



Spellbound (Mages and Mates #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Roderick Hollen met his mate forty years ago.

As one half of the fifth guardian pair, Rod knows their destiny is tied to the Great Ward.

If it failed before the new one was created, he and his mate will die creating the replacement.

There's just one problem, Ailpein, the phoenix king, has forbidden any phoenix from mating with a mage, and used his powerful magic to enforce his will.

No mate bond means no new Great Ward.

Cinaed FionnLaoch burns with frustration at his grandfathers refusal to lift the mating prohibition.

He and Rod have honored his edict for forty years, but now the consequences reach far beyond them.

The Earths increasingly urgent warnings tell him the Ward is failing, but he's powerless to fix it unless his grandfather relents.

But when King Ailpein vanishes without a trace, he takes with him any hope of lifting the spell.

James Blackstone has spent centuries plotting his revenge against the magical world that destroyed his demon-summoning ancestors.

He's abducted King Ailpein and plans to use the phoenix king's life force to destroy the barrier separating Hell and Earth.

Killing Ailpein will also prevent the new guardians from creating a new Great Ward.

Rod and Cinaed gather the other guardians and race to save Ailpein.

But even if they find him, it might already be too late.

Their love has survived four decades of separation, but if they don't

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Chapter One

Roderick Hollen:

The wave of wrongness hit me like a physical blow, sending the ancient book in my hands crashing to the floor. The room spun violently as I gripped the edge of the heavy oak table.

Clutching my mage stone to ground my thoughts, I discovered it was the source of my anxiety. No, the assault came from Cinaed, funneled through my gem. It was the medium his emotions had used to reach me.

He was afraid. Very afraid.

I slammed another useless book shut and added it to the towering pile of discards on my table.

Four days of research, and I had nothing to show other than eye strain, frustration, and clothes that smelled like musty, old tomes.

Of the three, my frustration was the only thing I could control, and I was doing a poor job of managing my emotions.

I'd been warned the chances of finding anything useful were small.

The ardril hadn't said it would be futile, but as the leading elf scholar on earth magic, he'd told me he'd never seen a reference to magic that could dissolve the spell the

phoenix king had cast. He'd nevertheless humored my request to search his library.

I think he understood my need to do something to keep the despair away.

Ailpein's spell had been based in earth magic, but it also required an intimate knowledge of phoenix physiology.

Remarkably little had been written about phoenix magic in any library I'd contacted.

Or not so remarkably. Ailpein had been the king since long before the Great Ward was created.

He'd no doubt purged the world's libraries of anything he'd found.

My hands shook as I focused on Cinaed's image in my mind and pushed my consciousness out through my stone. Ailpein might have barred us from mating, but his magic wasn't strong enough to stop me from communicating with my Cinaed. Whispering his name, I waited.

The moment he joined the link, the anguish in my soul eased a fraction. I could see his beautiful face in my thoughts, his copper hair shining in the early Scottish morning. The usual fire in his eyes, however, had dimmed.

"Roderick." The sadness rolling off him might have broken my heart if it hadn't shattered already. "What's wrong?"

Linked through my stone, I couldn't hide my surprise. "I felt your fear. It connected to my gem. What happened?"

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to send those emotions through our link."

I studied his features, drinking in the sight of him as though he'd been standing next to me. He wasn't well. Until we could bond, he wouldn't regain the joyful song that had been in his heart when we met. "Never apologize for seeking me out when you need me," I said. "It'll never be a burden."

"I know, but I hate being weak." His voice felt like tears on my cheek. "I can't hide my sadness as well as you."

The difference between us was he'd lost a part of himself. I hadn't. Before we'd met, he'd been vibrant and full of joy. My life had been empty, and there was a longing for something I couldn't name.

"You can't compare us, my love. Our separation has dimmed your fire," I said. "You were meant to soar, but fate has held you down. It's not your fault."

If my death would restore his joy, I'd have given my life decades ago. The loss of his mate, however, would only rob him of the one thing that kept him going.

Hope.

"Roderick," he said in the soft voice he used when he tried to cheer me up. "You were meant to fly just as high— only you knew it wasn't a solo flight. I didn't know I was missing a part of me until I met you."

We'd had this conversation too many times. He wasn't wrong, but I couldn't lose the tragic brooding until he and I were one. "What made you so afraid?"

"There's a feeling of wrongness in the magic around the castle. Like the stones are screaming a warning and I can't understand what they're trying to tell me. I don't know if anyone else feels it, but I can't keep it out of my soul."

Something the Western Guardian said pushed its way to the forefront of my thoughts. I dared not hope Darius was right, but it felt too coincidental. “Your grandfather’s spell goes against what the Earth has decided. Even he can’t hold back the full force of the Earth’s magic.”

Cinaed didn’t reply immediately. He was smart enough to grasp the implications. “Is my grandfather in danger?”

I doubted the Earth would try to kill Ailpein, but that didn’t mean he was safe. “If he continues to resist, I don’t think it is good for his health.”

“I don’t think that’s what I felt,” he said. “It was ominous. Cautioning us of an approaching danger.”

Cinaed was more sensitive to the differences in earth magic, but I wondered if he was ignoring the obvious. “Are you sure it’s not connected? Your grandfather’s fate might be quite dire if he doesn’t yield.”

“I agree, but this is different,” Cinaed said with conviction. “There isn’t any anger in the energy. It’s a warning.”

“Are you safe?” I knew he was capable of defending himself—and what could harm a phoenix—but I still worried.

“I’m fine. Just unsettled.” Our connection wavered for a moment before it stabilized. “Father’s calling for me. I have to go.”

I wanted to hold onto this moment, but given his grandfather’s position, Cinaed couldn’t stay. “Be careful.”

His presence faded, and I missed him the moment I was alone again. If Cinaed was

right about danger to his flock, I needed to find a way to keep them safe.

Clearing my mind, I reached out to the one person I knew could help me.

“Bart, I need to see you. It’s important.”

Bart’s office at Utrecht was nothing like anyone would expect from the youngest professor of defensive magic in Utrecht’s centuries-long history.

Most of his furniture consisted of pieces he’d rescued from Hollen Hall, which meant they were probably older than me.

The décor was tasteful, but felt like the office of an ancient academic, not a thirty-year-old archmage.

Bart was an old soul, but he was a good being. He’d made time for me on a moment’s notice. He smiled and rose from his seat. “Rod!” He swept me into a hug. “I was surprised to get your message.”

Given the minimal contact I’d had with him and the younger generation over the last four decades, his reaction was understandable. “I wouldn’t have bothered you if it wasn’t something that might involve the Great Ward. And some of it is personal.”

“You don’t have to explain. I’m always available if you need me.” He ushered me to one of the matching chairs in front of his desk. It brought me back to my university days, sitting in front of one of my professors.

I relayed my conversation with Cinaed and explained my concerns and suspicions. “I’m still worried this could be directed at Ailpein,” I said. “Cinaed, however, is convinced it has nothing to do with his grandfather’s defiance.”

Bart kept silent for a few seconds and then heaved in a deep breath. “Without experiencing the feeling for myself, I can’t be sure what it means. Based on what you’ve shared, I tend to agree with Cinaed. It’s unlikely what he’s feeling is connected to Ailpein’s spell.”

I wanted them both to be wrong, but they were probably right. “Can you find out what it means?”

The look of disapproval on his face answered my question. “It doesn’t work that way. My visions don’t come on demand. Plus, I’ve only seen things for people I know. Cinaed is a stranger to me.”

I slumped in my chair. Of course I knew this, but that didn’t stop the disappointment. “What about when you meet him? Could that trigger a vision?”

“Rod,” he said carefully. “No one knows how prophetic visions work. The Ocular Society has studied this for centuries and they don’t have an explanation. Plus, we don’t know if the source of the dread is centered on Cinaed.”

Hearing how sorry he sounded for not being able to help, I regretted coming to see him. “I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“Hang on,” he said before I could get up. “I might be able to determine the source of whatever is affecting Cinaed if it happens when we’re there. No promises, but if the Earth is sending a warning, we might be able to figure out what it’s trying to tell us.”

Despite all the qualifications Bart included in his statement, all I heard was he might be able to determine the source. “What do you need to find out?”

“Try not to get your hopes up, Rod,” he said. “The things we don’t know outnumber what we do. Most of these warnings are incredibly hard to understand.”

I realized the chance of success was small, but a slim hope was better than none. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Have you heard when we leave?”

That was another frustration. Diplomacy moved at a snail’s pace, which was why I spent so much time searching the libraries for answers. “No. Dad’s still in negotiations with King Ailpein.”

“What’s there to negotiate?” Bart asked. “We just want to talk to him.”

Like me, Bart didn’t make things complicated. He didn’t engage in subtleties and half-true answers. “Ailpein realizes what we want and doesn’t want to listen. But he wants something from Dad, so they are discussing what each side will agree to give up.”

“So stupid.” Bart’s lips curled down slightly. Rising, he selected a book from his desk. “The king is letting his emotions cloud his judgment. We sent him the proof weeks ago, but facts don’t matter to him if they conflict with what he believes.”

Bart’s description matched Cinaed’s opinion of his grandfather. “Then this trip is a waste of time.”

“Not at all.” He thumbed through the book. “I need to get closer to Ailpein so I can find his magic signature. If I have that, I might be able to help you break his spell.”

Maybe I had Bart wrong. “You’re going to pretend to try to change his mind?”

“No, that part is real.” He spun the book around and handed it to me. “If he’s as stubborn as I’ve been told, I want a backup plan. Study that spell. Once we isolate his magical fingerprint, we might be able to negate its effects on you two.”

I read the passage three times before I realized what he had in mind. Days of searching had been fruitless because I was trying to attack the macro problem. Bart's idea was to shield the individual from the effects of the broader spell.

"This is amazing," I said, looking up from the pages. "How did you think of this?"

"Defensive magic is based on protecting the mage," he said. "I created that spell when I was a sophomore as a final project. The theory is sound, but the execution requires certain information I don't have."

"You created this in college?"

"High school." He shrugged. "I wanted to do something no one else had done."

I'd come to Bart hoping he could tell me if there was danger to Cinaed, but he'd given me a solution to the real problem I faced.

After weeks of fighting off despair, I finally saw a light in the distance.

It was a ways off, but it was there. Given fate wanted me and Cinaed to be together, I took this as a positive sign.

"I see that look in your eye, Rod," Bart sat across from me and pointed toward the book. "Don't get your hopes up. If Ailpein's spell targeted his flock, the magic might have already bonded with Cinaed. I won't know if that happened until I examine a phoenix."

One very specific phoenix. My mate. I didn't want to ask a question, but I needed to know. "Assuming the magic soaked into Cinaed, can you reverse it?"

The answer was visible in his face before he spoke the words. "I don't know.

Depending on the spell, undoing the effects might kill even a phoenix.”

