about knowing when to pause, regroup, and lean on each other. And I was grateful for a leader who understood that.

Damon and I snuggled against a tree, its rough bark digging into my back, contrasting Damon's comforting warmth. He put his arm around me, the familiar scent of his leather jacket mingling with the earthy forest air. I laid my head on his shoulder, feeling the rise and fall of his steady breathing. Tears freely fell as I thought of Justice. The chill of fear and loss settled deep in my bones, making me shiver despite Damon's embrace.

Brody walked the perimeter of our little camp, his footsteps a rhythmic crunch on the

forest floor. The rustle of leaves in the cool night breeze seemed to whisper warnings, keeping us on edge. I only hoped the bad guys needed to sleep, too. The question gnawed at me. Did demons sleep? The thought of our otherworldly enemies sent a shudder through me, my mind conjuring shadowy figures with glowing eyes lurking beyond the firelight.

Right now, I didn't care. Exhaustion had consumed me, seeping into every fiber of my being. My limbs felt leaden, my eyelids heavy as stone. Even my thoughts seemed to move in slow motion, trudging through a fog of fatigue.

The gentle crackling of our small campfire and the soft murmur of my teammates' hushed voices blended into a soothing lullaby, tempting me to surrender to the oblivion of sleep. Yet even as my body craved rest, my heart ached with worry for Justice, keeping me teetering on the edge of consciousness.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Someone shook me gently. “Sawyer. Hey, it’s time to get up, sleepyhead.”

I looked into my brother’s weary eyes, noting the dark circles and the stubble that had grown heavier. I wondered if he had gotten any sleep. Knowing Damon, he’d probably spent the night on watch, shouldering the burden of keeping us all safe.

“Morning, sunshine,” he stated with a tired smirk, his attempt at levity not quite reaching his eyes. “Ready to go kick some demon ass?”

I blinked and stretched as dawn peeked over the horizon, its golden rays piercing the misty Scottish air. The light caught the turrets of Inveraray Castle, their slate-gray stone glowing warmly against the pale sky. The majestic structure peeked through the trees, its fairy-tale silhouette a stark contrast to the grim reality of our mission.

Rising to my feet, I took in our surroundings. The forest around us was coming alive with the sounds of morning. Birds chirping their dawn chorus, a gentle breeze rustling the leaves of ancient oaks and Scots pines. The crisp, damp air carried the earthy scents of moss and heather.

As we gathered our gear, I couldn’t help but marvel at the castle beyond the tree line. Inveraray stood proudly, its imposing Gothic Revival architecture a testament to centuries of Scottish history. The symmetrical towers flanked a central keep, their crenellations cutting a dramatic figure against the lightening sky. The pale walls seemed to glow as if the castle itself was waking up to greet the day.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured, almost forgetting why we were here.

Damon nodded, scanning the perimeter out of habit. “Yeah, it’s something, all right. But remember, sweetheart, looks can be deceiving. That place is crawling with demons, and we’ve got a job to do.”

His words snapped me back to reality. Queen Charlotte’s harp was inside those walls, the last missing piece we needed to send Maci and her horde of demons back to hell. A flicker of hope mixed with apprehension. If we could get our hands on that harp, maybe we could end this nightmare. And maybe it held some magical property that could free Justice from Rage’s clutches.

As if reading my thoughts, Damon squeezed my shoulder. “We’ll get him back, Sawyer. One step at a time.”

I nodded, steeling myself for what lay ahead. The castle loomed before us, beautiful and terrifying. I grabbed my backpack, the weight of our supplies a reminder of the long journey that had brought us here. “Where are the demons?” I asked.

Damon pointed through the trees, his jaw tightening. “They’re crawling around the entrance like cockroaches, but they’re not going inside.”

I followed his gaze and spotted dark figures moving unnaturally around the castle’s grand entrance. My stomach churned at the sight. Something was keeping them out. Maybe the same magic that protected the harp we sought.

I swallowed a lump of fear and forced myself to ask the question I dreaded most. “Is Justice with them?”

Damon hesitated, his green eyes clouding with concern. Then, he met my gaze squarely. His honesty was one of the things I’d always relied on. “Yes, he is. He’s not

as you remember him, Sawyer.”

I frowned, confusion mixing with fear. “But he only got possessed yesterday. How could he have changed so much?”

Damon ran a hand through his hair in frustration and worry. “Demon possession isn’t like possession by a ghost or a regular spirit. It can change a person fast, especially when fueled by rage. The Justice we knew might be buried deep right now.”

My heart sank as the reality of what we were facing hit me anew. I steeled myself, drawing on the determination that had gotten us this far. “Then we’ll have to dig him out,” I insisted, my voice stronger than I felt.

Damon nodded, a ghost of a proud smile crossing his face. “That’s my girl. Now, let’s figure out how to get past those demon bastards and into that castle. We’ve got a harp to find and a vampire to save.”

As we huddled with the rest of the team to plan our approach, I cast one last glance at Inveraray Castle. Somewhere in there was our salvation—and Justice. I only hoped we weren’t too late.

Damon stared at the castle. “What’s the plan?”

Brody straightened. “I’ve scouted the perimeter,” he announced. “The demons are concentrated at the front, but I’ve identified a potential entry point at the rear. We have an advantage. The castle’s closed to the public on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and today is Wednesday. That means fewer civilians to worry about.”

He paused. “It won’t be easy, but we’ve faced worse odds before. If we work together and stick to our strengths, we can do this. We’re not only fighting for ourselves. We’re fighting for Justice and for everyone those demons threaten. Remember why

we're here and watch each other's backs."

Brody's words were reminiscent of Captain America's speeches. He concluded with a determined nod. "Now, let's gear up and move out. We've got a team member to save and a world to protect."

Damon gestured to my backpack, a glint of hope in his eyes. "Why don't we time-warp ourselves in there? Wouldn't that be easier than trying to sneak past a horde of demons?"

Lisa shook her head. "Unfortunately, the wards don't allow us to use any magical objects within the castle grounds. We're able to get inside, unlike the demons, but our magical gear will be useless after we cross the threshold."

I frowned, instinctively wrapping my arms around the backpack. The hourglass had gotten us out of more than a few tight spots. The thought of being without it made me uneasy. "Will I be able to bring in the backpack at all? We can't let Maci get it."

"The artifacts are not evil, so they can get inside," Lisa explained. "We just can't use them. The wards seem to differentiate between beings and objects. They keep out demons and neutralize magical items but allow humans to pass through with their possessions intact."

Damon frowned, processing this new information. "So we can bring our gear, but anything magical is dead weight when we're inside. Great. Any other surprises we should know about?"

Brody stepped in, his tactical mind already working on a solution. "This changes our approach, but it doesn't change our objective. We'll need to rely on our training and non-magical skills inside. It levels the playing field. The demons won't be able to use their supernatural abilities either."

I looked at Lisa, and a sudden chill gripped me. “Do you think Justice can get inside? He knows our plan and could go in and steal the harp.” The words tumbled out, tight with anxiety.

Lisa glanced at Zara, then back to me. “No. He’s possessed, Sawyer. He can’t enter.”

My blood froze. Justice was now one of the things we were fighting against. Something we were sworn to kill to protect the innocent. Now, the magical wards that protected the castle couldn’t distinguish between the man I loved and the evil that possessed him.

My breath caught in my throat as a wave of conflicting emotions washed over me. Relief came first. At least we didn’t have to worry about Justice beating us to the harp. But it was overshadowed by a crushing sadness that he’d become a tool for ungodly forces.

Tears pricked the corners of my eyes, but I blinked them back fiercely. Now wasn’t the time for a breakdown. I had to lead the team. The mirror was always picking me to do this. Brody had taken the lead when I was down, but to save my team, to save Justice, I had to step up. I channeled the ache in my chest into determination, and newfound resolve settled over me.

I inhaled, squaring my shoulders. “Okay,” I stated. “We have to retrieve Queen Charlotte’s harp before Maci or her demons do.”

“We’re with you, Sawyer,” Damon replied, his gruff voice softening. “All the way.”

One by one, Brody, Zara, and Lisa nodded in agreement. Even the phoenix fluttered its wings as if to say, “I’m with you.” Their unwavering support, including our magical companion, filled me with a renewed sense of strength and purpose.

Damon cleared his throat, a hint of a smirk playing on his lips despite the gravity of the situation. “Well, ain’t that touching. We’ve got Captain America, Sabrina and Hermione the teenage witches, and friggin’ Fawkes all lined up. If those demon bastards aren’t shaking in their boots, they should be.” He clapped my shoulder. “You’ve got this, sis. Now, let’s go raise some hell. Or, you know, the opposite of that.”

I smiled. Damon always knew how to pump me up. I glanced at Brody. “Lead the way to the back.”

Brody tilted his head. “This way.”

I followed him, wishing Justice was walking alongside me, giving me his strength. This time, I had to draw on my own courage, not rely on his. I wouldn’t disappoint him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Brody led us through the trees surrounding Inveraray castle, offering us coverage. I thought it strange that the demons, Maci, or even Justice didn't approach us. My feet sank into the soft grass as we moved silently forward.

Through the trees, I glimpsed Justice. I swore he was looking right at me with his vampire vision, but instead of feeling love, loathing washed over me. The hatred in his eyes haunted me, a stark reminder of the demon possessing him. It was Justice's face, but the expression was entirely foreign, twisted with malice.

I swallowed the disappointment in my throat, fighting the urge to call out to him. That wasn't my Justice. Not yet. It reinforced why we were here, why we had to succeed. It was the only way I could save him.

I hoped the mirror would tell me how the harp would defeat Rage and release Justice from his clutches.

However, it wasn't only Justice's eyes on me. I felt someone watching us, the sensation prickling the back of my neck. Between the sun and the trees, long shadows covered the forest floor, creating a patchwork of light and dark that played tricks on my eyes. Maci could be hiding here without any of us knowing it.

I scanned the area, my gaze darting from shadow to shadow. The forest, which had seemed merely atmospheric moments ago, now felt oppressive and threatening. Every rustle of leaves, every snapping twig under our feet sent a jolt of adrenaline through my system.

“Guys,” I whispered. “Keep your eyes peeled. Something’s not right.”

Damon tensed beside me, his hand instinctively moving toward his weapon. Brody’s pace slowed, his tactical mind working overtime to assess our surroundings. Lisa and Zara exchanged worried glances, their magical senses on high alert.

Was Maci orchestrating some elaborate trap? Being a shadow dragon, she could attack at any moment. I didn’t see Rage with Justice and wondered if he was waiting to pop out and possess another one of our team.

In case the other demons started getting ideas, I reached into my backpack and quietly pulled out the Mirror of Aethereal. If any demons jumped out at us, they’d be toast.

The mirror decimated all the demons except for Rage. I only prayed the harp would be his downfall, or we were all screwed, and I’d lose Justice forever.

Brody led us to the back of the castle, where the gardens were located. A high stone wall, weathered by centuries of Scottish weather, stood between us and our goal.

“Normally, you’d need tickets to get in,” Brody whispered, eyeing the wall. “But I don’t think the demons bothered with the admission fee.”

Damon smirked. “Guess we’re going for the VIP entrance, then.”

We approached the wall cautiously. It was about ten feet tall, old enough to have plenty of handholds but well-maintained enough to pose a challenge.

“I’ll go first.” Brody was already moving toward the wall. “After I’m up, I’ll help pull the rest of you over.”

Brody scaled the wall with practiced ease, his movements almost silent. At the top, he gestured for us to follow.

One by one, we climbed, each helping the next. The rough stone scraped against my palms as I pulled myself up, and Brody's strong grip helped me over the top. As I lowered myself down the other side, I got my first look at Inveraray's famous gardens.

The manicured grounds stretched out in stark contrast to the wild forest we'd left. Neatly trimmed hedges formed intricate patterns, and vibrant flowerbeds burst with color. In the center, an ornate fountain stood silent, its still waters reflecting the early morning light.

"Stay low," Brody warned as we regrouped. "And watch for patrols. Just because we're in doesn't mean we're safe."

As we crept closer to the castle, I couldn't shake the feeling we were walking into the belly of the beast. The gardens, designed for peaceful strolls and quiet contemplation, served as the prelude to our most dangerous mission yet.

The castle itself loomed over us, its turrets and spires reaching toward the sky. From this angle, we could see the grand bay windows of the state dining room and the intricate stonework.

Despite the beauty surrounding us, tension hung in the air. The usually welcoming gardens now felt like an exposed battlefield, each topiary and statue a potential hiding spot for our enemies.

"Watch your step, and stay low," Brody whispered. "We don't want to be silhouetted against these open spaces. There, I think that's our best way in." He pointed toward the castle's rear entrance.

A set of grand stone steps led up to a terrace. From there, ornate double doors provided access to the interior. The castle's unique construction, with its four symmetrical diagonal wings, meant this rear entrance was as imposing as the front.

Brody continued. "See that dip in the land before the steps? That's part of the old defensive design. Not quite a moat, but it would've slowed down attackers. We can use it for cover."

I nodded, taking in the scene. The manicured lawns gave way to a subtle depression in the ground that circled the castle. It wasn't filled with water like a traditional moat, but in the dim light, it offered some concealment.

Damon scanned the lawn and the rear entrance, his eyes narrowing as he assessed the situation. "After we're across that, it's a straight shot up those steps, but we'll be exposed. We'll need to move fast." He smirked. "And pray none of those demon bastards decides it's a good time for a smoke break on the terrace."

"You know what to do," Lisa murmured as she stroked the top of the phoenix's head.

I stiffened, a flicker of doubt crossing my mind. Was Lisa going to betray us like she did last time? The memory of her past deception still stung.

As if sensing my unease, Lisa turned and winked at me, her eyes filled with determination. She glanced back at the phoenix. "Be careful, Aurora."

Aurora ruffled her brilliant feathers and took flight, her wings a blur of red and gold as she soared toward one of the castle's turrets. For a moment, the majestic bird was silhouetted against the sky, a beacon of fire and hope.

Suddenly, a loud commotion erupted from the front of the castle. Demons scrambled, their attention drawn to the unexpected intruder.

“The phoenix!” someone cried with awe and alarm. “It’s on one of the turrets!”

“Get it!” another called. The urgency in its voice sent the rest into a frenzy.

As the demons rushed toward the castle, their concentration fixed on Aurora rather than the gardens, I felt relieved. The diversion was working.

Damon grinned, his eyes gleaming with approval. “Now, that’s what I call a bird’s-eye view of the situation. Let’s not waste this chance, people.”

Brody motioned for us to follow him. We crouched and moved swiftly, using the meticulously trimmed hedgerows as cover. These weren’t merely decorative. In the formal garden style typical of Scottish castles, they formed a series of geometric patterns, creating natural corridors we could exploit.

“Stay in the shadows of the topiaries,” Brody muttered. “Move when I move, stop when I stop.”