Bart had tried to be helpful, but it had the opposite effect. He’d given me a sliver of hope, and then dropped an anvil on my head. The best option, convincing Ailpein to revoke the spell, was also the one least likely to succeed.

I couldn’t give in to the despair creeping into my soul. As hard as it was to resist, I had to try. Cinaed was hurting too much already.

Bart and Otto had better make a convincing argument or else Cinaed and I might not be around to help create the new Great Ward.

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Chapter Two

C inaed FionnLaoch:

The sharp stab of pain didn't just arrive, it invaded the marrow of my bones. This time, the attack occurred while I was outside, which gave me a clearer idea of its source. I could rule out the castle. Unfiltered by our ancestral home, there wasn't a trace of phoenix magic in the warning.

And it was a warning. That much was finally clear.

In the face of such a clear danger, the instinctual urge to shift nearly took over.

Not since I was a teenager struggling to master my powers had I spontaneously burst into flames and ruined my clothes.

Losing control would have ruined one of my favorite shirts.

Roderick had bought it for me the last time we were in London together.

The accompanying vertigo was brief, but it left me unsteady. Thankfully, I'd been seated, or I'd have face-planted in Mother's rose bed. She'd spent centuries cultivating these bushes, and I would never forgive myself if I crushed her hard work.

I pulled my cloak tightly around my body despite the warmth of the garden. Outside it was a frigid Scottish early December day, but inside these walls, Mother made sure the temperature never dropped below fifteen degrees or above twenty-five.

The feeling was more ominous than before.

It pummeled me with its insistence. I'd asked around the last time, but no one else had been affected.

Grandfather brushed it aside, but not without gifting me with a questioning glare.

I didn't need to read his thoughts to know he suspected the mage world was behind the attack. One specific mage and his family.

He was wrong. The Hollens wouldn't try to subvert Grandfather's spell because Roderick promised me he wouldn't without my permission. I'd never met a more honorable being than Rod. No matter how much he disagreed with me, he'd never tried to change my mind.

My fingers curled into the thick wool of my robe, forcing back the burning sensation that preceded my regeneration. Aside from destroying my clothes, I couldn't afford to go to ash when my father was coming to talk about the negotiations.

The truth was I didn't really care about politics. I was the youngest of my generation and so far from the throne, sometimes I couldn't see it from my position. What mattered to me was when I would see Roderick again. His steady presence grounded me. Together we'd make sense of these warnings.

His absence, however, was all my fault. I'd been naive to believe I could convince Grandfather to change his mind. That mistake had cost us decades, and now we might never have the chance to complete our bond.

Father's arrival stopped the self-recrimination building inside. His timing was fortuitous. It wasn't good for my state of mind to dwell on such negative thoughts. I collected myself and stood to greet him. His smile faded as soon as we locked eyes.

“Another one?” His voice carried equal measures of concern and resignation.

I nodded weakly as we settled onto the bench. He put his arm around my shoulder, and it helped steady me as the last hints of the distress receded into a distant echo. Unlike my grandfather’s formal stiffness, Father had always been demonstrative with his affection.

“They’re getting worse,” I admitted. “Something’s coming, but I don’t understand what the magic is trying to tell me.”

“I assume Roderick told you his brother’s theory?” I nodded and he continued. “Your grandfather dismissed it as the mages trying to scare him into changing his mind.”

Hardly surprising given how strident he’d become.

“I partially agree with Grandfather. I don’t think this is the Earth telling him to change his mind or else.

If that were the case, he would feel the same thing as me.

I’m being singled out, but I’m not smart enough to understand what I’m being told. ”

“Roderick will be here tomorrow with his two brothers,” Father said. “Chancellor Hollen insisted we meet with all three.”

The frown on his face suggested this had been a heated conversation. “Grandfather didn’t want Roderick.”

It wasn’t a question, and it confirmed my connection to Roderick was known to the king. “The two argued for days over his inclusion. Wilhelm Hollen must care deeply for his son to have held up everything over such a small provision.”

Small? It was the most important condition of the agreement.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Father said. “I only meant Roderick and you could find a way to meet somewhere else. On its face, this is trivial, but it tells the king the importance the chancellor places on his son’s happiness.”

In that way, my father and Roderick’s were cut from the same cloth. “If he knows I’m the one, why isn’t it my choice?”

“Setting aside I’ll never let you sacrifice yourself, the king never recovered from Adelais’s death.”

Judging from how Father spoke of her, she must have been extraordinary. “How does condemning the world make his pain any less? Or lessen how much he’s hurting me?”

“He’s not thinking with his mind—this is his heart taking control. He’s doing this out of love.”

My grandfather and I had once been very close.

He nicknamed me his “little firebird.” Then something changed, and he turned into a bitter phoenix.

Father was the only one who could reason with him, and his influence was extremely limited.

“He’s not doing this out of love for me.

If love was truly his motive, he’d listen to the facts.

Something changed. Now he speaks like his pride was hurt.

First because he wasn't consulted beforehand, and second when Adelais chose Katarina and the world over him.

I will find a way to break his spell, even if he banishes me for my action. ”

Father watched me in a way that suggested I'd crossed a line too far.

He raised his hand and put it on my leg.

“Never say that where he can hear you. The king's magic is strong, and he'll use it to bind you.

He's already suspicious of this delegation.

He believes Otto is meant to distract him while Bartholomew finds a way to let you and Roderick bond. ”

Which meant Roderick and I needed to be extra careful. “Thank you for letting me know.”

“Of course.” He watched me like I was a fledgling phoenix again. “How certain is Bartholomew the new Great Ward can be created without you and Roderick sacrificing yourselves? Because in this, the King and I agree, we don't want you to die to save the world.”

I'd heard my grandfather rant many times in recent decades about how a phoenix would never sacrifice themselves for the world again. He found humans and other shifters selfish and unworthy of what Adelais did for them. Now that anger blinded him so much he wouldn't listen to facts.

“He’s wrong,” I said. “We won’t survive if the Ward fails. No one will. The mages and other beings took the brunt of the demon attacks. If they fail, we might not die, but we will wish we had. I’ll not be the pet or plaything of a demon prince.”

“None of us want that, least of all your grandfather.” Father picked up a rose petal and set it on the bench. He collected them whenever he walked in this garden and gave them to Mother. “Which is why I asked what proof does Roderick’s brother have you two won’t die creating the new Ward?”

“What proof does he need?” I struggled not to shout at my father.

He was an ally, but only to a point. “The spell to create the Ward is not complicated. What killed Adelais was forcing the demons back to their realm. We’ll only have to die if we don’t do this soon.

Once the Ward fails, demons will flood the world.

If that happens, we’ll need to use the second part, and that will kill us.

Why is he trying to kill me? Roderick and I will bond, and we will help create the new Great Ward.

He can’t stop us. The only question is will Grandfather force me to die to save everyone else. ”

Father searched the area because I’d failed to keep my voice down. “He’s doing this because he doesn’t want you to die.”

I might have misjudged my father’s loyalty.

Grandfather’s actions weren’t about saving me, not anymore.

This was about pride. His pride. “If you think that, then he’s fooled even you.

This is about him feeling slighted. The king wants the world to come begging for his help before he lifts his spell.

By that point, it will be too late. His stupid pride is going to kill me, and you’re going to help him. ”

I stood, but before I could walk away, he grabbed my hand. Snatching it away, I refused to look at him. No one cared if I died, so long as the phoenix achieved the lofty status of the other beings who anchored the Great Ward.

“Cinaed, stop!” Father rushed ahead of me and put his hands on my shoulders to keep me from fleeing.

I considered shifting and letting him chase after me, but eventually I’d have to continue this conversation. “What else is there to say? Do you want me to beg on my knees to lift the spell? I won’t give either of you that satisfaction. We’ll find a way to defeat his spell.”

We stared at each other, and I saw the tears pooling at the edges of his eyes.

He’d always been a parent first, even when it conflicted with the king’s will.

My accusation struck at the core of who he was, but this wasn’t about his heart.

Grandfather had manipulated him into thinking he was acting in my best interest.

“I’m sorry you think I wouldn’t die to protect you.” He swallowed loudly. “I don’t agree with the king’s method, but I know in his heart he thinks he’s protecting you.”

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“Father, I know how much you love me, but you’re too close to see the truth.

” I took his hands gently from my shoulders and clasped them.

“Grandfather’s heart isn’t guided by love for me or anyone else anymore.

He’s not the same phoenix who doted on his grandchildren.

He’s been poisoned by anger and resentment.

Ask Mother, your siblings, or your other children if you doubt me. ”

I watched his face hoping for a sign he was listening.

“If you can’t see the truth, you will aid in my death.

Those aren’t the words of a bitter child.

I love you as deeply as you have loved me, and I say that to save you from the self-recrimination you will feel the rest of your life when I’m gone. ”

He shut his eyelids tightly, and his skin grew warmer in my grasp. My words challenged two pillars of his life. The choice between loyalty to his father and king, or the love for his child. Sadly, he couldn’t remain true to both, and whichever he rejected would haunt him.

I squeezed gently to prevent him from instinctively shifting. “I’m sorry. After

Grandfather rejects the mage delegation's proposal, I won't make you choose between which duty you value most."

"No, you won't." When he opened his eyes, there was a clarity he'd lacked before. "My choice was made the day you were born. I'll do everything I can to save you, but for now, this conversation must stay between us. Not even your mother should know what was said here."

My nose tingled, and I sniffed loudly. "Thank you," I whispered.

"Always, my beautiful boy. Always." He kissed my forehead like he had when I was a boy. "You should regenerate before the delegation arrives. You're fading. Each time I see you, your fire burns a little dimmer."

"I'm fine," I said, but the lie tasted like ashes.

"No, you're not," he said sternly. "Renew your spirit. You will need all your strength for what is coming."

He forced a smile, gathered his rose petals, and walked out of the garden.

I considered his words and saw no downside to doing as he suggested. The garden's perpetual warmth wrapped around me as I undressed and folded my clothes with careful precision. Even in the depths of a Scottish winter, Mother's magic held the cold at bay, protecting her beloved roses.

My fingers lingered on the fabric of the shirt Roderick had chosen for me in London. The memory of that day brought both comfort and pain—like most memories of him did these days. I saw his gentle smile as he held the shirt up to see how it paired with my fair skin and red hair.

Father was right about my dimming fire. I'd delayed this regeneration longer than wisdom suggested and let my stubbornness override good sense. The resulting malaise had made me irritable toward my father.

I placed the last of my clothes on the bench as the first tremor of transformation shuddered through my core. I'd never experienced an involuntary death, but I was told it wasn't pleasant. Not that voluntarily dying was enjoyable, but it was easily managed.

Closing my eyes, I reached for the eternal spark central to all phoenixes. It flared like I'd never experienced before, which was another sign I'd waited too long.

Father's promise to fight for me echoed in my mind as I surrendered to the fire. It erupted from my center, racing along pathways worn smooth by experience. Pushing Roderick's image into my mind, I let the flames consume my body.

A quick burst of pain was all that marked the severing of my connection to my body and soul. I drifted in a peaceful expanse of white. Had I lingered, I could've shaped this resting world to my will. It would be an illusion, but there were times I thought I'd be okay with the daydream.

Today wasn't one of those times.

Embracing the pull that led to my rebirth, I willingly left the tranquil setting.

Awareness returned gradually, each sense reactivating in careful sequence.

First, I felt the touch of ash against newly formed feathers.

Sound filtered in next. The soft call of birds taking refuge in the garden's warmth.

I followed the scent of rose petals and ash to full awareness.

It was a routine I'd followed since my first renewal.

I stood on wobbly legs, shedding any remaining ashes with a brisk shake. My body hummed with fresh strength. Gone was the hint of sluggishness that plagued me in recent days.

Renewal also sharpened my magical senses. The complex magic my mother wove to maintain this pocket of spring sang to me in clear notes. The next time the warning came, I hoped my heightened senses would help me ascertain its origin.

My copper and gold wings unfurled, sparkling in the winter sunlight. I stretched them to their full span and yielded to the urge to test my renewed strength.

Raising my wings, I launched myself skyward. Steam surrounded me as the heat from my fiery form clashed with the frosty winter air.

Below me, my ancestral home grew smaller with every beat.

From up high, the patchwork of ancient stone and newer additions stood out in a way it didn't when I saw it from the ground.

The protective wards surrounding our home shimmered like heat waves in winter air.

Somewhere in the magical web lay the spell banning Roderick and me from joining.

Its presence felt slightly less oppressive after Father's promise.

I banked sharply, riding a frigid wind current higher. Flight was the purest expression of a phoenix's nature. It granted me freedom of movement without the constraints of

family and political obligations.

My wings caught another updraft, carrying me in a wide arc around the grounds as I considered Father's warning.

Grandfather suspected the Hollens would try to break his spell during this visit.

He wasn't wrong. Roderick and I would find a way to complete our bond.

We would not, however, do it under his oppressive thumb.

If the king didn't lift the ban, I would leave with Roderick and renounce my flock. It was the most drastic thing a being could do, but even a flock paled before a mate bond. No matter how much I longed to be part of my family, I knew in my soul Roderick's love was stronger.

The warning pain from earlier echoed in my memory as I glided over a frozen loch.

My renewed senses were sharper and more attuned to the wrongness I'd felt.

Whatever was coming was connected to my family, but not the spell meant to keep me from my mate.

I didn't understand how I knew this, but I was certain.

I spiraled higher, extending the joy of the moment. My flight soothed the anxiety in my soul, but it was only temporary. I couldn't escape the problems I faced. Reluctantly, I tucked my wings and plunged toward the garden.

As a kid I'd routinely engaged in such reckless flying, secure in the knowledge I wouldn't die.

Most phoenixes eschewed such raucous behavior and chose to follow the king's more reserved demeanor.

My wild personality, something he encouraged when I was younger, had made him suspicious when he changed.

No doubt this was the reason Grandfather watched me closer than my siblings.

The frozen ground rushed to meet me, and for a split second, I contemplated experiencing what it felt like to die. I might have followed through except it would cause enormous damage to the flowers.

I pulled up before I reached the heated air and executed a wide circle to slow my descent. Still, it had been one last thrill before the weight of duty returned.

Landing near my clothes, my talons dug into the gravel path.

Shifting was less dramatic than regeneration.

The fire rippled through me, reshaping rather than destroying.

I let the process flow naturally until I stood on human feet again.

My skin tingled in the air, which, while warm, was almost cold compared to my fire.

The renewal had done its work. My inner flame burned bright and steady. When I appeared before the king again, I'd do it with strength and conviction.

I dressed and considered how to handle my grandfather's refusal to change his mind. He hadn't put me under guard, but it was possible he would once Roderick arrived. Despite these concerns, my steps were lighter as I headed back to the castle. For the

first time in weeks, I felt truly myself again.

Roderick and I would find a way forward. Even the king couldn't stop fate.

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Chapter Three

Roderick:

The heat of the throne room pressed against my skin, thick and oppressive, like stepping too close to an open flame.

It wasn't the enchanted fire casting its flickering gold against the heavy drapes—this was Ailpein's magic.

He'd woven spells into this room that amplified his already formidable power.

The quiet thrum of energy was a reminder to all who appeared before the king that he wielded authority in the room.

My brothers stood at the foot of his raised dais, unbent by the weight of Ailpein's scrutiny.

Otto spoke with the easy poise of someone who didn't acknowledge the fine edge they were walking.

His diplomatic calm was impenetrable, but I could feel the faint tension winding through him.

He understood what was at stake and the distrust of the being before him.

Bart paid close attention, content to let Otto take the lead.

Another example that my younger brother was the smartest person in the room.

He knew his strengths weren't in persuasion, but rather in teaching.

Explaining could only happen once Ailpein agreed to listen.

Yet for all the strength of their unity, they faced the immovable force that was Ailpein's pride.

I kept to the side of the room, trying not to draw the king's attention. His gaze had flicked toward me twice, but it didn't linger. It was a none-too-subtle reminder I didn't matter. Neither did my bond with Cinaed.

My blood boiled at his callousness. He'd rather see the grandson he previously adored, die from a broken heart than admit his foolishness.

Across the room, Cinaed stood silently behind his grandfather.

He'd remained behind his father and siblings, but the cut of his tense jaw reflected the anger I felt.

We hadn't bonded, so I knew I hadn't influenced him with my emotions. I hadn't needed to. He was as angry at the king as I. The difference was, Ailpein's defiance had hurt Cinaed deeply.

"He's not even pretending to listen to Otto." Cinaed's voice brushed into my thoughts. "It's just insults coated in diplomacy."

Cinaed's voice burned with the heat of his anger.

I didn't respond immediately, keeping my focus steady on Ailpein.

Some might think the king looked regal sitting with his back straight on the gilded throne, but it was feigned elegance.

His face was cold, his expression unreadable except for the slight narrowing of his sharp, orange-gold eyes.

“He doesn’t want to listen,” I replied, trying to keep my tone measured. “This is an exercise in his authority. He wants to see how far we’ll bend before he shuts us down.”

I knew Cinaed wanted to step forward and intervene, and how much it cost him to remain deferential to his grandfather. He wasn’t a coward, but this wasn’t the time or place to defy the king. Revealing our plans would get Cinaed locked away before we tried to break the spell.

“You ask us to trust mere words.” Ailpein’s voice cut sharply into the room. “Where is this unity you speak of? I’ve heard no offer of aid. Instead, you hide behind your bureaucracy and have the audacity to request something from me in the same breath.

“He pretends this is about protecting us,” Cinaed said, his thoughts sharper than before. “This is about his pride. He believes the world doesn’t respect him like it does the guardians.”

I shared his frustration, but Ailpein’s display helped me see the truth. Granting us this meeting was theater for him. He wanted this confrontation to make us squirm in front of his flock. Except Otto hadn’t been goaded into disrespecting the king.

“Your majesty,” Otto said as if Ailpein hadn’t accused him of duplicity. “Erecting a new Great Ward is in everyone’s interest. If we do it now, no harm will come to anyone involved in casting the spell.”

“So you’ve said already.” Ailpein spat. The flames on the sconces lining the walls flared like an extension of Ailpein’s anger. “Katarina stood in that very spot and made the same assurances. I’ve seen no evidence your words aren’t just as false as hers.”

Bart launched into an explanation, giving reasons and details for why this time was different. When he finished, Ailpein gripped the arms of his gilded throne and leaned toward my brothers.

“Do you take me for a fool?” Ailpein’s voice rose enough that his guards stiffened.

“You’re not ready to create the new ward, and that renegade mage could capture one of my flock at any time.

Where is the protection your Council offered at the start?

When your father keeps his pledge, then I will consider your request.”

“This is not a delay we take lightly, Your Majesty,” Otto said. “The truth-testing is a safeguard that cannot be skipped. Or rushed.”

“Grandfather sees the delays as a slight,” Cinaed said.

Ailpein was right to be scared for the safety of his flock, but Blackstone’s betrayal had the entire Council on edge. “That’s just a made-up excuse. He knows full well the consequences of sending a traitor to guard your family.”

Bart’s attempt to get the king to listen was cut off when Ailpein rose swiftly from his throne. “When you speak with action instead of empty promises, we can continue this conversation. For now, I’ve heard enough words.”

Ailpein gathered his robes and left through a side door. The tension in the silent hall was thick enough to cut with a blade. The king's prerequisite promised nothing more than a continuation of this fruitless discussion.

"Even if you give him what he wants, he won't change his mind," Cinaed said softly.

He was right. Ailpein wouldn't change his mind even if Father had already sent the mages. "Let's meet as soon as is prudent and discuss our next move."

In my century-plus of life, I'd visited most places on earth—including Scotland—but this was the first time I'd seen the Highlands from the phoenix king's castle.

Cinaed had always spoken of his home with such passion that I'd longed to see it in person.

Ailpein's attitude toward his flock dating mages made that impossible until now.

Standing on a balcony in the hallway outside my room, I understood why this land had captured Cinaed's heart. The earth had truly blessed this place. It was almost as beautiful as my mate.

A day had passed since I'd seen Cinaed, and that was across the hostile throne room. His suggestion that we meet had been surprising to say the least. "The view is breathtaking."

"It looks even more amazing from the air." Cinaed pressed his shoulder against mine. "I wish there was a way to take you with me."

There were many things I wished for that wouldn't happen. "Letting me experience it through your eyes has been life-changing."

He put his hand over mine, and his heat radiated through my entire body.

We stood in comfortable silence, enjoying the view.

It was a closeness we'd been denied for too long.

I'd memorized every detail about Cinaed so I could see him in my mind without looking at him.

I saw the way his face softened when we touched, the light on his copper-red hair, and the way his skin shimmered with his internal fire.

He was breathtaking in ways I still wasn't sure I deserved.

A hand cupped my cheek, and he guided my face toward him. His lips touched mine and I forgot all my doubts. We were a pair no matter how much Ailpein tried to keep us apart. I opened my arms, and even though our bond was incomplete, it hummed with revitalizing energy.

I allowed myself to indulge in the fantasy of this being our new normal, but then yielded to the tiny voice that was pecking to be heard.

We leaned back slightly but didn't break our physical connection. His hands lingered against my chest as though he was afraid I'd vanish if he let go.

"You look tired," he said, the faint quirk of his lips shadowed by the burden we carried. "You aren't sleeping enough."

He'd told me he renewed himself the day before, and I had no doubts he'd display the same weariness had he not been a phoenix. "Rest is a luxury we can't afford."

I didn't need to elaborate. Ailpein's heavy hand loomed over this castle like a shadow no light could banish.

"Don't let him pull the fire from us," he said, quieter but no less firm. His hand brushed my cheek. "We're stronger than he'll ever know."