I weaved through the garden from one sculpted bush to another, grateful for the early morning shadows that stretched across the manicured lawn. Behind me, I heard the soft footsteps of my team. I glanced over my shoulder and found Damon directly behind me. He motioned for me to keep going. I turned and followed Brody. The gravel paths posed a challenge. Each step risked a telltale crunch, so we stuck to the softer grass wherever possible.

I glanced from side to side for any demons, Maci, or Justice, but they all seemed focused on the phoenix.

As we neared the castle’s rear entrance, the hedges gave way to open space. A stretch of exposed lawn lay between us and the grand stone steps leading to the terrace.

Damon tensed. “This is where it gets tricky,” he muttered, eyeing the open ground warily.

Suddenly, a dark shape detached itself from the shadows of a nearby turret. My heart clenched as I recognized the flapping movements of the bat. It was Justice. Even in this form, I could sense his presence, feel the echo of our connection. But the malevolent energy surrounding him was unmistakable.

The bat circled the phoenix, predatory and threatening. Aurora seemed unperturbed by the smaller creature’s approach.

As the bat dove toward her, Aurora spread her wings wide. The morning sun caught her feathers, igniting them in a dazzling display of reds, golds, and oranges. The sight was breathtaking, momentarily distracting even the demons on the ground.

With a powerful flap of her wings, Aurora released a pulse of energy. The air around her shimmered with heat, distorting the fabric of reality. Justice was caught in the wake of this display. He flew erratically, tumbling as if buffeted by invisible winds.

The demons cried out in awe and fury, captivated by the aerial display above them.

Lisa knelt beside me. “See? She makes a great distraction. None of them can touch her since she’s perched on the turret, and the wards protect her.”

I had to admit she was right, but my heart broke watching Justice. This wasn’t him.

Brody’s hand clasped my arm, his grip firm but reassuring. His blue eyes met mine. “The phoenix is playing her part valiantly,” he pointed out. “It’s our turn to step up to the plate. Remember, we’re not only a team. We’re a family. And we never leave family behind.”

He scanned our faces, making sure we were all focused. “We move as one unit. Quick, quiet, and together. Is everybody ready to do their part?”

I drew a deep breath, forcing my focus away from the aerial battle and back to the task at hand. Justice needed us to succeed. We all did. I gave Brody a sharp nod. “Ready.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Brody darted toward the terrace, his movements swift and purposeful. I clutched my backpack tightly, the straps digging into my shoulders as I poured on the speed to keep up. The manicured lawn blurred beneath our feet as we crossed the exposed ground.

Sweat poured down my face, my heart pounding a frantic rhythm. The cool Scottish air felt sharp in my lungs as I pushed myself to run faster.

A shadow passed overhead, and I instinctively looked up. Justice hovered above us, wings beating rapidly to maintain his position. He didn't dive-bomb us, but his presence was a constant reminder of what was at stake.

For a split second, our eyes met. Even in bat form, I saw a flicker of something familiar in those tiny eyes, a hint of the Justice I knew and loved. My heart clenched with hope and despair. I desperately wished I could reach out and heal him, break through the demon's control, and bring him back to us.

Damon's hand gripped my arm, yanking me forward. "Hey, sis. This ain't the time for a staring contest with your bat-boy," he growled. "Unless you want to be demon chow, keep those legs moving."

I allowed him to drag me a few feet before I broke from his grasp. I forced myself to concentrate on the terrace ahead and not let Justice distract me.

As we ran, Damon glanced back at me, his eyes softening. "Look, I get it. But the

best way to help Justice is to get that damn harp. You can make goo-goo eyes at him when he's not trying to eat us, okay?" He smirked, but I saw the tension in his jaw. "Besides, if we pull this off, you two can have a real Batman and Robin thing going. Now, move!"

"Almost there," Brody called back, his voice barely audible over the sound of our footfalls and ragged breathing.

I gritted my teeth and pushed on, my lungs burning. The ornate double doors of the castle loomed before me, their intricate designs a blur as I approached at full speed. I skidded to a stop, my hands slamming against the cool glass as I struggled to catch my breath.

Damon was on my heels, his footsteps thundering up the stone steps behind me. I heard Lisa and Zara not far behind, their labored breathing joining the chorus of our collective exhaustion.

"Clear?" Damon asked tersely, scanning the area.

Brody gave a curt nod. "For now. Let's not waste it." He stepped forward, grasping the ornate brass handle of the door. The muscles in his arm tensed, veins standing out as he attempted to turn it.

The door didn't budge.

He grunted. "Locked."

"Allow me." Lisa stepped forward with a determined glint in her eyes.

Before she could act, Brody squared his shoulders. "No time for finesse," he muttered. With a sudden burst of strength, he wrenched the handle. The sound of

splintering wood and bending metal pierced the air.

The door gave way with a groan, swinging open to reveal the castle's dimly lit interior.

As we stepped inside, a piercing alarm shattered the silence. Red warning lights flashed, bathing the ornate hallway in an eerie, pulsating glow.

My heart leaped into my throat. We'd barely made it inside, and our cover was already blown.

Before panic could fully set in, Zara stepped forward, her face a mask of concentration. She flicked her hands in a fluid, practiced motion, her fingers tracing invisible symbols in the air.

"Hushyndra ," she intoned, her whispered voice charged with power.

The effect was instantaneous. The shrieking alarm cut off mid-wail, plunging us into an almost deafening silence. The flashing lights flickered once, twice, then died, leaving us in the dim light filtering through the windows.

For a moment, we all stood frozen, hardly daring to breathe.

Damon released a low whistle. "Handy trick, Sabrina. Remind me to bring you along next time I'm sneaking out past curfew."

"Nice work," Brody nodded approvingly at Zara. "But we're not in the clear yet. Everyone, stay alert. We don't know if that spell tripped any other security measures."

I shared a glance with Lisa, seeing my own relief and apprehension mirrored in her

eyes. We'd overcome our first obstacle, but something told me it was only the beginning of what this castle had in store for us.

One by one, we filed into the cool interior. As I crossed the threshold, I felt like I'd stepped into the lion's den. Yet, with Justice's fate hanging in the balance, there was no turning back.

Brody moved to shut the door, his hand already on the ornate handle, when Lisa clasped his wrist. "Not yet," she told him. "Aurora."

As if on cue, a streak of fire and gold shot through the air as Aurora soared through the open doorway. But she wasn't alone. A dark shape darted toward the entrance directly behind her. Justice in his bat form, his tiny wings furiously beating as he pursued the phoenix.

When he reached the threshold, a flash of blue light erupted. It was as if Justice had slammed into an invisible wall. The bat's small body ricocheted off the unseen barrier, spinning wildly out of control. We watched with relief and concern washing over us as Justice tumbled through the air and crash-landed into a nearby hedge.

"The wards," Lisa explained. "They keep out demons, remember?"

Damon whistled. "Talk about your rapid evictions. Guess Dracula's gonna have to find another castle."

A pang pierced my chest, watching Justice's helpless tumble, but I pushed the feeling aside. This was proof the castle's defenses were working, and we were on the right track.

"All right," Brody announced as he finally closed the door. "We're in. Now, let's find that harp and end this."

As he sealed us inside the castle, I hoped I hadn't led my team into the arms of danger again.

Damon must have sensed my unease. He clapped a hand on my shoulder, his touch grounding me. "Hey, chin up, Buffy. Your bloodsucking boyfriend got his ass handed to him by a magic doorway. If that's not a win, I don't know what is."

His smirk faded as he met my gaze, his voice lowering. "Look, we've faced worse odds and come out swinging. Hell, we've nearly died and come back for an encore. Whatever this place throws at us, we can handle it. Besides," he added with a wink. "I've always wanted to raid a castle. It's like Dungeons and Dragons but with better-looking players."

I stepped further into the room, and the grandeur of the salon took my breath away. The space was vast, its high ceilings adorned with intricate plasterwork that seemed to dance in the dim light. Ornate chandeliers hung above us, their crystals catching what little light filtered through the tall windows, sending prismatic reflections across the walls.

Brody looked around the salon, scanning the opulent surroundings. "Where do you think the harp is?"

I followed his gaze, taking in the room's details. An impressive array of weaponry lined the walls. Gleaming swords, antique firearms, and polished armor spoke of centuries of clan history. Between these martial displays hung massive oil paintings depicting stern-faced ancestors and dramatic Highland landscapes.

At the far end of the room, a grand fireplace dominated the wall, its mantelpiece intricately carved with the heraldic symbols of the Campbell clan. Plush sofas and richly upholstered chairs were arranged throughout the space, their deep reds and golds a perfect counterpoint to the pale, elaborately decorated walls.

Ornate tables dotted the room, their surfaces home to various historical artifacts and curios. I glanced from one to another, searching for anything resembling our target.

“This place is like a museum,” Damon muttered, his hand hovering near a particularly wicked-looking broadsword. “Talk about your family heirlooms.”

“We should split up,” I suggested, trying to shake off the feeling of being overwhelmed. “Cover more ground. But stay within earshot. We don’t know what other surprises this castle might have for us.”

As the team dispersed, I once again felt we were being watched. Whether by the stern gazes of the portraits or something more sinister, I couldn’t tell. But one thing was certain. We needed to find that harp, fast.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We each took a section of the room. I found myself near a wall lined with ancient weapons, their blades gleaming dully in the dim light. I scanned the displays, finding only swords, shields, and other implements of war.

Damon's low whistle echoed from across the room. "Check out this family tree," he murmured, gesturing to an enormous tapestry. "These Campbells go way back."

Lisa was examining a glass case filled with delicate porcelain figurines. "No sign of the harp here," she reported, her brow furrowed in concentration.

As the minutes ticked by, a sense of unease grew in the pit of my stomach. The harp wasn't here, at least not in plain sight. Had we made a mistake? Was our information wrong?

I was drawn to the massive fireplace that dominated one end of the room. Its mantelpiece was a work of art in itself, covered in intricate carvings. As I ran my fingers along the cool stone, I sensed we were missing something important.

"Any luck?" Brody's voice startled me from my thoughts.

I shook my head. "Nothing yet. But Brody, look at these carvings. Don't they seem odd to you?"

"It's not here." Lisa sighed, running her hand along yet another ornate table.

Damon kicked at the plush carpet. “Great. So we’ve broken into a castle for nothing?”

I was about to suggest we move to another room when Brody called, “Wait. Look at this.”

The others gathered around the massive fireplace as Brody ran his fingers along the intricate mantelpiece carvings. He leaned in, his eyes narrowing as he examined the symbols.

“These symbols aren’t just clan heraldry,” he muttered. “Some of them are ancient protection runes.”

Lisa leaned in, her eyes widening. “He’s right. These are powerful concealment sigils. Whatever they’re hiding, it’s not family heirlooms.”

“So, what?” Damon asked. “We need to solve some Da Vinci Code puzzle to open a secret passage?”

As if in response, a soft click echoed through the room. The back of the fireplace swung open like a door, revealing a hidden chamber beyond.

“Or we could push the right carving,” Brody stated with a small smile.

Heart pounding, I peered into the darkness beyond. “The harp must be in there. But after everything we’ve been through, I doubt it’ll be as simple as walking in and taking it.”

Brody pulled out a small flashlight and swept its beam into the chamber. The light caught something that made my breath catch. Hundreds of gossamer-thin strings stretched across the opening like a spider’s web, but these weren’t silk. They

shimmered with a faint bluish glow.

“Wards.” Lisa reached out but stopped short of touching one. “Ancient ones. They’re still active.”

Damon squinted. “Can’t we cut through them?”

“Only if you want to find out what kind of magical security system they installed centuries ago. Queen Charlotte must have been a witch,” Lisa replied dryly. “These aren’t mere barriers. They’re alarms. Touch one, and who knows what we’ll trigger?”

I shifted my weight, acutely aware of how exposed we were. “Can you disable them?”

Lisa bit her lip, studying the pattern. “Maybe, but it’ll take time. And if I make one mistake, I think another barrier will slam down on us.”

I studied the faint bluish lines, noticing something in their pattern. The strings weren’t random. They formed a sort of musical staff, the gaps between them precise and deliberate. And suddenly, I understood.

“It’s not about disabling them.” Hope rose in my throat. “It’s about playing them.”

Lisa stood back, tension visible in her shoulders. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I am.” The certainty in my voice surprised even me.

I lifted my trembling fingers toward the glowing strands, feeling the magic pulse beneath my skin. Music had always been my sanctuary, my strength. Now, facing these ancient wards, it felt like every song I’d ever played had led me to this moment. I hadn’t played for a long time, but I used to like to forget about the horrors of a hunt.

I felt compelled to play as if an invisible force was pushing me. I plucked at the strings, playing a soothing song.

The strands spread apart and allowed entrance.

“Well, that’s not creepy at all,” Damon muttered, though I heard the relief beneath his sarcasm. “Since when do magical death harps just let you in?”

“Maybe because I’m not trying to steal it,” I replied with a cautious step forward. “Queen Charlotte was a witch, but she used her magic to protect people.”

“Like our witches here.” He nodded toward Lisa and Zara. Despite his usual distrust of magic, years of hunting together had taught him not all witches were threats. “Still, this is some serious old-school power we’re messing with. Be careful, okay?”

I heard the worry in his voice, the same worry that had been there since we were kids when I’d first shown signs of being different. Yet beneath that worry was trust. After all, he trusted me with his life. He might be cautious about ancient magic, but he’d always believed in me.

I broke out in goosebumps as wave after wave of energy pulsed from the darkness beyond the doorway. Strange sensations crawled over me like ants on my skin, making me suppress a shudder. Every hair on my body stood up, electricity seeming to crackle through the air. An ancient power dwelled in the darkness, one that made my mouth go dry and my heart thunder. The magic felt impossibly old, like time itself had crystallized in that hidden space.

I glanced at my team, their faces pale in the dim light, and my chest tightened with fierce protectiveness. “I’ll go.” The words tasted like ash in my mouth. The last thing I wanted was to endanger my team. Justice’s face flashed through my mind, how he used to be before Rage took him from us. The memory burned like an open wound. I

refused to lose anyone else to darkness.

Brody clasped my arm, his grip anchoring me to the present. “Sawyer, we’re a team. That’s not how we work. We face things together or not at all. You don’t know what’s inside that passage.”

“Like hell you’re going in there alone,” Damon cut in, his voice rough with barely contained emotion. “We’ve already lost enough people playing hero. I’m not watching my sister walk into some creepy magic death trap solo.”

“I know.” I covered Brody’s hand with mine, drawing strength from his steadiness, then met my twin’s worried glare. “But I need you to guard the others. If I fail, you’ll take over.” My voice caught, but I pushed through. “Can you do this for me?”

“No way.” Brody’s jaw set in a familiar stubborn line. “We don’t sacrifice our own. That’s not what heroes do, and that’s not what this team does.”