He kissed me again. It wasn't forceful or fleeting, but a perfect show of affection we'd avoided to appease his grandfather. When it ended, I pressed my forehead gently against his. Even that felt like too much.

"We have to be more careful," I said. "He's watching you."

A defiant grin tugged at his lips. "Not now he isn't. Grandfather is occupied."

I wanted to believe we could steal these moments hidden, but the king had watched us intensely since he figured out our relationship. If he caught us, he'd keep Cinaed locked up and never let us be together again. "He seems to be able to follow you even when otherwise distracted."

"Right now, he's meeting with your Inquisitor General who has made a surprise visit to work out Grandfather's concerns."

It took me a moment to process what I'd heard. There was no chance the statement was accurate. "Inquisitor General Hoffman? He's here?"

"That's what Father told me." Cinaed's expression turned wary. "Is something wrong?"

I wondered for a split second if my fears were influencing Cinaed, but we didn't share a link. Any effect I had on him came from my words and my body language. "Yes. Lucius Hoffman is in Philadelphia."

“Father said it was a surprise. Maybe your father sent him after Otto failed to persuade Grandfather.”

My father wouldn't have forgotten to tell us about him suddenly sending Lucius to negotiate with the king. “No. He wouldn't undermine Otto like that. And if for some strange reason he'd send Lucius—something he's never done—he'd have at least told us it was going to happen.”

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Dread settled its cold, unshakable grip along my spine. My pulse quickened as I put my hand on my mage stone. Pushing out my consciousness, I sent a message.

“Dad! No matter what you’re doing, take my call. The Great Ward is in grave danger!”

The answer was almost instantaneous. “Roderick? What’s wrong?”

I had no right to make demands of my father, even if he wasn’t mage chancellor, but I didn’t have time for niceties. “Where’s Lucius Hoffman?”

“What?”

“Dad, please. Don’t ask questions, just answer and I’ll explain.”

Most parents would push back, but my father had trusted me for decades and knew I wasn’t playing a game. His immediate response reinforced his faith in me. “He’s right in front of me. Now, what’s going on?”

Only a lifetime of training prevented me from devolving into utter panic. I took a settling breath and let it out. Looking Cinaed in the eye, I said, “Tell your father the king has been compromised. The mage he’s meeting with is not Lucius Hoffman.”

I prayed he trusted me enough not to ask questions because I still needed to answer my father.

“Someone claiming to be Lucius contacted the king and told Ailpein they were

coming to Scotland to help resolve any concerns Ailpein had. The king is meeting with that being right now. I fear the worst. I'll keep my call open, but I need to find the king. ”

“I told him,” Cinaed said. “He wants to know the source of your information.”

We didn't have time for distrust. Even now it was probably too late to save the king. “We can explain on our way to wherever the king was meeting this impostor.”

Thankfully, Cinaed kept his head in a crisis and led us on a mad dash through the palace while he answered his father's questions. I'd managed to get Otto and Bart into the link with Dad and they were headed to join us.

Malachy advised us the king had agreed to meet the purported inquisitor general in a private study just off the throne room. Although the crown prince was shocked and disappointed he hadn't been invited to the meeting, he'd witnessed his father's recent erratic behavior and dropped the matter.

“He's going to blame himself for not pushing harder if something happens to Grandfather,” Cinaed said when we'd kicked everyone else out of the links.

The crown prince probably would, because good beings tried to save those they loved. It didn't matter that Ailpein didn't want or think he needed saving, his son wouldn't forgive himself. “Let's hope we get there before it's too late.”

Despite my words, I expected the worst. Ailpein had been a fool, and fools were the easiest to dupe. Blackstone had played this hand too perfectly. We wouldn't get there in time.

The hallway leading to the King's private study was eerily quiet. There should have been guards or staff moving around if there was a meeting. I didn't need to voice my

concerns to Cinaed. The way he searched the area validated my assessment.

Something foul assailed my magical senses. I'd never fought a demon, been attacked by black magic, or stood over the edge of a klarion pit, but I was pretty certain I felt corruption. It tainted the air and saturated the stones.

Cinaed was a step ahead of me, his normally fluid movements taut with barely restrained urgency. He turned the corner and came to a halt. The door to Ailpein's study had been blasted open. We were too late.

"Cinaed," I whispered, grabbing his arm to keep him from charging headlong into danger. "We should wait for the others."

He glanced back at me, golden eyes fierce but shadowed with fear. "They've attacked my home!" Flame crackling in his words. "We don't have time."

"If they're still in the office, they can't get out without our seeing them," I said, still grasping his arm. "There is nothing to gain by rushing headlong into the unknown. The others will be here in a few seconds."

He hesitated, conflict written across his features. I was right, but that didn't stop his need to do something immediately. Finally, he gave a terse nod. "You're right."

I pointed my mage stone at the ruined grand doors to the king's private chambers.

My white diamond sparkled with the energy I fed it, daring someone to come out and challenge me.

Splinters of mahogany mixed with shards of crystal and stone littered the hallway floor.

The fight must've been fierce to cause this level of destruction.

Which begged a question. "How did this happen with no one sounding an alarm and rushing to investigate?"

Cinaed snorted. "Grandfather dampened the sound coming from this area. He wanted to make sure no one violated his private space."

"Fool" was too kind a word for Ailpein. Father had warned him of the danger, but Ailpein had been so convinced of his superiority and invulnerability that he ignored common sense in favor of appearance. His stupidity threatened the safety of the entire world.

Otto and Bart arrived before I responded to Cinaed. With my brothers for backup, I led Cinaed into the office. The devastation that greeted us defied even my worst fears.

The room was in complete disarray. Furniture had been shattered, the tapestries were ripped and scorched, and a mage lay dead on the charred carpet, his green gem inches from his prone body. The most disturbing sight, however, was the royal guards.

Four phoenixes stood frozen in grotesque stillness. They'd been encased in faceted crystals that pulsed with a malevolent energy. Their faces were masks of shock and pain, capturing their last moments.

Someone had planned this attack meticulously. The guards were dead, but unable to regenerate until they were freed from their translucent prisons. It was a perfect plan for dealing with a foe you couldn't kill outright.

Cinaed sucked in a sharp breath beside me. "This is truly dark magic."

I'd never heard of such a spell, but it was a brilliant execution of how to incapacitate

a phoenix. Cinaed stepped toward the nearest guard, but I quickly pulled him back.

“Don’t,” I said as gently as I could. “The spell might ensnare you too.”

“Is that possible?” He didn’t wait for an answer to shrink back.

“All things are possible.” I turned toward Bart and Otto. “It would be prudent to know what we’re facing before we test our theories.”

Bart examined one guard, bathing the crystal in purple light from his stone. He was engrossed in his examination when Prince Malachy, two of Cinaed’s siblings, and several guards entered the office.

“What in the gods happened?” Malachy asked.

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Chapter Four

C inaed:

F ather's voice cut through the oppressive silence of Grandfather's ruined study.

The devastation around us told a story of violence and betrayal that twisted my stomach. Blackstone hadn't just attacked Grandfather he'd corrupted our home with dark magic that made my skin crawl. The recent wrongness I'd felt had been a warning of this violation.

"Your Highness." Roderick's steady voice grounded me, pulling me back from the edge of rage. "The being who claimed to be Inquisitor General Hoffman was an imposter. We believe it was James Blackstone or one of his associates."

Father's face hardened as the implications sank in.

His gaze swept over the crystallized guards, and I watched heat ripple through the air around him.

The weight of command settled on his shoulders.

He was the crown prince, and with the king missing, the fate of the four phoenixes trapped in a nightmare of dark magic fell to him.

"Can you free them?" he asked Bart, who had already begun examining the nearest crystal prison.

Purple light from Bart's tourmaline stone played across the corrupted surface. Each flash revealed new layers of malevolent energy threaded through the crystal structure. The longer I watched, the more my inner fire recoiled from the wrongness of it.

"The spell matrix is complex," Bart said without taking his focus off his work. "I've never seen this exact spell, but there are elements I recognize."

The presence of the world's only archmage was a tiny slice of luck we'd retained. "Can you help him?" I asked Roderick.

My mate nodded and moved to join his brother.

The white light from his diamond meshed with his brother's energy.

They worked together in a way that spoke of the complete trust they had in each other.

Rod had clung to his relationship with his family as a lifeline against the despair our separation caused.

The two whispered softly and used their free hands to point to things only they saw.

I heard scraps of their conversation, but they used magical terms I didn't grasp.

The slow pace of their work scraped against my already raw nerves.

Every moment the guards remained in the grip of Blackstone's evil was a stark reminder of how stupid Grandfather had been.

My brother Colum joined me. As the next youngest after me, he and I had been relegated to the back of the line our whole lives. Next to my oldest sister, I felt the

closest to him. Lately, however, he'd been drawn further into Grandfather's orbit.

"Can we really trust them?" He nodded toward Rod and Bart. "It feels very convenient this happened right after they arrived."

I glared at him with enough venom in my eyes that he flinched. "Do you want me to gut you with a blade so dirty you'll need to regenerate a dozen times to cure the infection?"

He held up his hands and scowled. "Whoa, little brother. It's a valid question."

"No, it isn't," Elspeth said. "Bart and Otto are the Western and Southern guardians. The Earth wouldn't allow corrupted mages to defend it."

"Sorry, I'm a bit on edge." Colum said, having the grace to look ashamed. He pointed toward the guard on the far right. "Yargen is one of my best friends. What if they can't free him?"

Bart looked up, his expression sympathetic. "I should be able to free them, but dark magic is treacherous. I want to be sure I don't trigger some hidden attack."

The clinical way Bart approached his task gave him an air of competence that reassured me. Rod's admiration for his younger brother was well deserved. They were alike in many ways. Rod's patient demeanor balanced my impulsiveness.

"I think I've isolated all the threads," Bart announced after what felt like an eternity. "Anchor the containment ward, Rod. Otto come check my work."

Otto scoffed but joined his brothers. "I don't understand half of what you do. How can I verify your conclusion?"

“Fresh eyes,” Bart pointed his stone over an area. “Use your stone and make sure I didn’t miss any open lines.”

Everyone in the room watched as the brothers worked like a medical team performing a complex surgery. Father finished giving orders to the guards and joined me and my siblings. This was the phoenix I knew and respected. A being who made informed decisions with the authority to command confidence.

“This is what you felt, isn’t it?” he asked.

I saw the self-recrimination in his eyes. The Earth had given us a warning, and he chastised himself for failing to heed it. Except he had listened. “I can’t be certain,” I said. “In hindsight, I believe it is, but despite our best efforts, we couldn’t decipher the cryptic message.”

The truth didn’t appease my father’s guilt, but at least I hadn’t made it worse. A flash of brilliant purple filled the room and we looked toward the imprisoned guards.

A large crack appeared on the surface of the crystal in front of Bart.

Thin spiderwebs of lines spread out from the main fissure until the facade looked like a jigsaw puzzle of clear pieces.

Roderick tapped his mage stone to the exterior of the magical prison.

One piece flaked off and an instant later the entire structure crumbled onto the stone floor.

The guard stood still for a moment before he collapsed into a heap atop the broken shards. Bart looked at Father and nodded. Then he and Roderick moved on to the next crystal.

Father waved his left hand and soldiers rushed to help their fellow guards. The next three ensnared phoenixes were freed in quick order. By the time Roderick and his brothers stepped back, the skin of all four guards had begun to flake into ash.

“We should give them privacy for their rebirth,” Colum said.

“I need to stay to be sure there are no lingering spells,” Bart said. “The magic used to capture your guards is among the darkest I’ve seen. It was already seeping into their beings. It is possible it will linger beyond the first renewal.”

Father nodded once to Bart, who then turned back to the guards with his stone still glowing brightly.

It wasn’t easy to watch the bodies of members of our flock crumble into dust. This wasn’t a planned renewal. From the expressions on the faces of the trapped guards, their passing was painful.

One-by-one the four disintegrated into ash and soon burst into flames.

The natural orange and red color of renewal was tainted with a darker hue.

The fires seemed to flicker as if something tried to snuff them out and prevent the rebirth.

From the set of Bart’s shoulders, this was the negative consequence he’d feared.

I held my breath, hoping Rod and Bart could undo the damage. Father tensed beside me and I saw the horrified looks on Colum and Elspeth’s faces. This was truly a vile corruption of these phoenixes.

A sudden flare from the first guard they’d freed burnt away all trace of dark magic

and the natural renewal process continued. The other three followed suit and soon four newly reborn phoenixes shook off the dust surrounding them.

Father exhaled, but I felt his anger. “I should have pushed harder to prevent this meeting.”

“There was nothing more you could’ve done,” Elspeth said. “Grandfather refused to listen to anything that conflicted with his beliefs.”

I’d experienced his intractable nature more than any, and I agreed with my sister. He’d changed in recent years. Almost as if.... “When was the last time Grandfather left the palace?”

“What?” Father asked. “Why?”

“Tell me this is the father you knew,” I said before turning to my siblings. “Or the grandfather of our childhood. His bitterness seemed to grow over the last few years. Like someone had put a spell on him or altered his thoughts.”

Crazy as it sounded, no one disputed the possibility.

“It would explain a lot,” Colum said. “But how could we all have missed something so obvious?”

“The change was subtle enough that it didn’t arouse suspicion,” Father said. “By the time he cast the spell, we’d all gotten used to his suspicions of mages.”

Bart walked toward us. “I don’t detect any lingering black magic, but I’m not an expert on phoenix physiology. They should be carefully checked.”

“Understood,” Father said. He turned toward Elspeth. “Contact your siblings and

escort our guests to the council chamber. I'm calling an emergency session."

I threaded my fingers through Rod's not caring if anyone protested. If what had just happened didn't convince everyone Grandfather was wrong, I no longer cared.

The emergency session was a chaotic affair, with councilors trying to assert their power in the wake of Grandfather's abduction.

I stood to Father's right, with Colum, Elspeth, my oldest brother Lauchlin, and my other sister Gwyneth.

It was meant to be a show of unity, but my presence had been distracting.

Several of the old hardliners declared that if I hadn't been cavorting with a mage this wouldn't have happened.

After a particularly personal attack, Lauchlin stepped forward and slammed his hand onto the table.

"Enough!" The room quieted at the outburst. My brother was a powerful but kind being who'd been a source of comfort when I needed him.

"You shout accusations at my family, but not one fact. The king has been abducted and not because of his kin. Cinaed abided by his king's rule despite how much it cost him.

Four guards live because of the unrivaled skills of the mages you disparage.

Your role is to provide counsel, not cast baseless aspersions.

If you've nothing of value to add, then you are relieved of your position. "

The room was divided into two parts, those who would support Father and those who cared only about their own importance. Members of the latter group seethed, while the former tried to hide their amusement. Lauchlin's outburst made it clear there was no division in our family.

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Father put a hand on Lauch's shoulder and smiled gratefully. "Thank you, son."

He swept his gaze across the room, daring someone to speak. The loudest voices of dissent were those who'd carved positions for themselves in the disarray Grandfather's erratic behavior had created. Father let the council know that until the king returned, their influence had evaporated.

He turned his attention to Rod and his brothers. "What do we know of Blackstone's intentions?"

"His ultimate goal is to bring down the Great Ward." Rod answered. "The Guardians and the Mage Council believe he used recent events to collect dark magic. Bart is the expert on these matters, so I'll let him explain."

Father nodded, and Bart led the council through the intel Chancellor Hollen had conveyed to Grandfather. There were shocked expressions when he explained the missing piece was the energy released when a phoenix permanently died.

"It took the death of Archmage Katarina and Princess Adelais to banish the demons from this world," Bart said.

"The power Blackstone has collected, if released all at once, would probably equal the output of Katarina ending her life. The king's kidnapping changes one conclusion, and raises a question I hadn't considered before. "

"What's changed?" Father asked.

“He isn’t ready to act. Either he’s still missing something or he needs to act at a specific time or place, or both. If he was ready to act, he’d have killed the king instead of taking him hostage.”

The reprieve from the world being flooded with demons was a relief, but that raised the question he hadn’t considered. “What troubles you now?” I asked.

“Why King Ailpein?” Bart stared into his purple gem. “He specifically wanted the king. I don’t know why, but finding the answer might be essential not just to saving him, but also the world.”

Father let the room discuss the new information, then handed most of the councilors tasks. Those with assignments left and the atmosphere improved.

“Well played,” Colum said too softly for anyone but family to hear.

Father didn’t acknowledge the compliment. “Seal the room.”

The guards shut the doors, but when Rod and Otto pulled out their stones, it was clear he’d been talking to the mages.

A phoenix in a scholar’s robe stepped forward with several scrolls and put them on the table.

“I think I might have some information to answer Bart’s questions,” Father said.

He paused to let the historian spread out a map and Gwyneth moved to his side.

“When I heard about Blackstone’s need to kill a phoenix, I asked my daughter to conduct some research. ”

Gwyneth motioned everyone to come closer. “This is Master Oda. She was a friend of Adelaide before the Great Ward. She is one of the few beings alive who knows where the Great Ward was created.”

“The king also knows,” Oda said. “The Guardians were not present when the spell was cast. Adelaide and Katarina knew what they needed to do and they had the guardian pairs wait miles away to help stabilize the spell.”

“We think Blackstone needs to cast his spell in the same general location,” Gwyneth said.

The historian tapped a point on the map. “This is where my lady died.”

“Well I’ll be a donkey’s butt,” Rod said. “That explains why the Mage Council made its headquarters in Philadelphia.”

“Why didn’t Dad tell us?” Bart asked. “Or the original guardians for that matter?”

“I’m not sure he knows,” Father said. “I was a boy at the time of the Demon War. No one spoke of where the Ward had been created. Other than the guardians, Father, Oda, and Alegar Hollen were present. The Mage Council didn’t move to Philadelphia until the city was founded eight hundred years later. ”

“If the site was so important, why would they leave it undefended?” Elspeth asked.

“Who says it wasn’t guarded?” Father responded. “The guardians knew the location and so did the Society. The dragon court was a few hours flight to the north, the gryphons were less than an hour’s flight to the northwest, and there were Native American mages who could protect the site if needed.”

“You think he’s going to take Grandfather there?” I asked. “There are more mages

there than anywhere else.”

“That presumes he knows,” Rod said, walking over to take my hand. “And we don’t even know if the original site is important.”

“It makes sense that he knew the site was there,” Bart said.

He waited until everyone was looking at him.

“He spent over two hundred years at Utrecht. If there was any place in the world that contained information about where the Ward was created, it would be there. He tried to summon a demon twice on the campus. It feels too convenient to be coincidental.”

Holding Rod’s hand, I felt Grandfather’s spell create a magical barrier between us. I could feel Rod, but he was maddeningly just beyond my reach. The more I pushed, the stronger the obstruction became. I stopped when my head throbbed.

“Not yet, love.” Rod rubbed his thumb over my hand. “Hopefully soon.”

I didn’t share his faith. Given Grandfather’s determination to prevent me from mating with Rod, I expected the spell would last even if he were killed. Perhaps the Earth could undo the spell, but I didn’t want to put my hopes in a non-sentient entity solving my relationship problems.

“We need to find Grandfather.” I meant to say it quietly to Rod, but my words filled the quiet room.

“No offense, Cini, but you were the last person I expected to hear say that,” Elspeth said.

“Cini?” Rod asked with too much amusement.

I glared at my sister, but she didn't seem to care. "I'll kill El later, but don't ever call me that." Unlike most people, Rod wouldn't do it just because it annoyed me. He was too good a being.

"Grandfather is the key to saving the world," I said. "Without him, Blackstone can't destroy the existing Great Ward. We also need him to lift his spell so Rod and I can complete our bond. Only then can we create the new Ward."

"Can't you create it without bonding?" Colum asked.

"If they try, it will consume them both before they finish the spell," Bart said. "The mate bond amplifies both their powers. Without it, the strain of casting the spell will kill them."

"Then we'd better find Grandfather fast," Lauchlin said. "When do we leave?"

"You're not going anywhere," Father said. "You're the heir to the throne if the king dies."

"So?" Lauch asked. "This Blackstone already has the phoenix he needs."

"Yes, but any rescue attempt will be dangerous," Otto said. "We're still trying to determine the extent of Blackstone's help within the mage community."

"Everyone is at risk right now," Father said. "I need you here to help me rule the flock. Today we caught the council off guard. It won't be so easy the next time."

Lauch backed down, because how could he refuse Father's request?

"I'll contact the Council and update them," Rod said. "In the meantime, where do we look for the king?"

“Make your call.” Father stood. “I’ll alert the authorities to stop any unsanctioned flights.”

I doubted we’d find Grandfather, and from everyone else’s reaction, no one else did either. Despite the helpless feeling, we had to try. Otherwise, there was no guarantee Rod and I could complete our bond.

Roderick had never been inside my private chambers. The space that had been so depressing and empty for decades now hummed with joy. My joy and Rod’s. This wasn’t permanent, but I told myself this was what the future would be like.

“After four decades of not speaking about our relationship, I didn’t expect the way your family’s welcomed me.” Rod pulled me closer and my inner fire burned brighter. “Was it only your grandfather who opposed us?”

I smiled at how being in my room made Rod nervous. “Three years since we’ve been alone together and you want to talk about whether my family agreed with Grandfather keeping us apart?”

Rather than give him a chance to answer, I cupped his cheeks and kissed him. It wasn’t gentle, not with years of built-up longing.