“Heroes?” Damon laughed harshly. “How about we stick with ‘alive’ instead? Last time I checked, going solo against ancient magic isn’t a winning strategy.” He moved closer, and I saw the fear behind his anger. “Remember Cincinnati? Or maybe that lovely weekend in Milwaukee? Solo missions get hunters killed, Sawyer.”

“This is different,” I met his gaze. “You know it is. Someone has to test whatever’s in there, and I’m the one with the connection to the harp.” I turned to Brody. “And you know why it has to be me. If something goes wrong, the team needs both of you.”

“What exactly am I supposed to tell Dad if something happens to you?” Damon’s voice cracked. “Sorry, let her walk into magical sudden death because she asked nicely?”

I didn’t know how to answer him since my memory had been stripped of Dad. I knew

he had trained me and taken care of Damon and me after Mom died, but I only had glimpses of him. I'd forfeited those memories when I retrieved the Mirror of Aethereal.

Brody looked at me, torn between his duty as a teammate and his instincts as a leader. "Three minutes," he finally offered, ignoring Damon's outraged look. "You get three minutes in there. After that, we're coming in whether you like it or not."

I slipped through the opening, the cool air from the hidden chamber washing over my skin. The glowing strands shimmered behind me. Then, with a sound like a whispered note, they snapped back together. The barrier sealed itself, its blue light pulsing once before settling into an impenetrable wall between me and my team.

The darkness ahead seemed to reach for me, thick and absolute, swallowing everything but the faint glow of the magical barrier. I took another step forward and felt the blackness close around me like velvet until even the light from the strands became a distant blur.

"Sawyer," Damon yelled. He ran toward me, but the minute he hit the strands, he bounced back and slammed into Brody. They tumbled to the floor.

I looked past them and through the window. From outside, Rage, Justice, and Maci stared with eagerness in their eyes as if they knew what I would find. Maci's human form couldn't hide the predatory gleam in her gaze, a shadow dragon's hunger wrapped in pale skin. They watched like vultures anticipating a feast, and I wondered if I was walking right into their trap.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The power was even stronger now. It pulled on me like an urgent child wanting to lead me someplace.

Damon climbed off Brody, then rushed to the entrance. “Sawyer, wait, damn it!”

I called out from the darkness. “No, Damon. You need to stay there. The barrier won’t let you in.”

Lisa put her hand on his arm. “You can’t help her, Damon. She’s the chosen one and has to do this alone.”

“What if she can’t?”

She smiled at him. “She will. You have to have faith.”

“Faith is hard to come by these days.” He squinted, peering into the darkness.

Brody stepped up beside him, his stance steady and determined. “She’ll make it. Your sister’s the strongest person I know, Damon. Sometimes, the hardest thing is standing back and letting someone fight their own battle.”

There was no sense arguing with my brother. He never wanted me to be in danger and had always been protective. I turned away and allowed the strange pull to lead me forward.

The darkness was like a living thing, heavy and thick. Each step forward felt both wrong and right. Wrong to leave my team behind, but right in a way I couldn't explain. The pull tugged at something deep in my chest as if invisible threads were woven through my being.

Damon's voice grew fainter until I could barely hear him. The blue glow of the barrier seemed like a distant star, dimming with each step. My heart hammered, and I clenched my fists to stop my hands from shaking. The air grew colder, older somehow, carrying the weight of centuries.

I heard soft singing, and my heart stuttered. Every instinct screamed that following a voice in the dark was exactly the kind of thing that got hunters killed. But this didn't feel malevolent. The song wrapped around me like a familiar embrace, sweet and sad at the same time.

"Who are you?" My voice sounded small in the vast darkness.

The answer came in a melody that made my soul ache. "You already know."

Somehow, I did. The same way I'd known how to play those magical strands, the same way I'd always known music was more than notes on a page. The harp wasn't merely calling to me. It was singing to something inside me that had been waiting my whole life to answer.

Justice's face flashed through my mind. If music could soothe the savage beast, maybe it could save him from Rage. Maybe that was why the harp called to me so urgently.

The deeper I ventured into the chamber, the thicker the darkness became until a soft golden light suddenly bloomed before me. My breath caught in my throat as it illuminated Queen Charlotte's harp, tucked away in the farthest corner. It was

massive, nearly as tall as me, its golden frame ornately carved with symbols that danced and shifted in the glow. Ancient power hummed through its strings, vibrating in the air, but my heart sank.

I didn't have the spell to shrink it. It was on Damon's phone. Even if I could play it, how could I possibly move it out of here?

The voice changed, becoming deeper, older. "The harp's power can banish Rage back to hell. But first, you must play the song that will break his hold on your Justice."

My hand trembled near the strings. In the harp's golden glow, I saw Justice as he used to be. Laughing, human, mine. Then, the image twisted, showing him now, corrupted by Rage's darkness, hunting me. He would follow us when we left the castle's protection, and when he did...

"If I play this, it can save him?" Behind me, I heard Damon calling my name, his voice muffled by the barrier.

The harp's strings vibrated with power, a chord that seemed to shake the air. "The song must be played at the right moment, when he is closest to you. When his rage is strongest." The voice paused meaningfully. "When he attempts to end your life."

"Beautiful, isn't it?" the musical voice whispered, closer now. "You understand why I chose you."

I reached out, my fingers trembling inches from the frame. Though I was hidden in the depths of the chamber, I could sense Justice outside the castle, could almost feel the battle between him and Rage burning inside him.

The moment my fingers touched the cool metal, the harp pulsed with brilliant light. Under my hand, the massive instrument began to shrink, the golden frame folding in

on itself like liquid metal until it was no larger than a lap harp. Yet the power felt stronger, more concentrated.

“Size matters not,” the voice sang softly, almost amused. “Its magic lies in the music, in the player’s heart.”

I gazed at the harp. “So, the final battle is here?”

“No,” the voice sang, its melody urgent. “You must get to Rosslyn Chapel. There are carvings that will send the demons back to hell.” The notes grew deeper, more resonant. “The carvings of the Seven Deadly Sins. Use the artifacts you have and the phoenix.”

The voice softened to a whisper. “Find the Apprentice’s Pillar. You can imprison Maci.”

Rosslyn Chapel. The name tugged at something in my memory, scenes from that Da Vinci Code movie Dad made us watch during one of our rare nights off from hunting. I remembered ornate carvings and mysterious symbols, but that was about it. Now we had to find this Apprentice’s Pillar there? Part of me wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it all, following clues from a movie to stop a shadow dragon and her demons.

I had a destination now, but at what cost?

The harp hummed against my palms, its power thrumming through my blood like a second heartbeat. Even shrunk down, it felt ancient, dangerous. A weapon disguised as an instrument of beauty. Queen Charlotte must have known what she was doing, creating something that could destroy a demon but save the one possessed.

I turned back toward the barrier where my team waited. Damon’s silhouette paced like a caged animal, and I could almost hear his voice in my head warning me this

was crazy. Maybe it was. Then again, when had anything in our lives been sane?

Movement caught my eye. Justice at the window, watching. Even from here, I made out the war in his eyes, the way Rage's darkness twisted through him like smoke. Yet beneath the demon's corruption, I saw him. The way his jaw clenched, fighting Rage's control. The slight tremor in his hands that betrayed his struggle.

My fingers tightened around the harp. Everyone said I was the chosen one, but they were wrong. I hadn't been chosen because I was special or powerful. I'd been chosen because I loved him enough to face what was coming. Even if saving him meant letting him get close enough to kill me.

I stepped back toward my team, toward the inevitable confrontation waiting outside. The voice's final words followed me like a whisper.

"Remember, child. Love may give you the strength to play the song, but it's also what makes Rage's hold so strong. Your greatest weapon is also his."

As I approached the barrier, the strands spread apart like a curtain in a theater.

"Sawyer." Damon moved to take a step, but Brody grabbed him.

"Don't," Brody warned. "The barrier may crash down and trap her in there forever."

I passed through without incident and exhaled in relief. Damon grabbed me and hugged me. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine." I smiled and held up the harp. "I got it."

He released me. "Yes, I can see that."

“I know where we need to go next.”

The others fixed their gaze on me.

I drew a breath. “Rosslyn Chapel. That’s where the final battle will be. According to the harp, there is a sculpture of the Seven Deadly Sins and a pillar where we can send the demons back to hell and trap Maci.” I moistened my lips. “I can also heal Justice.”

“Let me guess. This comes with a catch that involves you getting way too close to a homicidal demon-vampire?” Damon’s attempt at sarcasm couldn’t hide the fear in his voice.

I held his angry gaze. “Yes. He has to be consumed with rage before the harp will heal him. I have to play it.”

“Are you telling me this is going to be like the Beauty and Beast fairytale?”

“I know it sounds crazy,” I replied as I lifted the harp. “But I think it’s true.”

“We’ll figure out a way to protect you,” Brody’s jaw firmed with determination. “There has to be a way to save Justice without sacrificing yourself.”

I looked at Justice, who paced back and forth at the window like a caged animal. My throat tightened as I placed my hand against the cold glass, wishing I could reach through and touch him, somehow calm the rage burning inside him. If I could only make him remember...

“The moment we step out of the castle, they will attack us,” I whispered, my voice breaking slightly.

Justice stopped pacing. His eyes met mine, and for a split second, I saw a flicker of recognition. Then, they blazed dark red, his face twisting into something inhuman as he snarled at me with pure hatred. The sound carried through the thick glass, making my blood run cold. I stumbled back, my heart shattering all over again. This wasn't my Justice anymore.

Not yet.

Lisa came up beside me, her voice firm and practical. "Zara and I can create a protection shield around all of us. If we combine our magic with the hourglass, we might be able to transport the whole team to Rosslyn Chapel before they can stop us."

Damon strode over, tension radiating off him as he glanced out the window. "Yeah, because a demon block party is exactly what we needed right now. How long's this spell going to take? Because, in case you haven't noticed, Hell's finest are having a reunion out there, and something tells me they're not waiting for an invitation to crash this party."

My heart sank, the harp growing heavy in my hands. The courtyard was filled with demons. To humans, they looked like men in suits, but I saw past their disguises now, the writhing darkness beneath their pristine facades. Dozens of pride demons stood tall and imperious, while the greed demons' fingers twitched with constant want.

Lust demons wore smiles that promised pleasure and pain, Gluttony's followers gaped with endless hunger. The sloth demons moved with deceptive slowness, and the eyes of Envy's servants burned green with hatred.

There, closest to Justice, stood Rage, alone but more terrifying than all the others combined. He didn't need a legion. His power rolled off him in waves of crimson fury, and through his connection to Justice, I felt the sheer force of his strength. One demon of Rage was worth an army of the others.

And now all seven were here, waiting for us like wolves circling their prey.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Brody, Damon, and I stood at the long castle window, the first rays of dawn creeping over the Scottish hills. The morning should have been beautiful, with golden light touching the ancient stones, making the dew sparkle on the manicured lawns. Instead, it was a nightmare painted in sun-drenched colors.

Behind us, Lisa and Zara's voices wove together in an ancient language, the protection spell building with agonizing slowness. Each second felt like an eternity. I felt Damon's growing tension, his fingers drumming restlessly against his thigh - a nervous habit from childhood.

The minute we stepped out onto that terrace, they would swarm us. Maci's human form rippled at the edges, her shadow dragon nature bleeding through. Justice's eyes burned with Rage's fire, and the demon armies waited with inhuman patience.

It was a suicide mission. Five of us against what looked like hundreds. The odds made my chest tight, my hands clutching the harp like a lifeline.

Then, the light hit them fully, and my blood turned to ice. Whether it was Maci's magic or some strange quality of the Scottish sun, their true forms emerged like a nightmare made real. Horns curved from distorted heads, wings of rotted leather, teeth too sharp and numerous to be natural. The pristine suits melted away, revealing grotesque bodies twisted by centuries of evil.

"Well," Damon muttered roughly. "Guess we don't have to worry about telling the demons apart from the tourists anymore."

Brody shifted closer to the window, his shoulders rigid. Even our unshakeable soldier looked disturbed. “This has to be Maci’s doing. She’s trying to break our resolve before we even step outside.”

“It’s working,” I whispered, unable to tear my gaze from the horror show. One of the Pride demons turned its head toward our window, multiple eyes blinking in sequence along its elongated face. The sight made my stomach lurch.

The harp thrummed against my chest, where I’d tied it with a makeshift strap. Its warmth felt like the only real thing in this twisted morning. Outside, Justice paced closer to the castle, his movements jerky and predatory. The demon army parted for him like a dark sea. Even they feared Rage’s vessel.

“Any time now with that spell,” Damon called over his shoulder. “Because I’m pretty sure Ugly out there is about to get a whole lot uglier.” He was trying for humor, but I heard the edge of fear. Not for himself, never for himself, but for me. For all of us.

The air crackled with Lisa and Zara’s magic, the temperature in the room dropping as their power built. Would it be enough? Could any spell protect us from what waited outside?

A sudden movement caught my eye as the phoenix, who’d perched silently on Brody’s shoulder, spread its magnificent wings. They stretched wider than seemed possible, shimmering with colors I had no names for, like fire made liquid. Then, to my amazement, it began to sing.

The sound was unlike anything I’d ever heard. Not quite music, not quite birdsong, but something ancient and pure. It rang through the castle’s stone walls, cutting through the cold dread in my chest. Each note felt like a sunrise after the longest night, like hope refusing to die. The room filled with radiant light that pulsed in time with the phoenix’s song, making the demons’ twisted forms outside seem less

substantial, less terrifying.

I hadn't even known a phoenix could sing. The creature's eyes met mine, filled with an intelligence that seemed to say, "There is still light in the darkest places." The harp hummed against my chest, resonating with the phoenix's song as if they were speaking to each other in a language older than words.

For the first time since seeing the demon army, I felt something other than despair. Maybe we weren't as outnumbered as I'd thought. We had things they could never understand. Hope, love, and now, the song of a phoenix.

The demons recoiled from the window, their grotesque forms shrinking back as if the phoenix's song physically hurt them. Even Justice faltered in his pacing as something flickered across his face, a glimpse of the man he used to be breaking through Rage's control. The shadow around Maci writhed, her dragon nature fighting her human form as the pure notes pierced the air.

Lisa and Zara's spellcasting grew stronger, their voices harmonizing with the phoenix's song. The protection spell's blue light twined with the phoenix's radiance, creating patterns of gold and azure that danced across the castle walls.

"Well, would you look at that?" A hint of Damon's bravado returned. "Guess we've got our own supernatural light show."

Brody stood straighter, the phoenix's song reinforcing his natural authority. "The demons aren't the only ones with power on their side."

The harp's warmth spread through my chest. Seven magical artifacts. The harp, the hourglass, the mirror, the balance, the crown, phoenix grass, phoenix feather, and now this magnificent creature. Maybe Queen Charlotte had known all along what we would face. Maybe this was why each piece had found its way to us.