His mouth claimed mine with an intensity that matched my fire. I pressed closer, molding my body to Rod’s. I coaxed my inner flame until it danced just beneath my skin. My healing energy surrounded him and flickered in response to his touch.

Magic swirled around us, and our bond sang its yearning to meld together and be one. The obstruction created a wave of frustration that threatened to sap the happiness of the moment.

“Cinaed,” he breathed when we finally broke for air. His forehead rested against

mine, our breaths mingling in the space between us. “We should slow down.”

“I don’t want to slow down.” I kissed him again, pouring all my frustration and need into it.

He responded with equal fervor, backing me toward the bed. “I want this as well, but?—”

“Father gave us his blessing.” I pulled him closer, drawn by the quiet power that always surrounded him. “And Grandfather’s wards are focused on the wrong type of magic now.”

A smile tugged at his lips. “Looking for loopholes already?”

“Always.” I reached for him, no longer willing to maintain distance. My fingers traced his jaw, feeling the slight tremor that ran through him at my touch. “I’ve missed you. Seeing you across the room, having to pretend we’re just allies—it’s been torture.”

His hands found my waist, pulling me closer. The heat of my skin didn’t bother him anymore—he’d long since grown used to the fire that burned within all phoenixes. “We should be planning,” he murmured, even as his grip tightened.

“We have hours until dawn.” My other hand slid into his hair, reveling in its softness. “And I need this. Need you.”

His hands found my waist, pulling me closer. The heat of my skin didn't bother him anymore – he'd long since grown used to the fire that burned within all phoenixes. "We should be planning," he murmured, even as his grip tightened.

My fingers moved to the buttons of his shirt, revealing his skin inch by inch. It had

been too long since I felt his body on mine. Too long since I felt his heart beat against my skin. I pushed the fabric off his shoulders and helped him toss it aside.

Rod's gentle hands slid under the hem of my shirt and pushed it over my head. A soft gasp escaped me as the coolness of his body connected with my warmth. His eyes darkened as they traveled over my torso.

"Three years," he whispered, voice rough with emotion. "Three years of remembering rather than feeling."

Pulling us together, he tilted his head, opened his mouth and captured my lower lip between his teeth. Our tongues tangled and fuck! I forgot how good he kissed. Pulling back, I gasped for air.

Half of him wasn't enough. I need to wrap my flesh around his, forgetting where I ended and he began. "Pants," I managed before crushing my lips back against his.

Rod moved us toward my bed, and our pants joined the pile of discarded clothing.

We broke our kiss, and I filled my lungs with air.

Closing my eyes, I ran my hands over his body, remapping the contours I'd memorized in all of our stolen moments.

The bed touched the back of my legs, and we fell onto the mattress in a tangle of limbs.

I inched closer and cupped the back of Rod's head.

Our mouths met and my tongue touched the seam of his lips.

I traced the edge, not asking for entrance.

The kiss was soft, as we took our time reacquainting ourselves with each other.

Our lips slotted, and Rod opened his mouth enough for me to push my way in.

The soft kiss had turned in a bone-tingling one that stoked my inner flame.

Moaning softly, I pulled Rod on top of me. His body covered mine, and I hooked a leg around his. He dick pressed tightly against mine with breathtaking friction as our bodies wriggled. Rod slowly inched his way down my body, feathering my skin with soft kisses as he moved.

He swirled his tongue around my left nipple and I nearly shot off the bed.

“Still like that, I see,” he whispered, before shifting to my right side.

I gulped in a breath to keep from shooting. “Still remember what it does to me, I see.”

“Always,” he said before continuing his trek downward.

His tongue painted a wet line down my abs, while he ran his hands up and down my side.

As if sensing my urgency, Rod raised his head and captured my cock in his warm mouth.

Keeping his lips tight, he pushed my foreskin down and ran his tongue incircles around the sensitive head.

I slammed my head back against the pillows and moaned.

“Oh fuck, that feels so good.” I clutched the sheets as I squirmed. Rod cupped my balls in his right hand and ran his left one up my body to tweak my nipple. “That. Just like that.”

He teased his tongue around the tip of my cock, sliding it under the foreskin. After a second, he plunged down until I hit the back of his throat. His breathe tickled the sensitive skin at the base of my cock.

“Oh fuck!” I was reduced to moans, gasps, and groans.

Spurred on by my reaction, Rod enveloped the base of my dick with his finger, and swirled his tongue around my shaft. Pulling up, he used his hand to create more friction.

“Yes,” I hissed. “That’s it.”

I was so close, but Rod didn’t like me to warn him. Given my verbal responses, he already knew.

He surrounded my cock with his lips and pumped his hand up and down. It was too much.

The first blast was so intense, I shoved myself deeper into his mouth. Rod held me steady as I twitched and convulsed with every eruption. After the last spurt, I collapsed boneless on the bed.

Rod lifted his head with a wet pop and looked at me with a mischievous grin. “Liked that, did you?”

I was still too winded to speak so I dragged him up my body and kissed him to give him my answer.

Sex with him was already insanely hot. If it got more intense when we bonded, I might need to regenerate after every time.

Chapter Five

Roderick:

Cinaed tasted like fire—his fiery nature ignited a level of need I'd always managed to contain. With him it was impossible. My soul sang out to him, and his answered. We couldn't complete our bond, but I could still feel his essence.

I remained pressed against his warmth, our kiss lingering until he broke it to speak. "I want you inside me, Rod. Please?"

There was nothing I'd deny him, but I wanted this as much as Cinaed. I sat up and thought about how I could summon lube, when a small vial was pressed into my hand. "Planned ahead did you?"

"Shut up and fuck me," he said as he pinched my nipple. "I know all your spots. Don't think I won't exploit them."

His angelic smile hide a wicked streak he showed me whenever we had the chance.

I loved it, and most of all him. I squirted some liquid into my palm, but before I could prepare him, he took the bottle and squeezed some onto his fingers.

Reaching between his legs, he spread the slick liquid around his hole before sliding a digit into himself. He moaned loudly and added a second.

My length twitched as I coated it with lube. I watched, mesmerized by his fingers

moving in and out.

“Don’t watch, Rod,” he said with an urgent need that matched my own. “Fuck me.”

I pushed his knees toward his chest and rubbed my cock against his entrance. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes!” His head flopped back and his eyes locked on mine. “I need to feel your flesh wrapped around mine.”

Being inside Cinaed was unlike anything else I’d experienced. We were so in sync that I experienced his pleasure like it was my own. Pressing forward slowly, I inched into the warm, tight space. His inner fire was hot, but not painful. My self-control fled and I pushed all the way into him.

“Oh, fuck,” he hissed. “Forgot how big you are.”

The first time we fucked, I tried to withdraw, but he stopped me.

Now, I didn’t move and waited for him to adjust. He pulled my head down and pried my lips open with his tongue.

Energy surged through me as if from a thousand points of fire.

I focused on the kiss and let it consume me.

Cinaed was life, and I could live off his energy.

We broke the kiss, and my heart galloped wildly as Cinaed hooked his legs on either side of my hips. His fingertips grazed my cheeks, leaving a trail of heat in their wake. “Fuck me, Rod. Now!”

I understood my mate's needs. Thrusting deep, I buried my entire length inside him. He twisted my nipple, and I jerked uncontrollably within him. He met my gaze with a filthy leer.

"I know all your spots too," I said.

Pulling back, I thrust again, forcing a grunt from Cinaed. He dragged my head down and assaulted my mouth. Gasping for air, I put my hands on the backs of his thighs and fucked him harder. "That how you want it?"

"Yes!"

He slid his hands up my chest, and I growled at the light pain when he pinched both nubs. I ground my hips and crushed our lips together. Cinaed poured himself into the kiss, begging for my tongue with his. I wanted more, but for now this was enough.

I thrust urgently and each time our eyes met, I saw the lust I felt staring back.

"Oh God, Rod," he whispered. "That's it. I need you!"

"You feel so good," I whispered in his ear. Scraping his prostate with every stroke, I watched with satisfaction as he writhed under me, hands clutching the sheets.

"Come for me," he panted. "Shoot it in me."

The muscles in his ass tightened each time I hit bottom. My balls tingled and I fucked him harder, leaning back to angle my cock for maximum friction. I tossed my head back. "I'm gonna come."

"Give it to me," he urged. "Don't stop."

Slamming my groin against him, I buried myself as deep as I could just as my cock erupted.

Cinaed clenched tightly around my shaft and I found his lips with a furious need.

We moaned into each other's mouth, our tongues tangling together.

With short, hard thrusts, I pounded until I stopped shooting.

I collapsed against him, his legs still circling my waist. He threw his arms around my neck and kissed me softly.

"Just like I remembered," he whispered. "I love you beyond words."

I understood the sentiment. How could you express something so consuming it touched every part of you? "You are my everything, Cinaed. I will love you in this life and the one that follows."

We lay quietly for a while, wrapped in the warmth of each other's love. Neither of us wanted to move and lose the moment, so we didn't. Locked together, we enjoyed just being one.

Finally, I moved. "Let's clean up."

He dragged a finger lightly over my chest. "Stay tonight?"

I hadn't planned to leave, but the invitation still made me grin like a fool in love. "Of course." I pressed a kiss to his temple. "I'm not leaving until I have to."

"Why?" Cinaed asked, his skin growing almost hot.

I didn't agree with his father's decision, but it was based in fact.

Malachy's hour turned into three, and instead of making arrangements to get us to Orkney he'd spent two hours on the phone with my father. "Calm down. Hear him out."

"You agree with him?"

His disappointment that I hadn't supported him rolled off him and hit me like a slap. "No, but it isn't arbitrary or personal. He's doing what he thinks is best for the flock, and by extension the world."

"Thank you for your vote of confidence," Malachy said. "He's right, son. Wilhelm needs Roderick in Philadelphia, and I need you here. The Earth spoke to you. Bart thinks you might be attuned to the solution more than anyone else."

There was a logic to his words, but it failed to address the source of Cinaed's – our – displeasure. "Don't blame your father, he's right," I said. "The problem isn't with you staying, it's my need to go home."

"Your father said the Ocular Society was very specific in who went where," Malachy said. This might not be what he wanted, but he wasn't going to risk failure just to make his son happy.

"And they happened to keep all the other guardian pairings together except me and Rod."

I found it odd, but the Society didn't act without cause. "At least we have another night together," I said. It wasn't enough, but it helped.

"After how long we've been apart, another night doesn't begin to make up for lost

time.”

It didn't, but what he really feared was our fate. If the old Great Ward failed before the new one was created, we might not get many more nights. “No, but nothing will restore what was taken from us.”

“Cael, Leo, Gund, and Thal will be here this afternoon,” Otto said. “We should give them a full day to rest.”

Otto was a good being, but his suggestion was transparent. “They'll rest on the plane,” I said. “Thanks for trying, Otto, but Elspeth and I are leaving at first light.”

My brother shrugged, but he knew I appreciated his efforts.

“We might need the day to discuss things with the newcomers,” Bart said.