Lisa and Zara approached us, their faces gleaming with sweat. In their upturned palms, they held what looked like captured starlight, burning white orbs that pulsed with raw power. The air around them crackled, making the hair on my arms stand up. Even Damon, usually skeptical of witch magic, took a step back.

“This is the protection spell.” Lisa’s voice strained with the effort of containing such power. The orb in her palm cast strange shadows across her face, making her look otherworldly. “When the door is opened, we will throw them out there. An invisible force field will form.”

Zara’s hands trembled as she held her orb. “It should hold long enough for you to use the hourglass to get us to Rosslyn Chapel.”

I slipped the harp off my chest, my fingers lingering on its golden frame for a moment before carefully placing it in my backpack. The weight of it settled between my shoulder blades like a reminder of everything at stake. With shaking hands, I pulled out the hourglass. I couldn’t risk trying to hold both artifacts during the fight. One slip, one moment of weakness, and we could lose them to the demons.

The phoenix’s song strengthened as if understanding the gravity of what we were about to attempt. It faded to a soft hum as Brody stepped forward. “All right, team. We need to move with precision. Sawyer, you take point with the hourglass. Lisa, Zara, the moment those doors open, launch the spell. Damon and I will guard the rear.”

His blue eyes swept over us. “We’re not running from those demons. We’re making a strategic advancement toward our goal. Every step brings us closer to ending this. Remember what we’re fighting for.” He placed a strong hand on my shoulder. “Each of us has a part to play in this. Together, we can turn the tide. Are you ready?”

I met his gaze, drawing strength from his steady confidence, but my focus was drawn

inevitably to Justice. My heart twisted. “We need to be careful, Brody. It’s not only the demons and Maci who will attack us.” My voice caught. The man I loved was out there, transformed into something that wanted to destroy us. The thought of anyone hurting him, even in self-defense, made me sick.

Brody looked out the window at Justice, who stood like a dark sentinel, his posture rigid with barely contained violence. Nothing remained of his gentle smile, his quiet strength. He waited like a predator, daring us to step outside. Rage’s power rolled off him in visible waves.

“I know,” Brody replied. Those two words carried volumes. He knew what Justice meant to me, knew the impossible position we were in. He would try to protect both of us, even from each other.

“Sawyer,” Damon called. “We’re not going to kill him. But if he comes at us...” He ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. “Look, sometimes you have to hurt someone to save them. You know that better than anyone.” His eyes met mine, full of memories of all the times we’d had to make impossible choices. “We’ll do what we have to in order to keep you alive long enough to save him. That’s the deal, okay?”

His words hit me like a physical blow, but I forced myself to nod. My vision blurred with tears that I refused to let fall. “You’re right,” I managed to whisper. “Just...try not to hurt him too badly.”

I looked back at Justice, remembering all the times he’d protected me, fought beside me. Now, here we were, about to face him as an enemy. My fingers curled around the hourglass, its cool surface grounding me in the moment. Sometimes, love meant making the hardest choices. Sometimes, it meant hurting someone to save them.

I gripped the hourglass tighter. “I’m ready. I won’t let anyone die or leave anyone behind. Ready?”

Everyone nodded, their faces set with grim determination.

Brody and Damon took their positions on either side of the glass doors, muscles tensed like coiled springs. The dawn light caught their shadows, stretching them across the castle floor.

“When we open this, they’ll attack,” Brody cautioned. “Be ready.”

Lisa and Zara stood on either side of me, palming their magical orbs. Above us, the phoenix flapped its magnificent wings. Its radiance pushed back the darkness, making the demons beyond the glass writhe and hiss.

I drew a deep breath, feeling the weight of the backpack against my back, the cool glass of the hourglass in my hand, and the warmth of my team around me. “Open the door,” I announced. “It’s time.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Brody and Damon pulled the glass doors open, and the air hit us with a blast of cold that had nothing to do with the temperature. Justice's reaction was instant and violent. He hissed, the sound more animal than human, pulling back his upper lip to reveal fangs that gleamed like daggers in the morning light. His eyes, once so gentle and brown, now burned blood-red with a hatred that pierced my heart. He crouched low, every muscle tensed to spring at us. At me.

Behind him, Maci's transformation was terrible to witness. Her human form ripped away like tissue paper, revealing the massive shadow dragon beneath. Her wings unfurled against the pale sky, blocking out the sun. Her shriek shattered the morning and vibrated through my bones, making my teeth ache and my grip on the hourglass falter.

Rage moved through the chaos with casual confidence, each step deliberate and mocking. His crimson eyes locked onto mine as he swaggered forward, his lips curved in a smile that promised pain. He didn't need to hurry. In his mind, he'd already won. Behind him, the demon horde moved as one writhing mass, their true forms no longer hidden, their grotesque features twisted with anticipation of the kill.

"Now!" Brody's command cut through the chaos.

Lisa and Zara hurled their orbs into the midst of our enemies. The magical spheres exploded in blinding white light, making the demons shriek and recoil. A shimmering dome of energy expanded around us, pushing back against the tide of evil.

But Justice moved faster than the shield could form. He launched at me with inhuman speed, his face a mask of rage and hunger. Damon tackled me aside as Justice's claws raked through the air where I'd been standing, and the shield closed us in. The hourglass nearly slipped from my sweating palms, but I clutched it tighter, my heart hammering against my ribs.

"Little sister." Rage's voice rolled across the courtyard like thunder. "Did you really think you could save him?" He gestured at Justice, who circled our shield like a caged tiger searching for weakness. "He's mine now. Body, soul, and all that delicious anger."

The phoenix's song rose in defiance, making the shadow dragon rear back with a roar of pain. Maci's massive form blocked most of our escape routes, her wings creating a canopy of darkness above us.

"Sawyer," Lisa called, her voice strained from maintaining the shield. "Whatever you're going to do with that hourglass, do it now!"

I held up the artifact, its glass warm and vibrating in my trembling hands. The ancient symbols carved into its frame glowed with an inner fire. "Take us to Rosslyn Chapel," I commanded.

The phoenix swooped down, its feathers radiating heat and light, and touched a golden talon to the hourglass. The contact sent a shock wave through my body like lightning in my veins. White light exploded outward, so bright it turned the world into a negative of itself.

A vortex of power caught me up like a leaf in a storm. My feet left the ground as nameless colors whirled around me. The wind roared in my ears, carrying echoes of times past and future. My stomach lurched as reality itself bent and twisted.

Screams pierced the chaos, my team's voices mixing with the inhuman shrieks of our enemies. Someone's hand brushed mine in the maelstrom but was ripped away before I could grab it.

"You're not escaping me!" Rage's voice cut through everything else, a sound of pure fury. Then I heard him command, "Get her!"

A familiar snarl pierced the chaos. Justice, moving faster than I thought possible. Through the spinning colors, I glimpsed his face, twisted with Rage's power but still achingly beautiful. He reached for me, his fingers almost grazing my jacket as the vortex pulled us apart and slammed us back together.

The world spun faster, colors bleeding into one another until I couldn't tell up from down. My team's voices came in fragments through the roar of magic.

"Sawyer!" Damon's shout, desperate and fading.

"Hold on!" Was that Brody or Lisa?

A phoenix's cry, high and piercing.

The hourglass burned so hot I thought my skin would blister, but I couldn't let go. Wouldn't let go. Through the kaleidoscope of power, I felt rather than saw Justice drawing closer, using his vampire speed to fight the magic trying to separate us.

Then, everything went black.

The darkness exploded into sudden, blinding light. My body slammed into cold, hard stone, the impact driving the air from my lungs. The hourglass slipped from my numb fingers and rolled across the rough surface. For a moment, all I could do was lie there, gasping, my head spinning with leftover vertigo from the transport.

Somewhere nearby, I heard groans and the scraping of bodies against cement. My team, scattered across what had to be Rosslyn Chapel's courtyard. The phoenix's soft glow pulsed weakly, illuminating ancient stone walls looming above us.

"Everyone okay?" Brody's voice, steady despite everything.

"Define 'okay,'" Damon groaned from somewhere to my left.

I pushed to my knees, every muscle screaming in protest. The harp dug into my back. That was when I heard it—a low, predatory growl from the shadows near the chapel entrance.

My blood turned to ice. I knew that sound.

"Sawyer, don't move," Lisa whispered urgently.

A pair of crimson eyes gleamed in the darkness of the chapel doorway. Justice had made it through with us, and we were still outside the chapel's protection.

"Guys?" Damon's voice had lost all its usual sarcasm. "Please tell me everyone else can see the homicidal vampire blocking the entrance."

Justice stood at the top of the chapel steps like a nightmare made flesh, his movements liquid and deadly. The sun caught his face, highlighting the inhuman beauty Rage's possession had twisted into something terrible. His gaze never left me, tracking my every breath like a predator savoring the moment before the kill.

"Sawyer." My name on his lips was both a curse and a caress. "Did you really think you could run from me?" Rage's power colored his voice, but I caught something else beneath. A flicker of the man I loved, drowning in darkness.

I scrambled to my feet on the rough cement, instinctively reaching for the harp on my back. Not yet, a voice in my head whispered. The timing had to be perfect. He had to be consumed by rage first.

We also had to get past him into the chapel, the only place that might offer us protection when the demons arrived.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I held the harp in trembling hands and faced Justice. He was a complete contrast to Rosslyn Chapel. The sun's light painted the medieval stone walls in shades of rose and amber, and ribbons of mist wove between Celtic crosses and weathered headstones. The chapel's western face loomed behind him, its Gothic windows dark, like hollow eyes watching our confrontation.

The courtyard stretched around us in a patchwork of ancient graves and uneven cobblestones, slick with morning dew. Some headstones listed to the side after centuries of Scottish winters, their carved angels and death's heads worn smooth by time and weather. Wild roses and thorny brambles had claimed the crumbling boundary walls, their pale blooms nodding in the chill breeze like silent mourners.

Around the courtyard's edge, gnarled yew trees cast long shadows across the wet grass, their branches reaching like skeletal fingers. A lone raven called from atop the chapel's highest point, its harsh cry shattering the stillness. Beyond the stone walls, rolling hills emerged, their heather-covered slopes still shrouded in morning mist.

Justice stood motionless, his immortal presence more ancient and terrible than even this hallowed ground. The sun turned his skin to marble and his eyes to burning embers as birdsong heralded the morning. Perhaps our last together if I failed.

He released a menacing roar, the sound morphing mid-cry from Justice's rich baritone to the demon's guttural snarl and back again.

Ravens erupted from the chapel's gargoyles as he rushed toward me across the dew-

slick cobblestones. His movements were a violent dance of grace and fury, one leg stumbling as Justice fought for control, the other striking with demonic precision. Dark veins writhed beneath his skin like living serpents, spreading from his heart in pulsing waves before retreating as Justice pushed back against the possession.

The air crackled with supernatural energy as Damon's boots crunched across fallen leaves. "Sawyer, look out!"

Let this work. Please, let our love be enough.

My fingers shook against the harp strings, and the first haunting notes rang through the chill morning air. Justice halted between two ancient monuments, his powerful frame seizing. His face was a twisted canvas of war. Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the chill, turning to steam as it rolled down his supernaturally heated skin. His fingers dug into the weathered angel statue, leaving deep gouges in stone that had stood for centuries.

His eyes flickered in an agonizing dance, blood red to warm brown, the colors swirling and fighting for dominance like oil and water. "Sawyer..." His voice cracked before a violent spasm bent him double. His spine curved at an impossible angle. Muscles rippled beneath his shirt as they grew and shifted unnaturally. A network of black veins spread up his neck, pulsing and receding like tide marks on sand.

When he straightened, half his face bore his gentle expression while the other half twisted into a demonic snarl. One eye blazed crimson, and the other remained soft brown, tears of blood tracking down his right cheek. "Music won't cure me," the demon snarled from the right side of his mouth as the left side whispered, "Help me."

He lunged forward, one arm reaching with desperate love while the other curved into talons. My fingers danced across the harp strings, and Justice crashed to his knees.

His body convulsed as if being torn apart from within. His bones crackled as they shifted, the demon trying to reshape him while Justice fought to maintain his form.

Tears slipped down my cheeks as he convulsed, but I couldn't stop. Not if I wanted to save him.

“No!” A demon's howl of rage.

“No!” Justice's desperate plea.

“No!” Both voices tangled together in a sound of pure agony.

He writhed in the wet grass, his back arching until only his heels and head touched the ground. His fingers dug furrows in the earth, alternately clawing in torment and grasping as if seeking anchor. The veins pulsed like black lightning, turning his flesh into a roadmap of the war within. His face cycled between expressions—love, rage, peace, torment—each lasting mere seconds before being consumed by the next. Blood trickled from his nose, one side red, the other black, meeting at his lip in a marbled swirl.

His shadow split and danced around him, one the sharp, twisted shape of the demon, the other his own familiar silhouette, wrestling for dominance on the dew-soaked ground as my music wound around him like chains of light.

His eyes flickered one final time, blood-red fighting warm brown, before the music reached a crescendo. The chapel's stones sang with centuries of sacred power, and Justice arched backward as golden light poured from his eyes and mouth. The demon's shadows tried to hold on, creating horrific patterns beneath his skin, but they couldn't withstand the combined power of love, music, and hallowed ground.

With a sound like breaking glass and crumbling stone, the demon's presence

shattered. Justice collapsed onto the dew-soaked grass. Steam rose where his fevered skin touched the sacred ground. The black veins faded like pottery cracks sealed with gold, leaving behind a faint, shimmering tracery that spoke of healing rather than harm.

When he lifted his head, his eyes were his own again, warm brown and filled with tears. No demon's shadow lingered in his expression, no rage haunted his eyes. The sun caught the traces of gold beneath his skin, making him glow like a renaissance painting, restored and more beautiful for having been broken and mended.

"Sawyer, keep your distance." Damon's gruff command cut through my hope. I felt his familiar presence move closer, solid and protective as always. My twin brother, ready to throw himself between me and danger, like he'd done since we were kids.

I wanted to run to Justice, to touch his face and make sure this was real, but Damon's arm shot out in front of me, a barrier as unmovable as iron. I felt him practically vibrating with tension, his silver knife catching the dawn light. Classic Damon. Though Justice was mostly healed, he wasn't taking chances. Not with his sister's life.

"Hold up," he growled when I tried to step forward. The brotherly tone that usually annoyed me now brought a lump to my throat. Even facing down my vampire mate, even after everything we'd been through, he was still trying to keep me safe. "Let's make sure it's really him first."

Tears blurred my eyes as Justice lay on the grass, panting.

Damon's gruff voice cut through the morning air. "Justice? That really you in there, buddy, or am I gonna have to explain to my sister why I had to gank her boyfriend?"