Normally, he wasn't so clueless, but that was my kid brother when he geeked out. “Otto was trying to keep me here an extra day so Cinaed and I could have the time.”

“Oh,” Bart said, then his eyes went wide. “Oh! Right. Sorry.”

“You don't need to stick around.” Otto pointed to me and Cinaed. “We can fill you in tomorrow.”

I grabbed Cinaed's hand before anyone could object. Cinaed didn't resist, and we practically ran from the stuffy conference room.

“Where are we going?” Cinaed asked with an amused lilt.

I slowed, and he came up alongside me. “Away. Before they can change their minds.”

“Slow down, we’re safe now.” He tugged my hand. “We only have a few hours, let’s figure out what we want to do.”

He was right, we didn’t want to waste any of our time. “Show me things that are special to you.”

Cinaed held my hand as he led me through winding stone corridors. I felt a bit guilty that this was the freest and happiest I’d felt since learning of Ailpein’s prohibition. Cinaed’s spirit was also brighter. The cost of our improved moods was Ailpein’s abduction.

Like everyone else, I wanted to rescue him and bring him home safely. Unlike most others, I wasn’t sad he’d been abducted. Such thoughts made me a bad person, but it was hard to shed tears for a being that had caused me so much heartache because his ego had been wounded.

Some would say Blackstone brainwashed the king, but Ailpein couldn’t get off that easily. Any manipulation was made possible because of the king’s pre-existing prejudices and pride.

I pushed those negative thoughts from my mind, otherwise they would ruin my time with Cinaed. We were going to his favorite place in the castle, and I didn’t want anything to spoil the mood.

He paused at a pair of double doors and smiled. “I’ve wanted to bring you here since we met.”

Negative thoughts at being denied this little pleasure tried to steal my happiness, but seeing the joy on Cinaed’s face made it easy to keep them at bay. “I’ve envisioned you sitting here so many times. I’m glad to finally see your happy place.”

A wave of warmth greeted us as we entered his mother's garden.

Neat gravel paths wound between carefully tended beds.

Blooming plants, in vibrant colors, stood in defiance of the harsh Scottish winter.

It was easy to understand why this place meant so much to Cinaed.

The love and energy it took to create such a marvel was everywhere.

"It's beautiful," I said.

"Come," he tugged my hand gently. "I want to show you something."

He led me to a stone bench in front of a group of beds filled with different colored roses, each heavy with blooms. "Father built this garden for Mother after they were married. The crimson roses were the first things she planted."

His fingers brushed one of the flowers with a gentleness to match his soul.

We moved to his right and stopped in front of a bed of royal purple roses.

"Mom planted a different color for each of us when we were born. She said she chose the colors that matched the personalities she felt when she was pregnant. Lauch's purple was for the stoic and steadfast heir, the gold for Elspeth's nurturing spirit, bright yellow for Colum's energetic soul, the pink for the fierce yet feminine Gwyneth. "

We reached a bush with flowers of deep copper. "And mine to match my hair."

To me, the color matched his fiery spirit. "Your mother knew her children."

“She still does.” He cupped his fingers under a bud and turned it toward the sky. “Mine was the hardest to plant, she said, because I was the last. After a thousand years, even a phoenix’s ability to create life fades.” He let the flower flop back down. “Mother says I was worth the wait.”

I understood why it was so hard. My parents said they knew Owen would be their last, and I saw how deeply it affected Mom’s mood for a few years. “I agree.”

“Of course you do.” Cinaed bent down in front of Gwyneth’s row of pink roses. “Whenever Father visits, he collects some of the fallen petals and gives them to my mother.”

The sweet gesture spoke to Malachy’s deep love for his family. This wasn’t just a garden, it was an extension of Cinaed’s parents’ love for each other and their children. It also explained why Cinaed had trouble defying his grandfather.

Cinaed slowly walked down the line toward his parents’ bush. While his back was turned, I collected some of his petals and put them in my pocket. When he sat on the bench, I joined him. “Is this where you called me from all those times?”

“What gave it away?” He smiled, but it dimmed quickly. “I wish you didn’t have to leave.” His voice caught slightly. “I know why – I understand the logic – but we’ve spent too many years apart already.”

He left unsaid the possibility we didn’t have many days left and each one was precious. “This time it’s different.” I kept my voice steady despite the ache in my chest. “We’re not hiding anymore.”

“Promise me something?”

He faced me, and he was so serious, I wondered if I could give him what he wanted.

“Anything.”

“Come back to me,” he said, his eyes sparkled like the light on his roses. Cupping my cheek with his hand, he moved our heads together. “No matter what happens next, this isn’t the last time we’re together.”

I leaned into his touch—he knew I couldn’t guarantee what he asked, but that wasn’t the point. He wanted me to know he didn’t care what his grandfather said, he was going to fight for us. And I was going to fight just as hard.

“I promise we will be together again soon.”

Chapter Six

C inaed:

The neolithic stones loomed against the pre-dawn sky, their weathered surfaces painted in shades of violet and deep blue. I was struck by how old the place felt, which shouldn't have surprised me given they were put there five thousand years ago. Still, even for a phoenix, this place was ancient.

Bart was the first into the circle, followed closely by his brother Leo.

They were a pair. The serious older brother who suppressed his playful side to tackle the world's problems, and the more carefree younger one who tried to hide the exceptional mind behind humor.

Even Roderick couldn't explain why they chose to conceal parts of themselves.

"This is astounding," Bart said, his purple stone glowing as he traced detection spells through the air. "An extraordinary amount of magic has been cast inside this stone circle. The echoes still reside in the stones."

"Careful," Leo said as we moved closer. "He's half a step from geeking out on us."

I probably should've laughed, but I was focused on what Bart had discovered. Placing my hand on one of the megaliths, the stone pulsed under my palm, thrumming with dormant power. "They don't just remember, they're preserving something."

Cael joined his mate, placing a hand over Bart's. He'd shifted to his elven form to enhance his earth magic. "There are spells woven into the stones. They're old and powerful, but entwined closely with the Earth."

"Someone is watching us." Gundhram moved closer to me and Leo.

Father had contacted someone he said might be helpful, but I forgot to tell the others. "It is probably my father's friend."

"I'd nae presume to call myself his friend," a voice said from below the hill. "But I am here because Prince Malachy asked me to come."

The phoenix who walked up the hill was older than any I'd seen before. Far older than my grandfather. He carried his age like a well-loved cloak.

"I am Aonghas." His amber eyes fixed on me. "Yer father thought I might know somethin about this place, young Prince FionnLaoch. I know many things, so it might be best to ask me what you want to know."

"D o you know who placed the magic in these stones?" Bart asked.

"Nae, laddie." He rested his hand on the side of a towering stone. "They were old before I was born."

It was hard to determine the level of Aonghas's willingness to provide information. He said he'd come to help, but it was clear he'd only give us information if we asked the right questions. "What were they used for?"

"That's a popular question." The expression on Aonghas' weathered features shifted.

"I'm not sure who built them or why, but druids still roamed these isles when I was a

child.

They used the Ring of Brodgar to banish demons.

They also used the Stones of Stenness, but it's much smaller and not as powerful. ”

In coming here, we all half expected Aonghas's answer, but hearing the words was still shocking. “Are you sure?” I asked.

“I'd nae hae said it if I weren't.” He removed his hand from the stone and moved toward the center.

“The rings are older than written history, but I've watched over them for close to twenty-eight centuries.

Before Katarina and Adelais created the Great Ward, these stones and others around the world kept us safe.

And if demons managed to come for us, the druids used these circles to send them back. ”

“Excuse me?” Leo said, pulling his wool peacoat tighter around his body. “You said it was a popular question. Has someone else asked about it recently?”

“Aye.” Aonghas spat toward an open space. “Trio of mages came asking questions, here and at Stenness. The locals sent them to me, but I turned them away. Didn't like their aura.”

My fear was visible on everyone else's face. “Can you describe them?”

“I ain't much good with words, but I can show you.” He pointed to me.

I knew what he was offering and it spoke of his trust in my father. This wasn't just viewing his memories, it was experiencing them. Whatever Aonghas was feeling, I'd feel as if I were him. "You honor me."

"It don't take a genius to know them three had something to do with King Ailpein's disappearance." He held out his hand. "You bein his kin, I want to help you find him."

Fortunately, Aonghas wouldn't see my thoughts because I wasn't as committed to finding my grandfather as he expected. "I need to show what I see to my friends. I won't share more than their faces, but I need your permission first."

"Your Highness is polite to ask, but do whatever you need to find our king."

The four mages had their stones out, but I locked my gaze on Bart. I'd felt his mind when he spoke to Rod, and it would be easiest to link with him. "If I share with you, can you show the others?"

"Yes."

I waited to take Aonghas's hand until Bart extended a link. The old phoenix's thoughts pushed into my mind. Three mages, two men and a woman, stood in front of Aonghas. The man at the back sneered when Aonghas asked who they were, why they were asking, and did they have the king's permission.

Aonghas's defiance felt like it was mine as I watched the three struggle to remain calm. When the woman put her hand into her coat pocket, Aonghas tensed for a fight. The man in front raised a finger and she stopped.

"We're meeting with the king tomorrow," he said. "We'll ask him for permission."

“See that you do before ye come back.”

When the three turned and left, I broke the link.

I’d done everything I could to stick to just what we needed, but I couldn’t block Aonghas’s discomfort of having me in his thoughts.

“Thank you.” I squeezed the hand I still held and then released it.

“I appreciate you allowing us to intrude on your privacy.”

“Find the king and we’ll be square, young prince.”

I wondered what he’d say if he knew how bitter and petty Grandfather had become.

“We’re doing our best.”

The others in my group had moved to the far side of the circle and were huddled together in obvious conversation. When I reached them, Bart beckoned me over. “I’m guessing you recognized some of those visitors,” I said.

“All three,” Otto said. “The woman is Victoria Ashworth, deputy ambassador to the European Union. I’ll alert the Ministry.”

“The man in front was Thomas Reid,” Leo said. “Assistant deputy inquisitor general in our London office.”

“The mage in back was Thorton Beckinbaugh,” Cael said. “He’s a self-proclaimed expert in creative magic who was removed as a teacher at Utrecht High School for using magic to discipline a student. He’s a real whack job.”

The brothers were quiet, and their stones were glowing, so I assumed they were

reporting the names of the traitors. I waited for them to finish before raising the question of what to do next.

“Now we know why the Ocular Society said Bart, Otto, and Leo needed to be in Scotland,” Cael said. “Unfortunately, those three probably are in hiding now.”

I understood his frustration. We were one step behind them at every turn. “Catching one of them would be helpful in finding my grandfather.”

“I wouldn’t count on them giving us useful information,” Otto said. “Blackstone has put a kill spell in the stones of other agents in case they get captured.”