The threat in his words was real, but I heard what lay beneath them. The pain it

would cause him to have to hurt someone he'd come to consider family. Despite his tough hunter exterior, I knew Damon had grown to care about Justice, too. He'd never admit it out loud because that wasn't the Grant way, but his knife hand trembled slightly, and his jaw clenched against the possibility of having to follow through on the threat.

"Say something only Justice would know," Damon demanded, and I held my breath. My brother's arm stayed firm across my path, and I felt the subtle shift in his stance, ready to shove me behind him if things went wrong.

The sunlight caught the lingering gold traces beneath Justice's skin as we waited for his response, and I found myself praying my brother's protective instincts wouldn't be needed this time. That for once, we could have a miracle without paying for it in blood.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Damon walked around Justice as if he was ready to plunge the blade deep into his heart. No matter what happened, I didn't think I could do that. My hand trembled on the harp, the weight of what I might have to witness tightening my chest.

Brody came up beside me, his presence steady and reassuring like a lighthouse in a storm. His hand on my arm carried both comfort and restraint. When he shook his head, I saw the same compassion and tactical assessment in his eyes he brought to every mission. The soldier in him understood Damon's caution, but his inherent kindness reached out to steady me.

Wait, his touch seemed to say, though he didn't speak the word. Lisa and Zara stood a few paces behind him, tense with concern as they watched the scene unfold. The mist swirled around their feet, and I felt the weight of their collective experience in this moment. How many times had they all had to wait, to watch, to make sure a victory wasn't simply another clever deception?

Justice's eyes fluttered open, and my breath caught in my throat. Those warm brown eyes, my Justice's eyes, stared up at Damon with a familiar hint of sass despite his exhaustion. The golden healing marks under his skin pulsed once more like a fading sunset.

"I saved your ass the first time we met at the Shadow Mine," Justice replied, his voice rough but entirely his own.

A sound between a laugh and a sob escaped my throat. That was such a Justice thing

to say, picking the one memory that would simultaneously prove his identity and irritate my brother.

Damon snorted, but his shoulders relaxed slightly, the knife lowering a fraction. “Yeah, well, I had it handled. Demons are my specialty.”

Justice sighed as he pressed his palms against the dew-damp ground, his arms trembling with exhaustion as he slowly pushed himself up toward sitting. His usual vampire grace was gone, replaced by the careful movements of someone who’d been through hell and barely made it back. Still, he had enough strength to throw shade at my brother.

“Right. You were almost food for a horde of gluttony demons.” Justice grimaced as he finally managed to sit up. He looked pale even for a vampire, the sun highlighting the shadows under his eyes and the way his clothes hung on his frame as if the demon’s possession had burned through his essence.

Damon glared. “I was waiting for the right moment.” He circled Justice one more time, trying to maintain his tough-guy stance while relief flickered across his face. “And for the record, I could’ve taken those vamps with one hand tied behind my back.”

I could practically hear him biting back a “bitch” or “jerk” comment, that signature Grant deflection of emotional moments with humor. But I knew my brother. The fact that he was falling back into their usual banter meant he was starting to believe this was really Justice.

Brody squeezed my arm gently. He hadn’t been there that day, but he’d heard the story enough times during mission briefings and late-night strategy sessions. It had become a new experience for my family. The vampire who’d saved a Grant, turning everything we thought we knew about allies and enemies on its head.

That day in the Shadow Mine had been the beginning of everything, the moment Justice had proven he wasn't our enemy, wasn't just another vampire to be staked. The day my brother had been forced to reconsider everything he thought he knew about monsters and men. It was the kind of story Brody appreciated, understanding better than most how sometimes the strongest alliances were forged in the most unexpected moments.

It's Justice," I insisted as I wiggled free of Brody's grip. All the fear, all the waiting, all the desperate hope burst through my chest like a dam breaking. The golden marks beneath Justice's skin pulsed softly like stars calling me home.

"Sawyer—" Brody reached for me, concern still edging his voice, but I was already moving. I didn't care about being cautious or tactical. I'd spent too long dreaming of this, of having my Justice back, of seeing those warm brown eyes look at me with recognition instead of rage.

I knelt beside him in the dew-soaked grass, my hands trembling as they hovered over his shoulders, suddenly afraid he might shatter if I touched him. The demon's possession had left him fragile, almost hollow, like a stained-glass window that had weathered a storm. Beautiful but breakable.

"I've missed you," I whispered, tears blurring my vision. The words felt inadequate, too simple to contain the ocean of emotion behind them.

"I have, too." He reached for me, his voice rough with emotion. His hand trembled slightly. In that small movement, I saw the echo of every moment we'd been apart, every battle he'd fought against the demon's control.

My heart raced in anticipation, beating a rhythm that sang he's back, he's back, he's real. The morning air seemed to hold its breath, the misty courtyard fading until there was nothing but this moment. Nothing but us.

He slipped his hand around my neck, his touch achingly gentle, as if he was remembering how to be tender after so much darkness. His fingers against my skin grounded me in the reality that this wasn't another dream, another desperate hope. His lips brushed over mine, soft as a whisper. "You never gave up on me?"

The question held so much. Wonder, gratitude, and lingering traces of fear. I heard what he wasn't saying. After everything the demon made him do, after all the darkness, had I still believed in him? Had I seen him beneath the rage?

"Never," I breathed against his lips, pouring every desperate prayer and moment of unshakeable faith into that single word. "My heart belongs to you." The truth rang through me like the harp's music, pure, unbreakable, and healing. The golden marks beneath his skin pulsed as if responding to the declaration, to the love that helped bring him back from the darkness.

As our lips met, a cascade of electric sparks lit up my body. I couldn't resist tangling my fingers in his thick, dark hair as he deepened the kiss. A rush of heat and pleasure surged through me, settling in my quivering belly. The taste of him lingered on my lips, sweet and intoxicating like a forbidden fruit. I lost all sense of time and place, consumed by the passion and desire between us.

"Okay, Twilight. We need to get inside now and prepare for demons."

Damon's smart remark doused our tiny reunion like ice water down my spine, yanking me back to the reality of our situation. The warm bubble of joy in my chest didn't quite pop, but it definitely shrank.

Justice broke off the kiss, but his hand lingered at my neck, thumb brushing my skin as if he couldn't quite bear to break contact completely. "I promise we'll finish what we started, and this time, we won't be interrupted." His voice held warmth and determination, making my heart flutter despite the danger lurking at the edges of our

moment.

“Oh, pardon me,” Damon drawled, and I could practically hear him rolling his eyes. “I just thought we needed to come up with a plan before the horde of demons and Maci descend on us like flying monkeys from the Wizard of Oz.”

My brother’s pop culture reference would have made me laugh in any other situation, but the mention of Maci sent a chill through me that had nothing to do with the cold air. We were far from safe. I felt Justice’s fingers tighten slightly against my skin, a silent acknowledgment that our reunion would have to wait.

“I won’t let him take you again,” I promised, the words emerging fiercer than I intended. The memory of watching the demon possess him, of seeing my Justice twisted into something else, made my voice shake.

Justice clasped my hand and pulled me off the ground with the innate gentleness that always surprised people who didn’t know vampires could be tender. Even weakened, he moved with careful strength. Still, worry darkened his eyes.

“Listen to me,” he murmured. “He’s too powerful. If he captures me again, you need to run.” The mere suggestion of leaving him made my chest tight, but I saw the haunted look in his eyes. He remembered everything the demon had made him do.

Damon scrutinized Justice, that calculating hunter’s assessment I’d seen a thousand times. “So, tell me, Jaws. Why does Rage want you so badly but not any of us?”

Leave it to my brother to cut to the tactical heart of things, even if he had to wrap it in a shark movie reference.

“Because of my vampire speed and strength.” Justice’s admission came with a grimace, his free hand clenching into a fist. “He thinks I’m the only one who could

grab the artifacts and get out.” The mist swirled around us as his words sank in, making the ancient headstones seem to loom closer. “He and Maci plan to destroy them.”

When he turned to Lisa, I felt the shift in his posture, the way he drew himself up despite his exhaustion. The shadows under his eyes seemed darker as he delivered the worst news. “His next objective is to get the phoenix. He wants to drain her power.”

A ripple of tension moved through our group. Lisa’s sharp intake of breath, Brody’s tactical mind already working on scenarios, Zara’s hand moving instinctively toward her weapons. Yet all I could focus on was how Justice’s hand trembled in mine, the tiny tell that revealed how much it cost him to remember what the demon had planned through him.

And it was more than that. Justice was afraid. Justice, who had faced hordes of demons without flinching, who had walked into the Shadow Mine outnumbered and emerged victorious, who had survived centuries of darkness while keeping his humanity intact. If something could make him tremble, put that shadow of fear in his eyes...

Ice crawled down my spine as the realization hit. If he was afraid, I should be terrified.

In all our time together, through every battle and close call, I’d never felt him shake like this. The golden marks beneath his skin seemed to pulse faster, as if they, too, sensed evil coming.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

A shadow fell over us, too large and sudden to be natural, snuffing out the sun like a candle being blown out. I squeezed Justice's hand, feeling his fingers tighten around mine in response.

Maci's appearance turned our courtyard reunion into something from a nightmare. The ancient headstones cast longer shadows, as if reaching up to greet our enemy. The mist that had seemed so peaceful moments ago turned ominous, curling around our feet like ghostly chains.

I glanced at Justice, seeing my own fear reflected in his eyes, but something else was there, too. Determination, defiance, and fierce protectiveness that made my heart ache.

"They're here." My whisper seemed to echo through the suddenly silent courtyard.

"Everyone, defensive positions," Brody commanded. He moved with purposeful grace, placing himself slightly ahead of our group like a shield. "Lisa, Zara, guard the flanks. Damon, cover our six. Keep the line tight and protect each other."

Even in the growing darkness of Maci's shadow, his presence radiated steadiness and hope. An unshakeable belief that if we stood together, we could face anything. He scanned the sky with tactical precision while his hand rested on his weapon, but his even voice grounded us all.

"Justice, Sawyer, stay central. He'll be coming for you first," he added. "Remember

your training. Remember who we are. We don't run from fights. We face them together."

"Oh, really?"

I gasped, the sound catching in my throat like broken glass. Rage stood in front of the entrance of Rosslyn Chapel, his presence a perversion of the sacred space behind him. The light seemed to bend around him, creating a darkness that had nothing to do with shadows. My skin crawled with the bone-deep wrongness that only came from being near something that shouldn't exist in our world.

The other demons stormed the chapel walls like a wave of living darkness, their forms twisted and wrong. They moved like smoke but rang against the stone like iron, their claws scraping centuries of weathered rock. The sound was like nails on a chalkboard amplified a thousand times, making my teeth ache and my grip on Justice's hand tighten.

They descended onto the courtyard in a spiral of chaos, turning our small sanctuary into a trap. We were surrounded. The headstones felt like barriers, boxing us in with creatures that had crawled straight from hell.

Justice stiffened beside me. The way he shifted in front of me as if to shield me from Rage's view told me everything about his fear. Not for himself, but for what the demon might make him do to me this time.

Brody moved with soldier-like precision and grabbed my backpack. "Sawyer, use the mirror," he commanded.

"It won't work against him," Justice prompted, tension threading through his words. His posture shifted, and I knew he was calculating how many demons he could take down before they reached me. The memory of his recent possession made his

warning carry extra weight.

“No, but it will against the other demons.” Brody scanned the courtyard, assessing angles and positions like the tactical genius he was. “It might give us a fighting chance. Remember, we don’t need to win. We only need to hold the line long enough to get clear.”

I followed his gaze, seeing what he saw. The demons had surrounded us, but the ancient headstones created natural choke points. If we could control those paths with the mirror, funnel them where we wanted... The sunlight could work to our advantage, too, amplifying the mirror’s power. We’d be fighting with our backs to the chapel, but that meant no demons could come from behind.

Every hunter instinct I had screamed we were trapped, but Brody was right. We didn’t need an exit, only enough space to make one. The mirror might not stop Rage, but if we could thin out his army, give my team enough room to maneuver, we had a chance.

I wouldn’t let him seize Justice. The memory of his possession was too fresh. My heart pounded against my ribs, each beat a silent promise: not again, not again, not again .

I handed the mirror to Justice, feeling his fingers brush mine in the exchange. He seemed locked in a silent battle of wills with Rage, his newly restored brown eyes meeting the demon’s hellfire gaze across the courtyard. The tension between them was almost visible, like heat waves distorting the air.

“Use this,” I told him. “I have another plan.” The harp’s smooth wood felt warm under my fingers, almost alive, as if it remembered the power it had wielded to free Justice. The golden inlay caught the light, sending tiny sparkles dancing across the ancient headstones.

I picked up the harp and started playing. The notes rang out clear and pure in the demon-tainted air in defiance of the darkness pressing in around us. Rage stopped in his arrogance, his confident stance faltering. He shook his head like Justice had, the movement so similar that a rash of gooseflesh broke out all over me. But where Justice's freedom had been beautiful, this was terrible. Watching something so powerful reveal a weakness, knowing it would only make him more dangerous.

A horrible shriek froze my blood, the sound like metal being torn apart. Maci landed on the courtyard, her massive form casting us into shadow. The impact of her landing made the headstones tremble and sent centuries of dust flying from the chapel walls. My heart stuttered at the sight of her, all scales and fury, her eyes burning with hatred that felt personal.

The air turned scorching as she reared back, her chest glowing like a forge coming to life. Time seemed to slow, and I saw every detail with terrifying clarity. The way her scales rippled with dark power, how her throat lit from within like magma about to erupt.

Then, she loosed a ray of fire so intense that it turned the morning mist to steam. The inferno roared directly at me, and I felt my skin blistering from yards away. My fingers clutched the harp tighter, but there was no time to play, to move, to do anything but face my death.

"No!" Justice's cry tore through the chaos, and my heart leaped into my throat. He moved with vampire speed, materializing in front of me like a shield, his body coiled with protective fury. The golden healing marks under his skin flashed like stars refusing to be extinguished. Terror and love warred in me. He'd just gotten free, and now he was risking everything to save me.

Justice raised the mirror, his stance unwavering in the face of dragon fire. His shoulders were set with a determination that broke my heart. He'd rather burn than let

anything happen to me. I wanted to pull him back, to tell him I couldn't lose him again, but I had no time.

The phoenix descended upon the mirror, its sacred power meeting Maci's corruption head-on. The fire slammed into the mirror's surface with a sound like thunder, but instead of shattering, the glass seemed to drink in the flames.

For a split second, blinding light bathed the courtyard as the mirror did its work, transforming attack into defense. The heat was overwhelming, and I pressed against Justice's back, unwilling to let him face this alone. He trembled with the effort of holding the mirror steady, but he didn't yield an inch.

The fire reversed course, a perfect reflection of Maci's own power turned against her. Her dragon fire, tinged with the mirror's holy light, struck her full force. She shrieked with anger, the sound sharp enough to crack stone, her wings flaring wide as her own flames engulfed her. The sight was terrifying and beautiful, a dragon burning with fire made holy by the mirror's power.

Maci flew into the air and spun, extinguishing the flames like a hellish pinwheel. The chapel's entrance waited behind our battle line as we edged backward. Brody's voice cut through the chaos. "Form up! Keep the line tight!"

Each scale that had been touched by the sanctified fire smoked, but Maci was far from defeated. Her massive form swooped low, herding us exactly where Rage wanted us. To my left, Lisa and Zara's voices rose in unison, their spellwork creating bursts of white light that pushed the demons farther into the courtyard. Damon's blade flashed as he forced another group back, buying us precious feet of ground.

My hands gripped Justice's shoulders, weak with relief. He was still here, still protecting me, still himself. Every mark the demon had left on him glowed golden in the reflected firelight, a reminder that we'd already won one impossible battle today.

The courtyard had become a battlefield. Brody's shield cleared space for our gradual retreat, Zara and Lisa's magic kept the demons from flanking us, and Damon's constant motion ensured none slipped past our line.

The mirror in Justice's hands still hummed with power as he directed it at the other demons. They burst into smoke and sank into the ground, but there were too many of them.

Rage kept fighting the harp, shaking his head. I was able to keep him back but not destroy him.

My team and I backed up onto the chapel steps. My shoulder blades touched the ancient stone. Victory was inches away. The harp's notes trembled in the air between us and the demons, our only barrier against chaos.

I called over my shoulder, trying to keep my voice steady. "Zara, get the hourglass out."

If I stopped playing the harp, Rage would charge us. My fingers ached from maintaining the melody, each note a thread in the fragile web holding back our enemies.

Lisa grabbed the door handle, and metal scraped against metal. "Sawyer, it won't turn. What do we do?"

My heart stopped. The weight of everyone's lives pressed against my chest, heavier than the harp in my hands.

Rage laughed. "Trapped like rats. You can't hold us back forever."

Above us, Maci's wings cast shadows like prison bars across our faces. Her scales

gleamed with unholy fire as she landed on the chapel roof, cutting off our last escape route. The stone beneath our feet trembled with her weight.

We were cornered, and I had one choice left.

Zara pulled out the hourglass. “Here.”

I had to stop playing the harp to use it. As soon as I did, Rage would charge. Every muscle in my body tensed with the impossible choice. Keep playing and stay trapped, or risk everything on one desperate gamble.

If we couldn’t get into the chapel, we were all dead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Time seemed to freeze in the space between one heartbeat and the next. The harp hummed in my hands, and the hourglass glinted in Zara's grip, our last desperate chance. Behind us, the chapel door remained stubbornly locked. Above, Maci's shadow turned the morning light blood-red.

I had to choose. Keep playing and die slowly, or risk everything on the hourglass's power.

I met Justice's gaze. "Ready?"

He gazed at me, those newly restored brown eyes holding a universe of worry and love. Eyes I'd fought so hard to see again without the demon's taint. "As soon as you stop playing, he'll charge."

"I know." The words emerged steady despite my racing heart hammering against my ribs like it might break free.

"I love you." He bent his head and brushed his lips over mine like a goodbye kiss. Yet we'd just gotten him back, freed him from possession. I refused to let this be our last moment together, to watch him die when I'd barely found him again.

"Seriously? Now?" Damon's gruff voice broke through our moment, tension making his sarcasm sharper than usual. "Save the romance novel stuff for when we're not about to die, preferably when I don't have to watch my twin sister making out with a vampire."

A fierce determination burned inside me to protect him and my team. We'd survived too much. Shadow mines, demon possessions, countless battles. We'd fought too hard to die on these chapel steps. The worn stone beneath my feet had weathered centuries. We only needed to survive the next few minutes.

Maci flapped her wings over our heads as if she knew what I had planned, her shadow turning day to dusk. Each beat of her wings sent a hot wind whipping around us, carrying the scent of brimstone and ash. Every muscle in my body coiled tight as I made my choice.

I stopped playing the harp.

The silence lasted less than a heartbeat.

Rage's roar shattered the dawn air as he charged, his form a blur of darkness and hatred. The sound vibrated in my chest like a bass drum. Behind him, the demon horde surged forward like a tide of nightmares, their twisted forms scrambling over gravestones and each other in their frenzy to reach us. Claws scraped against stone, leaving burning marks in their wake. The air filled with their shrieks as hundreds of voices cried out for our blood, our souls.

Maci's chest glowed with hellfire, the scales lighting up like hot coals. Her wings spread wider, and the air seemed to burn as she prepared to rain death upon us, the temperature rising until sweat streamed down our faces.

Lisa and Zara's spells crackled through the air like lightning, their voices strong but strained with effort. Brody's shield spun in a deadly arc, taking down three demons at once, but hundreds more were coming. Damon's blade flashed in the dim light as he kicked a smaller demon back into the horde. Justice raised the mirror, its surface catching what little light remained. His body tensed to protect me even though he was still weak from the possession.

We were surrounded, outmatched, with locked chapel doors pressing against our backs. The carved stone angels above the entrance watched our last stand with empty eyes. Dark shapes writhed in the morning mist, more demons than I could count, their red eyes burning with hunger. My team's ragged breathing told me everyone was running on empty. Too much fighting, too little time to recover.

The world narrowed to this moment, this last, desperate stand on sacred ground, with monsters at our throats and holy artifacts in our hands. Time seemed to stretch like taffy as I reached for the hourglass, knowing I had seconds at most before we were overwhelmed.

I held it up, its glass warm against my palm. The weight of everyone's lives pressed down on me as Rage's demons surged forward. "Inside Rosslyn Chapel." The words came out as both prayer and command.

The phoenix clasped the hourglass in her massive talons, and power rippled through me like a lightning strike. It started where her claws met the artifact, then surged up my arms and into my chest until every nerve ending screamed with holy fire.

My bones felt like they might shatter from the raw energy coursing through them. Wind ripped through my hair, hot and cold at once, carrying the scent of ancient stone and sacred power. The force of it stole my breath.

Colors spun around us, gold from the sunlight, crimson from Maci's flames, and violet from Lisa and Zara's spells bleeding together like wet paint in a whirlwind. The world became a kaleidoscope of light and shadow, sacred and profane. I caught glimpses of my team's faces, distorted and stretched like reflections in funhouse mirrors. Justice's golden healing marks blazed in the chaos, and for a moment, I was terrified we'd be torn apart again.

Then I was lifted off my feet, the ground disappearing. My stomach lurched into my

throat as gravity released its hold. For one terrifying moment, I was suspended in chaos, unable to tell up from down, my team's faces blurring around me. The only constant was the burning sensation of phoenix power coursing through my veins like liquid starlight. Time lost all meaning. It could have been seconds or centuries.

I landed hard. Cold flagstones pressed against my palms as I gasped for breath, each inhale burning like I'd swallowed fire. My skin tingled with leftover energy, little sparks of phoenix power dancing along my nerves. The world spun around me like a carnival ride, and my head felt stuffed with static.

The abrupt silence after the battlefield's chaos was almost as disorienting as the journey itself. Gone were the demon shrieks and the sound of combat, replaced by the holy quiet of the chapel's interior. My body trembled, every muscle aching like I'd been struck by lightning.

I groaned as I moved to a sitting position, every muscle protesting the movement. Black spots danced at the edges of my vision, and I did a quick scan of the chapel's interior, counting heads. Brody was helping Zara to her feet near the altar while Damon leaned against a pillar, looking like he might be sick.

Justice raced over to me, his vampire speed making him appear almost instantly at my side. The concern in his eyes warmed something in my chest. After everything he'd been through, his first thought was still my safety. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I managed, though "fine" was relative when your whole body felt like it had been torn apart and put back together wrong.

Bam-bam-bam!

The chapel doors wavered, ancient wood groaning under supernatural force. The sound echoed through the space like thunder, making the stained-glass windows rattle

in their frames.

“We have a problem.” Lisa wobbled over to us, her face pale from the magical transport. She had to grab a pew to stay upright. Magic residue still sparked at her fingertips as she pointed toward the entrance. “The chapel isn’t warded. They’ll be able to break in any second.”

“Well, that’s awesome.” Damon pushed himself off the pillar. “Magical teleporting bird drops us in a chapel with no protection. That’s some grade-A planning right there. Any other surprises? Maybe the floor’s actually lava.”

Another crash rattled the hinges. This time, splinters of wood scattered across the floor.

“Everyone who can stand, get ready,” Brody ordered as he moved to the center of the chapel. “We didn’t survive everything else only to fall here. Form a defensive circle. We protect each other, or we die trying.”

Outside, Rage’s laughter mixed with Maci’s shrieks. The chapel’s acoustics distorted the sound into something even more terrifying.

I raced toward the chapel pillars, my gaze darting over hundreds of carved faces. Which ones represented Pride? Wrath? More splintering wood behind me made my heart jump into my throat. Ancient stone angels and demons blurred together in the dim light.

“Found Gluttony!” Damon shouted from near the altar, his flashlight beam highlighting a grotesque figure with an oversized mouth. “Though I gotta say, not the prettiest decoration for a church. Who builds a chapel full of demon art, anyway?”

Justice’s vampire speed made him a blur among the pillars. “Here—Lust!” His voice

echoed off the vaulted ceiling as he pointed to a figure wrapped in sinuous curves, its face twisted in eternal desire.

Lisa and Zara's joined hands trembled as they maintained the barrier, sweat beading on their foreheads. Blue protective light flickered like a dying bulb across the doorway.

BOOM!

The entire chapel shuddered. Dust and small pieces of stone rained down from the ceiling.

"We need more time," Lisa gasped.

I scrambled onto a pew for a better view, scanning the higher carvings. There, was that Pride? The figure stood tall and arrogant, its chin lifted in eternal defiance. "Pride's up high on the north wall!"

"Greed and Envy are here," Brody called, gesturing to two figures flanking a window, one clutching a bag of coins, the other reaching for something beyond its grasp.

"That leaves Wrath and Sloth," Justice announced, still searching. "They have to be?—"

Another explosion rocked the chapel. The magical barrier crackled, now more holes than protection. Through the gaps, I made out Maci's fire, illuminating the sky like hellish lightning. Rage's laughter echoed through the weakening barrier.

"There!" Justice pointed to a shadowy alcove near the roof beams. "Wrath. It's almost hidden behind that gargoyne!"

Another blast shook the chapel doors. Through the new cracks, Maci's fire painted the stained-glass windows in hellish colors. The heat of her breath seeped inside, turning the air sulfuric.

"Last one," Brody shouted over the chaos, his shield ready as he backed toward us. "Where's Sloth?"

I spun in place, heart hammering. We were missing one. Just one. My gaze raked every inch of stone, every carved face and figure. The chapel almost seemed to be moving in the flickering light of Maci's flames.

"Look down!" Justice's voice cut through my panic. "It's carved into the floor. Sloth's lying down!"

Of course he was.

I dropped to my knees, fingers tracing the worn carving beneath years of dust and foot traffic. The figure was barely visible, stretched out in eternal laziness under our feet.

"Guys?" Damon's voice carried an edge I rarely heard. "Whatever we're gonna do with these ugly little sculptures, we better do it fast. Our demon pals are about to?"

The barrier shattered like glass.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The barrier's destruction still rang in my ears like broken bells as I dropped to my knees on the chapel floor. Dust and magical residue sparkled in the air, catching the hellfire light that now poured through the ruined doorway. We had all seven sculptures. Pride high on the north wall, Lust and Gluttony near the altar, Greed and Envy flanking the window, Wrath hidden in its alcove, and Sloth beneath my fingers, carved into the stone I knelt upon.

But having them and using them were two very different things.

Maci's massive head pushed through the chapel entrance, her scales reflecting firelight across every surface. Behind her, Rage's darkness seeped into the chapel like poison, turning the sacred air thick and heavy. Lisa and Zara still knelt where they'd fallen, drained from their failed protection spell. Justice stood ready with the mirror while Damon and Brody formed a protective line between us and the doorway.

We had seconds at most to act, and I still wasn't sure how these seven carvings could save us.

"Now what?" Damon backed toward me, blade ready. "Please tell me someone has a plan for these demon sculptures besides admiring the artwork."

"The artifacts," I shouted in a moment of sudden clarity. "We need to match them with the carvings."

Damon snorted. "Some of them are a little out of reach! Unless someone packed a

ladder?”

“Justice,” I called, my mind racing as Rage’s darkness seeped closer. “You can reach Pride with your vampire speed. Use the mirror!”

Justice nodded and blurred up the wall like a shadow, his fingers finding impossible holds in the ancient stone. Maci’s fire chased him, but he was too quick, pressing the mirror against Pride’s snarling face. Light blazed where artifact met stone.

“Lisa, Zara,” Brody commanded, his shield deflecting another blast of flame. “Get the crown to Envy by that window. I’ll cover you.”

The witches moved in sync, the crown held between them as they chanted, using their combined magic to levitate the artifact toward the covetous figure. Rage’s shadows tried to intercept, but Brody’s shield spun through the darkness, dispersing it.

“Phoenix feather for Greed,” I called, clutching the glowing plume. “But it’s so high up...”

The phoenix, still perched on her pew as if watching a show, spread her wings. The gesture was clear.

“Oh, this is gonna suck,” Damon muttered as he helped boost me onto the phoenix’s back. “Try not to get barbecued up there, sis.”

Aurora’s back burned hot beneath me as she lifted us toward the Greed sculpture. Maci’s tail smashed into a pew below, sending splinters flying. My hands shook as I reached out with the feather, trying to keep my balance as the phoenix wheeled in the confined space of the chapel.

“Duck!” Damon’s warning came as Rage’s darkness whipped past my head. The

phoenix banked sharply, and I nearly lost my grip on the feather. Below, Justice caught a falling piece of timber before it could crush Lisa and Zara, who were still guiding the crown into position.

“The phoenix grass!” I shouted to Brody as I finally pressed the feather against Greed’s grasping hands. Light exploded from the contact, momentarily blinding me. “Get it to Gluttony!”

Brody rolled beneath another blast of Maci’s fire, the phoenix grass clutched to his chest. The sculpture of Gluttony leered down from near the altar, its grotesque mouth open in eternal hunger.

“Little help here?” Brody called, trapped between the advancing demons and his target.

“I got you, Captain.” Damon launched off a broken pew, his blade slicing through Rage’s shadows, creating an opening. Brody threw the grass like a grenade, and Damon’s blade knocked it the final few feet into Gluttony’s maw. More light flared, and the chapel’s temperature dropped several degrees.

“Three more!” Justice shouted over the chaos. “Scales for Lust, hourglass for Sloth, and?—”

Maci’s tail smashed through a column, and part of the ceiling began to cave.

“The scales!” Justice shouted as chunks of ceiling rained down. “It has to reach Lust!” The sculpture writhed high on its pillar, half-hidden by shadows and decades of dust.

“Little occupied here!” Damon called back, blade flashing as he kept Rage’s darkness from engulfing Brody, who was still trying to recover from his throw.

The phoenix's wings swept past me as she dodged another of Maci's attacks. The downdraft nearly knocked Lisa and Zara off their feet. They stumbled, but the crown finally settled into Envy's greedy hands, sending another burst of light through the chapel.

I clutched the harp tighter, knowing it needed to reach Wrath, but Lust's sculpture seemed to mock us from its perch. Time was running out. I heard the ancient stones groaning above us.

"Together!" Brody's voice cut through the chaos. He snatched the Scales of Balance and braced one foot against a half-destroyed pew. "Justice, give me a boost!"

Justice blurred across the chapel, hands locking together to form a step as Maci's tail swung through where he'd been standing. Brody leaped, his soldier's precision making the impossible look easy. Justice's vampire strength launched him high enough to slam the scales into Lust's waiting grasp.

This time, the burst of light was blue-white, pure as a mountain stream. Rage howled as it touched his shadows, making them recoil.

"Two more," I gasped, watching Justice catch Brody before he could fall into the debris below. "But Sloth's in the floor, and Wrath?—"

Maci's fire cut off my words, turning the air to steam.

"The hourglass!" I shouted over Maci's roar. "It needs to touch Sloth's carving, but we're all walking on it!"

The floor beneath us was a maze of broken wood and stone, Sloth's lazy figure barely visible through the debris. Rage's darkness swirled around our feet like black water rising, trying to keep us from reaching it.

“Everyone up!” Brody commanded. “Get off the floor, now!”

Lisa and Zara scrambled onto the remaining pews. Justice snatched Damon out of the way of Maci’s tail and deposited him on a stone ledge. The phoenix wheeled overhead, her wings stirring the air like a hurricane.

“Sawyer,” Justice called, his gaze meeting mine. “Together!”

I understood immediately. Still clutching the harp and hourglass, I ran toward him as Maci’s fire chased my steps. Justice’s hands caught my waist, then I was airborne, spinning above the chaos. For one heart-stopping moment, I hung suspended over the chapel floor.

I threw the hourglass.

It tumbled end over end, catching the light from the artifacts we’d already placed. Rage’s darkness surged up to intercept it.

“Oh no, you don’t!” Damon’s blade flashed, cutting through the shadows at the perfect moment. The hourglass slipped through, striking Sloth’s carved figure dead center.

Light exploded from the floor like a geyser, forcing Rage’s darkness back. But we weren’t done. Wrath’s sculpture still waited in its alcove, and the harp in my hands hummed with anticipation.

And now Maci was between us and our final target.

Justice caught me as I fell, but Maci’s massive form blocked our path to Wrath. Her scales blazed like fresh-forged metal, her wings spanning nearly the width of the chapel. Behind her, Rage’s darkness gathered like a storm cloud, knowing we had

only one artifact left to place.

“The harp,” I gasped, feeling it pulse against my chest like a second heartbeat. “We have to reach Wrath’s sculpture!”

“Through that?” Damon gestured at the wall of dragon and demon blocking our way. “Great. Just another Tuesday for us, right?”

Six artifacts glowed now, their light creating a web of power through the chapel. But without the seventh, without the harp reaching Wrath, it wouldn’t be enough.

Maci’s tail smashed another pew into splinters. The impact sent Justice and me rolling in opposite directions. The harp’s strings hummed with tension, almost singing with the need to complete the circle.

“We need a distraction,” Brody shouted. “Something big enough to?—”

The phoenix launched from her perch directly at Maci. Fire met fire in an explosion of gold and crimson, two ancient powers colliding in the sacred space.

“Now!” Justice screamed. “While they’re fighting!” He appeared at my side as pieces of the ceiling rained down. “Sawyer, I can get you there, but?—”

“We’ll only have one shot,” I finished. The harp thrummed in agreement, its song rising above the chaos.

“Incoming!” Damon’s warning came as Rage’s darkness surged toward us like a tidal wave of shadow.

“Go!” Brody’s shield spun through the air, cutting a path through the darkness. “We’ll cover you!”

Lisa and Zara's voices rose in unison, their spell creating a brief corridor of clear air. Justice's arms wrapped around me, then we were moving with vampire speed, the world blurring around us.

The wall rushed toward us. Justice leaped, using broken pillars as stepping stones, carrying us higher with each bound. Rage's shadows clawed at our heels while Maci's fire chased us up the wall. The Wrath sculpture waited in its alcove, its carved face twisted in eternal rage.

We were almost there when Maci's wing clipped Justice's shoulder. We spun in the air, and I felt his grip loosen. No time to think, no time to fear. I pushed off from his chest, launching myself toward the sculpture as Justice fell away. His golden healing marks flashed in the chaos.

The harp sang in my hands as I reached for Wrath, my fingers stretching toward the carved face that had waited centuries for this moment. The other six artifacts pulsed with light below, so close to completing their purpose. Rage's darkness swirled around me, Maci's fire burned above, and the space between me and the sculpture seemed to stretch like an eternity.

If I could only reach it...

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

As my fingers brushed Wrath's cold stone face, the harp's song reached a crescendo that shook the foundations of Rosslyn Chapel. For one heartbeat, time seemed to freeze. Justice falling below me, Rage's darkness swirling around us, Maci's massive form wheeling overhead.

Then, everything exploded into light.

The seven artifacts awakened at once, their power connecting like lightning strikes. Crown to mirror to feather to grass to scales to hourglass to harp—which remained in my hands, its activation completed with a touch—a perfect star of holy fire that turned night to day. Ancient stone seemed to drink in the light as centuries of dormant power surged to life.

That was when I saw it. The Apprentice Pillar began to glow, its carved dragons writhing as if coming to life. The spiraling vines that wrapped the column moved, their stone texture turning fluid like living plants.

“No!” Maci's voice held real fear for the first time. “No, not the pillar! Not?—”

“Well, that's definitely gonna mess with the chapel's tour guide script,” Damon quipped, trying to mask his unease with humor, though I heard the slight shake in his voice. “‘And here, folks, is where we turned a psycho dragon into a lawn ornament.’ Man, I need a drink after this.”

The transformation started at her tail. Where the pillar's light touched her, scales

crystallized into stone, the change creeping up her body like frost claiming a window. My stomach lurched at the sight. This was justice, but watching any creature's terror as they were turned to stone made me feel sick. Even after everything she'd done, everything she'd tried to do to Justice...

"Stand fast." Brody's voice cut through my wavering resolve. I drew from his presence the way I had through countless battles. His next words reminded me why I trusted him to lead us when I couldn't. "What we're witnessing isn't merely an ending. It's proof that evil, no matter how powerful, can be overcome when we stand together. This is why we fight."

"Yeah, yeah. Skip the inspirational speech, Captain," Damon muttered. "Just tell me we're not gonna end up as stone decorations, too. Because I gotta say, eternal rest as a garden statue? Not really my style."

Justice's hand found mine in the chaos as Maci's wings petrified mid-beat. I squeezed his fingers, grateful for the anchor, as I watched the stone crawl across her wing tissue. I'd just freed him from one kind of prison. Watching another being, even one as evil as Maci, become eternally trapped felt like a cruel echo.

Lisa and Zara clutched each other's hands, paling as they watched their ancient enemy's imprisonment. Magic crackled at their fingertips, responding to the pillar's power.

"Focus, team," Brody commanded. "We've won this battle, but the war isn't over."

The stone crawled across Maci's membrane-thin wing tissue, creating intricate patterns that matched the pillar's ancient design. Her struggles became jerky, desperate, as more of her body turned rigid and gray.

As the pillar's power crawled higher up Maci's form, I started shaking. Not from fear

but from the sheer weight of what we were witnessing. What I had set in motion.

“Man, this is like some twisted museum installation,” Damon commented. “Hey, you okay there, sis?”

I wasn’t. Not really. The sound of stone claiming flesh made my teeth ache, and watching Maci’s desperate struggles become jerkier, more rigid—it was like watching someone drown in slow motion. Even after everything she’d done, trying to take Justice, trying to kill us all, this felt final. Permanent in a way that even death wasn’t.

“Remember why we’re here,” Brody insisted. “Remember what she would have done to the world, to all of us.”

“I remember,” I whispered as the stone reached Maci’s neck. Justice’s fingers intertwined with mine, and I drew strength from him, from all of them. My team. My family. The people I’d fought beside, bled beside, would die to protect.

The final moment approached, and Maci’s eyes found mine. Still alive, still terrified. In that last second, before the stone claimed her completely, I saw something I never expected. Understanding. As if she finally recognized what she’d brought upon herself.

“It’s done,” Lisa whispered. “She’s really...”

“Part of the chapel,” Zara finished, crossing herself despite not being religious.

Where Maci had been a creature of flame and fury, she was now another mystery for future visitors to wonder about, another secret carved into Rosslyn’s stones. The weight of what we’d done, what I’d done, wasn’t an easy pill to swallow. Maci had been evil, but sometimes killing evil leaves a bad taste in your mouth.

Rage's darkness swirled around us, then around the pillar. He howled in outrage as he brushed over Maci's still form, the sound carrying all the fury of hell itself. His shadows writhed and twisted, becoming more solid, more threatening. We'd taken something from him. His dragon, his weapon. Now, we'd have to face his wrath.

The darkness took shape, pulling into something almost human but wrong. Where features should have been was only void, deeper than night. The temperature in the chapel plummeted, our breath coming out in clouds despite the lingering heat from Maci's final flames.

"Well, that's not terrifying at all," Damon muttered, shifting his grip on his blade. "Anyone got a nightlight handy?"

"Stay together," Brody ordered, his shield ready. "Whatever he's become?—"

"You think you've won?" Rage's voice shook the ancient stones, making dust rain down from the vaulted ceiling. "You think trapping Maci ends this?"

His darkness surged forward like a tidal wave. I clutched the harp tighter. Around us, the other artifacts blazed bright as if responding to the threat.

"Stay close," Brody shouted, moving to form a defensive line. "The artifacts are connected now. Use them together!"

Justice tensed beside me, his golden healing marks flaring. I felt him flinch as Rage's darkness brushed too close, the memory of possession still too fresh, too raw. My heart clenched. I wouldn't let that monster touch him again.

"Hey, ugly!" Damon called, always drawing fire away from me. "You're not looking so hot without your pet dragon. What's wrong? Having a bad day?"

Rage's form twisted toward my brother, and for a heartbeat, I saw what looked like a smile in that void. Something that made my blood run cold.

“Bad day ?” The chapel trembled with his laughter. “I'll show you a bad day!”

The darkness rushed at us from all sides.

“Circle up!” Brody shouted.

Lisa and Zara grabbed the crown and the hourglass, then began to chant, their voices weaving together as they had in countless battles. The crown pulsed in sync with the hourglass, creating a rhythm like a heartbeat.

“Fools,” Rage's voice boomed through the chapel. “You cannot banish me. I am darkness itself.”

His shadows struck like serpents, but where they touched the light of our artifacts, they hissed and recoiled. The harp thrummed in my hands, its notes rising without being played. The artifacts glowed brighter, creating that seven-pointed star again.

“Sawyer, look!” Justice pointed to where the beams of light intersected. “The pattern—it's the same as the pillar's spirals!”

“Oh, hell no,” Damon growled, slicing through another shadow tendril. “You are not pulling that stone trick on us, you smoke-show reject.”

But I understood suddenly. The pillar hadn't been meant only for Maci. The artifacts, the seven sins, the spiral pattern, it was all connected. All part of an ancient trap.

Rage must have realized it, too. His darkness surged back, trying to escape the web of light we'd created. “No. I am not some weak dragon to be caged in stone!”

“The pillar needs all seven artifacts,” Lisa called, understanding dawning in her eyes. “Like with the sins, they have to work together!”

The harp’s song grew stronger in my hands, almost pulling me toward the other blazing artifacts as everyone grabbed one. Justice’s mirror cut through shadows, Damon steadied the phoenix feather, Brody held the scales like a weapon. The crown and hourglass pulsed between Lisa and Zara while the phoenix grass in Justice’s other hand glowed with internal fire.

“ I will not be imprisoned! ” Rage’s form writhed between solid and shadow, his darkness trying to slip through the gaps in our circle. “ I will tear you all apart! ”

“Not this time,” I called, my voice stronger than my quivering insides. The memory of what he’d done to Justice, how he’d twisted him, made my grip tighten on the harp. “You’re done hurting people we love.”

“Everyone move toward the pillar,” Brody ordered, his calm authority cutting through the chaos. “Keep the circle tight!”

“Right, because getting closer to the creepy stone-making pillar is exactly what I wanted to do today,” Damon muttered, but he moved in perfect sync with us, years of fighting together making us one unit.

We approached the pillar where Maci’s stone form coiled. Each step made the artifacts’ light grow stronger, their power connecting like pieces of a puzzle we were supposed to solve all along.

Rage’s darkness boiled around us, desperate now. “ You cannot hold me. I am eternal. I am ? — ”

“You are really starting to piss me off,” I cut in, channeling some of Damon’s snark.

The harp's song reached a fever pitch as we closed in on the pillar.

The seven artifacts sang in harmony, their light creating a cage of pure power around Rage's writhing darkness that grew tighter, brighter, until the chapel itself pulsed with ancient magic.

"NO!" Rage's form thrashed wildly, his darkness trying to seep through any crack, any shadow. "I possessed your mate. I know your fears, your weaknesses ? — "

"Yeah, about that," Justice's voice rang with quiet fury. "Bad move." He raised the mirror higher, its light cutting through Rage's attempts to reform.

The pillar's dragons moved again, their stone eyes tracking our progress. Maci's frozen form seemed to watch us, her eternal prison waiting to claim another.

"Almost there," Brody called. "Hold the line!"

"Hold the line?" Damon scoffed, but his hands were rock-steady on the phoenix feather. "How about 'hurry the hell up before shadow-boy here loses his mind?'"

Rage's darkness contracted suddenly, then exploded outward with devastating force. The blast knocked us all back a step, but our circle held. The artifacts' light caught his darkness like a net, holding him fast.

"You want eternal?" I felt the words rise from somewhere deep inside, powered by fury at what he'd done to Justice, to all of us. "Then be eternal in stone."

The harp's song crescendoed, and the other artifacts responded in kind. Light erupted from all seven points, connecting in a perfect star pattern that centered on the pillar. Rage's scream of denial shook the chapel foundations.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

His darkness began to crystallize, as Maci's scales had. But where she had steadily turned to stone, Rage's transformation was different. His shadows tried to split apart, to escape, but each tendril of darkness caught in our light turned solid, gray, eternal.

“This cannot be!” His voice fragmented, echoing off stone walls. “I am Rage! I am darkness. I am ? —”

“You are done,” I retorted, pouring every ounce of determination into the harp's song. The pillar's dragons writhed faster, making space beside Maci's frozen form.

“Together!” Brody shouted as Rage made one last desperate attempt to break free.

“Not so tough without your dragon, are you?” Damon's blade flashed through what remained of Rage's fluid form, herding him closer to the pillar.

Justice's gaze met mine across the circle of light. At that moment, I saw everything he couldn't say. His gratitude, his love, his relief at being free of this monster's influence.

Rage's form spiraled inward, drawn into the pillar's eternal dance. His darkness turned to stone in waves, like ink freezing in mid-splash. His final scream cut off as the transformation reached what passed for his head, leaving only those void-black eyes burning with helpless fury before they, too, became nothing but stone.

The chapel fell silent except for our ragged breathing. Where Rage's darkness had

boiled and writhed moments before was only stone, a twisted, beautiful spiral of shadows caught mid-flight, forever entwined with Maci's dragon form around the Apprentice Pillar.

My legs gave out, and Justice caught me before I hit the floor. The harp slipped from my trembling fingers, its song finally quiet. Looking up into his brown eyes—his own eyes, not Rage's crimson gaze—made everything we'd done worth it.

"He's really gone," Justice whispered. The golden healing marks under his skin pulsed like a settling heartbeat as his arms tightened around me. "I can't feel him anymore. That darkness he left inside me..."

"Is gone," I finished, reaching up to trace one of the fading marks on his cheek. My hand shook, the aftermath of fear and adrenaline making me unsteady. We'd come so close to losing each other, to losing everything.

"If you two start making out again, I'm leaving," Damon announced, but his voice lacked its usual bite. Even he looked drained, leaning against a pew as he stared at our handiwork on the pillar.

I couldn't stop touching Justice, reassuring myself that he was here, he was whole, he was himself again.

"We did it," I murmured against his chest. "We really did it."

The world seemed to shift then, like pieces of a puzzle clicking into place. Maybe it was the aftermath of using all seven artifacts, or maybe it was time, but suddenly, memories flooded back. Memories of my father, the ones that had been locked away for so long.

His smile. His laugh. Teaching me to hunt. The way he'd look at Mom like she hung

the moon. The last time I saw him...

My knees buckled again, and this time, Justice lowered us both to the floor.

“Sawyer?” His voice was thick with concern.

“I remember,” I whispered, tears blurring my vision. “Dad... I remember everything.”

“What?” Damon was there instantly, all pretense of casualness gone. My brother knelt beside us, hope and fear warring on his face. “Sawyer, what do you remember?”

Lisa and Zara moved closer, their faces soft with understanding. Brody stood guard nearby, ever the protector, but his eyes held compassion.

“It’s like a door opened,” I managed, clinging to Justice with one hand while reaching for Damon with the other. “All this time. How could I have forgotten?”

The memories crashed over me like waves. Dad cleaning weapons at the kitchen table, teaching us about silver bullets and holy water. His voice, steady and sure. “Always check your corners, kids. The monster you don’t see is the one that gets you.”

“The training course,” I choked out, looking at Damon. His face blurred through my tears. “Behind the house, through the woods. He’d set up those targets...”

“And make us run it blind,” Damon finished roughly. “Said we had to learn to trust our instincts.” He squeezed my hand harder. “You remember that?”

More memories flooded in. Dad showing us how to track creatures through the forest, teaching us to recognize signs most people would miss. The way he’d quiz us on lore

while cleaning guns, making a game of it. His serious face when he taught us about demons, how they were different, deadlier.

“The salt lines,” I whispered. “Every night, he’d make us practice laying them. Said speed could mean survival.”

“‘A hunter’s got three jobs,’” Damon quoted. “‘Protect the innocent, kill the monsters, and come home alive. In that order.’”

Justice held me steady as I remembered the weapons training, the endless drills, the way Dad would ruffle our hair when we got something right. But he wasn’t only teaching us to kill. He was teaching us to survive, to protect others. To be the kind of hunters who made a difference.

“He was preparing us,” I realized, looking around at my team, at the family we’d built. “All along, he was preparing us for this. Dad would have loved you guys,” I blurted. “He would have...” I couldn’t finish, but Damon could.

“Given Justice the shovel talk of the century?” He tried to smirk, but his eyes were suspiciously bright. “Called Brody ‘son’ within five minutes of meeting him? Adopted Lisa and Zara as bonus daughters?”

Justice grinned. “I don’t know about that. Vampires aren’t your dad’s favorite supernatural. I’m sure I’ll always be a thorn in his side.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged. “But you’re my mate, so he’ll just have to get used to it.”

A distant church bell tolling snapped us back to reality. The Apprentice Pillar stood silent, its new prisoners forever part of its mystery. Where chaos had reigned minutes before, now only peace and the lingering warmth of the artifacts’ power remained.

“The demons,” Justice stated suddenly, his arms tightening around me. “When we bound Rage, when we used all seven artifacts against the sins...”

“They would have been pulled back to hell,” Lisa finished, understanding dawning in her eyes. “The whole army, with no leader, no anchor here.”

“So, McDuff Manor is safe?” I asked, hope rising in my chest. After the possession, the battle, the memories. Could it really be over?

“One way to find out.” Damon was already pulling out his phone. “Think we got reception in here, or do we need to step outside this literal prison of evil?”

Lisa shook her head. “Without the hourglass, she can’t transport us.”

I thought of the mirror, and sadness rushed over me at the idea of not hearing my mom’s voice again. “So, the artifacts are lost to us?”

Zara nodded. “I believe so.”

Damon headed toward the double doors. “Then let’s leave this cage. I need some fresh air.”

Justice and I intertwined our fingers and followed him outside, the grip of his hand comforting me in the midst of chaos. The once-pristine grounds were a mess, with torn grass and fractured stones strewn about as if a violent storm had swept through. Statues lay shattered on the ground, their proud forms reduced to rubble.

Lisa and Zara conjured a powerful spell that enveloped the area, healing the damaged grounds and restoring them to their former glory. The broken stone structures rose back up, and the grass grew thicker and greener than before. It was as if the battle had never happened, but I would always remember it.

Brody put his cell phone away. "I spoke with Sean. He's coming to pick us up."

I looked at him. "What about Grady and Scott? Are they all right?"

He gave me a reassuring smile. "They're back to themselves. Sloth's power broke the second we locked those demons away. Now, let's get ready for Sean. He'll be here soon."

One by one, we climbed over the wall. Rosslyn Chapel would be the same except for the added dragon in the Apprentice's Pillar. I almost felt sorry for Maci. Her lust for revenge had been her downfall, and now she was trapped forever. The ironic thing about the pillar was the dragons were supposed to be keeping the demons from escaping hell. She was caught in a purgatory.

Exhaustion washed over me, and I longed for the comfort of my own bed. I leaned into Justice's strong shoulder, seeking support in his embrace. He gazed down at me with concern etched on his face. "Are you all right?" he asked softly.

The weight of the past year bore down on me, and I couldn't hold back my tears any longer. "I'm tired," I admitted with a shaky voice. "I think it's time to go home." As much as I loved Scotland, a sense of homesickness tugged at my heartstrings.

"Yeah, 'cause nothing says good times like almost getting killed. Let's hit the road already," Damon muttered with a smirk.

Justice's fingers curled under my chin, lifting my gaze to meet his intense stare. "I can grant you that wish," he murmured before closing the distance between us. His lips were soft and warm against mine, and I couldn't help but lean into him, losing myself in the sensation of his touch. All thoughts faded away, leaving only him and me in this moment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A WEEK LATER

My bags were packed, and it was time to return to Colorado. I missed the mountains and my home. Scotland would always hold a place in my heart, but I was weary and wanted to be bored for a while.

No hunting.

No travels.

No adventures.

I stood on the worn wooden porch, watching the imposing silhouette of Edinburgh Castle that loomed in the distance. The ancient stones held centuries of history and secrets within their walls. As I lost myself in the grandeur of the castle, Justice's familiar scent enveloped me. He appeared by my side, his arm encircling my waist and pulling me close to his broad chest.

"Are you going to miss this place?" he asked.

I nodded, but my heart was already longing for home. "I will, but I'm ready to go back. I want to be ordinary for a while."

A smile tugged at his lips as he turned me to face him. His dark eyes held love and amusement. "You'll never be ordinary," he insisted, brushing a stray strand of hair

behind my ear. “You’re special, and you have my heart.”

My heart swelled with warmth at his words, reminding me again why I loved this man with every fiber of my being.

Damon sauntered out onto the porch, his easy grin belying the seriousness of the conversation we were about to have. “Am I interrupting something?” he asked, his deep voice tinged with amusement.

I laughed, knowing full well he had orchestrated this “chance” encounter. “You love these little interruptions, don’t you?”

“Guilty as charged.” He shrugged. “But in this case, it’s good news. I just got off the phone with Zara, and she’s one happy camper. After we sent Maci and her posse a one-way ticket to hell, her sister isn’t a lifeless statue anymore. None of the people trapped in that cursed forest are.”

I couldn’t help but smile at the thought of those innocent lives freed from their nightmare. “That’s fantastic.”

Damon’s expression grew serious again. “And there’s more. Garrick reached out to Sean, and his kingdom is no longer crawling with the undead. His men are back to their normal selves.”

A wave of relief crashed over me like a cool ocean spray. Everything that Maci had destroyed was finally being healed and restored.

Then, Damon’s voice broke through my thoughts, and his words caught me off guard. Tears glistened in his eyes as he spoke. “I also have the best news of all,” he stated. “Dad’s no longer in a coma. He’s meeting us at the airport. He wants to know all the details of what happened.”

Justice groaned. “Great, just what I need. A big, happy reunion.”

I tried to inject some humor into the tense moment. “Hey, you said it yourself. I’m not boring.”

Damon gave him a sharp glare. “Who said you were boring?”

“I did,” I admitted with a wry smile. “Or at least, I wish I could be boring sometimes. Have a normal life for once.”

“You mean give up hunting?” Damon asked.

I sighed. “I don’t know, Damon. But I could use a vacation.” I drew my finger along Justice’s chest. “Maybe I need some downtime.”

Justice’s hand clasped mine, and he tenderly kissed my finger. My heart skipped a beat, wondering what he had in store.

“Maybe have a wedding?” His eyes sparkled as he reached into his back pocket and produced a small black box. He knelt on one knee. “Sawyer Grant, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

My breath caught in my throat as tears pooled in my eyes. I glanced at Damon, my best friend and confidant, who stood nearby with a smile. He chuckled and shook his head. “Yeah, he already asked me if he could have your hand. What can I say? Jaws has grown on me.”

I couldn’t hold back my emotions any longer. Tears streamed down my cheeks. At that moment, all my doubts and fears melted away. My heart swelled with love for this man who had captured it long ago. And as I looked into his loving eyes, I knew without a doubt I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him.

My fingers trembled as Justice delicately slid the ring onto my hand, and I cried harder.

His warm embrace enveloped me, offering comfort and support. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m just so happy,” I managed to choke out between sobs.

As if on cue, the door swung open, and my team emerged from the room, a wave of familiar faces rushing toward me. Garrick’s broad smile lit up his face as he bounded toward us, followed closely by Maggie, Grady, Brody, Scott, Lisa, and Zara. Their joyful expressions mirrored my own as they surrounded us in a tight-knit circle of love and celebration. It was a moment I would never forget, filled with overwhelming emotions and an unbreakable bond between friends.

Garrick’s eyes twinkled. He leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to my cheek. “Congratulations, beautiful,” he whispered.

I furrowed my brow in confusion. “I thought you were still in the Unseelie realm.”

Damon couldn’t contain his mischievous grin. “Didn’t you ever wonder how Garrick told Sean about his men? It’s not like Sean has a crystal ball.”

My gaze darted between their smiling faces. “So, everyone knew about Justice’s proposal?”

Damon turned to me with a smirk. “Oh, please. You think we’d let some punk waltz in and sweep you off your feet? Justice practically had to grovel. We ran him through every test in the book before he even thought about popping the question.” He playfully nudged my side. “Even Dad knows.”

“Wait, what? And he said yes?” I was surprised at the idea of my father agreeing to

anything without a fight.

“Oh, absolutely.” Damon chuckled and rolled his eyes. “Tim probably had to smack him around a few times to make it stick. Guy’s got a skull thicker than a brick wall. But hey, guess he finally saw the light.”

Tim Shoneberg was the head of the hunter’s guild and had been taking care of Dad ever since he fell into a coma.

“I imagine that was no easy task,” I remarked with a smile.

Justice chimed in with a sheepish grin. “It took some convincing, but he finally agreed this morning.”

As Sean opened the ornate screen door, a gentle breeze carried the scent of freshly cut grass and blooming flowers. “Please come in,” he beckoned with a warm smile. “We have a surprise for the lovely couple.”

I followed him inside, my heart racing with anticipation.

As we entered the grand manor, I couldn’t help but pause in awe. The opulent decor and intricate details took my breath away. Then, I noticed something even more surprising. My father stood in the foyer, surrounded by all our closest friends and family.

As I gazed at him, memories flooded me. Him teaching me how to shoot a bow and arrow, showing me how to wield a sword, guiding me through the woods on hunting trips. He had been there during the darkest moments after losing Mom.

I approached him, noticing the warm glint in his deep brown eyes and the faint smile lines etched around them. His formerly jet-black hair was now peppered with silver strands, but he still carried himself with the same bold confidence. He had flown all

the way to Scotland simply to see me, and his gruff voice brought back a flood of memories. “Sawyer,” he greeted, holding out his arms.

I rushed into his embrace as tears of joy and nostalgia streamed down my face. All my forgotten memories came rushing back in an instant, both the good and the bad.

My father’s grip tightened around my shoulders as he whispered in my ear, “You would have to get engaged to the enemy.”

I stepped back, breaking from his embrace. “Dad,” I muttered with mingled frustration and love.

“I only want you to be happy,” he replied. “I’ve told your fiancé that if he ever hurts you, I’ll personally pin his hide to my wall.”

Tim chuckled as he came up behind us. “Yeah, he’s a stubborn cuss, but don’t worry. I knocked some sense into him.” He stretched out his arms and gave a small, proud smile. “Hell, I’m happy for you, kid.”

I turned slowly toward Justice, my heart racing with disbelief. “Did you plan all this?” I whispered.

His eyes met mine, filled with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine. He lifted my chin gently with his hand. “I would do anything to make you happy,” he murmured. “You’re more than my love. You’re my life.”

My heart swelled at his words, knowing the depth of emotion behind them.

“You saved me more than once,” he continued, his voice steady and sincere. “No one has ever done that before. You’re mine,” he declared, his grip on my chin tightening ever so slightly. “And you will always be.”

At that moment, I knew our love was unbreakable. Nothing could ever come between us.