My head throbbed from the intensity of sharing Aonghas’ memories, but I was also angry. These mages came into our home and took our king. The new information, however, meant our answers would be found elsewhere. “What do we do next?”

I scanned the group, but everyone had turned toward Bart. He had his stone out and was oblivious to the attention. Purple light from his gem scoured the snowy ground. He stopped moving his stone and remained stationary over a single point. “Cael? Can you come here?”

Bart only asked for his mate, but we all converged on him. Cael put his hand over Bart’s and they closed their eyes. I’d spent most of my life speaking to my family mentally, so I knew they were talking. Finally, Cael pulled his hand away.

“You’re right,” he said.

“Right about what?” Leo asked.

“Sorry,” Bart said, putting his stone away.

“There’s a lot going on here. There are burial mounds inside the circle and inside those are some powerful magical items. Which is truly fascinating and confirms our suspicions that our ancestors used other items besides gemstones to work their magic.

If we could excavate the area, the wealth of information?—”

“That’s enough, Bart,” Cael said, touching his mate’s chest. “As interested as everyone is in this academic discussion, Cinaed’s question needs an answer.”

“He asked a question?”

Cael rolled his eyes and let out a sigh. “He asked what we should do next.”

“We should go visit Percy and Gio,” Otto said. “Maybe their library has some details on what these circles were used for.”

“I could ask Syrax if there’s any information in our library,” Gund said. “Leo and I can go help him look.”

Finding an answer to the circles was important, but Leo and Gund leaving felt wrong.

We’d never picked a leader for our group, but as the prince, I had some claim to the role while we were here.

“You should send Syrax a message and let others look,” I said.

“Whatever we’re supposed to do as a group isn’t finished.

At least it doesn’t feel that way to me. We all need to go see Percy and Gio.”

“Agreed,” Thal said. “Let me tell my uncles the seven of us are coming.”

I almost cursed myself for being stupid. Had I agreed with Gund, I could've flown back with them and seen Rod. Unfortunately, our mission wasn't finished. We needed a solution or else we might never complete our bond.

My gut told me we wouldn't find it in Transylvania, but it was the right place to start.

Chapter Seven

Roderick:

Yawning, I set my book down and took another sip of coffee.

Traveling across time zones always played havoc with my internal clock.

It was mid-afternoon for Avie and the others based in Philadelphia.

Elsbeth and I were five hours ahead, and it was past my dinner hour.

If my stomach grumbled, too bad. I was hungry.

“I can order food if you’re hungry, dear.” Aunt Gretchen patted my hand. “We forgot you left Edinburgh at four a.m. our time.”

Of all Dad’s siblings, Gretchen was everyone’s favorite. She was the one most comfortable in her own skin. The others were too self-important for my liking. “I’ll manage, but let’s make it an early supper.”

“Always the good child,” Avie said.

The world heard sarcasm in her remark, but to me it was a private joke.

Avie spent her life living up to the high expectations of the heir apparent.

I spent a lot of time being a wild child so people would stop suggesting they skip over her and pick me.

There weren't many beings sharper than my older sister, and she figured me out before anyone else.

Once she knew I had her back, I got to drop the act.

"I have a personal motivation to find King Ailpein," I said. "My stomach can wait a bit longer."

"We're wasting our time," Jan said. "Avie's people and Dad's team have combed the school looking for clues. Blackstone wiped all trace of his existence from the school."

"We're not trying to prove he existed," Owen said. "Only why he hung around Utrecht for two-hundred and fifty years."

The simple answer was so he could hide in plain sight, but the others had rejected that idea. They were probably right, but my gut said it played some part in his decision. "I agree with Jan."

"You do?" Jan looked around the room like I'd given him an award. "Really?"

Most of my siblings were special, but I had a lot of respect for Jan.

He stepped into the viper's nest of Hollen Hall at age five as Dad's bastard son.

Jan never let the nastiness of family politics dampen his spirit.

"Blackstone stayed here to be close to the seat of power. He used his position to recruit people to his cause and allow them to advance up the ranks of all levels of

power. We're not going to find any ulterior motives. ”

“What about the fact the Great Ward was created on these grounds?” a voice asked.

I turned and found two old men standing in the library doorway. One was a mage of considerable power, and the other was an elf. “That assumes he knew it was here, Uncle.”

Darius smiled and Ignatius nudged his mate. “Told you the smart ones wouldn't bite for your lame attempt to bait them.”

“Hush, you old fool.” The humorous tone belied the hard words. “I would bet money he did. Care to wager?”

“That would be a difficult fact to prove,” Avie said. “Unless we ask him, we'll never know for sure.”

The pair moved closer, and I saw Darius held an old book. “Gretchen, could we bother you for some tea? Green if you have any.”

“Of course, Uncles.” Gretchen put her hand on her stone and ‘disappeared’ for a moment. “Staff will bring us a pot in a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” Ignatius said. “Flying on a dragon is incredibly exhilarating, but not all that comfortable on an old elf's butt.”

“Honestly, Iggy.” Darius rolled his eyes. He set the book down and they took seats across from me and Avie. “Where to begin.”

“The beginning always helps,” Jan said.

Ignatius pointed a finger at Jan and nodded. “Well said, nephew.”

Darius closed his eyes and had a long suffering look on his face.

“The Great Ward was created not far from these grounds. It was never marked, but scholars and mages narrowed down the location using the pattern of disappearing demons. Those findings were recorded and housed in the original mage school library. I’m sure if you search Utrecht’s library, you will not find a copy of that book.

Fortunately, Percy and I both have copies. ”

We all looked at the volume sitting in front of him. “Why in the world would you allow that information to remain available?” Elspeth asked. “Instead of making copies, why didn’t you destroy the book?”

“It served our purpose to allow the book to remain,” Ignatius said.

Before anyone could ask a follow-up question, a staff member entered the conference room carrying a tray with cups and a tea pot. “Thank you.”

Darius poured himself and Ignatius a cup before tapping the book. “What significance does the site have?”

I tried to come up with a way I could use the place to aid in my spell casting, but without more information, I couldn’t come up with a good answer. “Was there any kind of formation or amplifier in the area?”

“No,” Ignatius said. “But well done. You see why Darius posed the question. There is nothing about the site that matters. It was just where they were at the time they were ready to cast the spell.”

Which meant anyone looking for the site would waste their time hunting for a place with no special powers. “Did Blackstone ever figure it out?”

“Impossible to know if he realized the site was meaningless,” Darius said. “But we know he never visited the place.”

“You were right, Rod,” Avie said. “He stayed to be close to mage government.”

I nodded absently. The way the guardians made us tease out information was irritating. We couldn’t afford to waste time, but we had to ask the right question before they’d tell us what we needed to know. “How do you know he never found the spot?”

“Darius and I owned the estate that was turned into Utrecht University,” Ignatius said. “We kept the plot of land where Katarina and Adelais died, and built our home there. No one knew who we were, so we lived there all these years.”

Much like Blackstone, they hid right in front of everyone, while protecting the final resting place of two heroes.

“Then it’s a waste of time searching the library for clues,” Lysandor said.

“Rod?” Cinaed’s voice stopped me from hearing the answer. “Are you okay?”

I had intended to argue against the futility of trying to unearth hints to what Blackstone was up to, but Cinaed’s call pulled me away. “Of course. Is something wrong there?”

“No. Your emotions were all over the place. I thought you were distressed.”

Checking my magical protection, I wasn’t leaking. So how did he feel me? “I’m not

sure how that's possible."

Me neither, but it was disconcerting."

Anything that distracted Cinaed was bad. "I'll work on blocking my feelings from you."

"Please don't," he said. "It feels nice. Like you're with me all the time."

Making him happy was always high on my list, but not understanding what I was doing gave me pause. I'd need to speak to my brothers about what was happening. "I promise not to cut you off without telling you first. Are you ready for your flight?"

"I've never been to Transylvania, and I'd be excited but for the reason."

"Roderick?"

Avie calling me meant I'd zoned out on an important bit. "Hold that thought." I wasn't letting him go that quickly.

Refocusing on the meeting, all eyes were on me. "Sorry," I said, not sounding the least bit apologetic. "I'm talking to Cinaed."

"Ah." Ignatius raised a finger. "Here we thought we were boring you."

I'd met with Darius and Ignatius many times, and usually I appreciated their humor. This wasn't one of those times. "Not at all, but what was the question? I want to finish my conversation with him."

"The suggestion is we head to Maine and search the dragon library," Avie said. "It's older, larger, and away from James Blackstone's attempts to destroy valuable

information.”

I owed her—again. Had she been against going, she’d have presented that argument. “It makes sense.”

“Glad you agree,” Avie said, patting my hand. “Give my best to Cinaed.”

Now that I had permission, I returned to Cinaed. “Sorry, love. The demands of being the team leader.”

I explained our discussion, and he agreed with the idea. “We can compare notes twice a day.”

Transparent, but I’d long stopped worrying about appearances. “That sounds like the best idea I’ve heard today. Have a safe trip and contact me when you arrive.”

“I will, and Rod? I’m the one who can regenerate.”

His way of telling me to be careful, without telling me to be safe, was cute. “I will. I have someone waiting for me when I finish. Can’t let getting injured or killed get in my way of seeing you.”

Chapter Eight

C inaed:

Percy and Gio's home had a different vibe from the energy I'd known my entire life. Our ancestral castle was saturated with the same primordial earth magic that flowed through every phoenix. The guardians' outwardly modest cottage felt like I'd stepped into a new world.

They'd crammed their house with layers of magic that were academic, purposeful, and pervasive. There were so many different functions that my brain struggled to accept what my eyes observed.

"I had a similar moment of awe when I first entered," Otto said. "As Gio told me when I asked, there are few things you can't accomplish with centuries to work on a problem. At the risk of totally blowing your mind, wait until you see the basement."

When the others said we needed to visit Percy and Gio because they had an incredible library, I had visions of a large mansion with an entire wing devoted to rare books.

Or maybe a separate building to house their collection.

Instead, we'd arrived at a tiny bungalow that was barely as big as my suite in the palace.

"Basement?" I blinked. "They have a priceless library in a basement?"

“It’s probably best to see it before we try to explain,” Gio said as he led us down a narrow hallway. “Words fail to do justice to what Percy created.”

The fondness in his voice for his mate left an ache in my heart for what I couldn’t experience for myself. Telling myself it would happen soon didn’t make the hunger disappear.

We were led down a spiral staircase descending into darkness. Mage globes along the wall flickered to life as we approached. When we reached the first landing, I realized the vastness of their “basement.”

“Sweet mother of fire,” I muttered.

The underground library stretched in every direction, at least four or five times wider than the modest home above.

Towering bookshelves created a labyrinth of knowledge, their ancient wooden frames bearing the weight of countless volumes.

The air carried the comforting scent of old parchment, ink, and the faint tang of preservation spells.

“As Otto said, we had a lot of free time,” Percy said with a shrug. “We volunteered to create this library, and our fellow guardians helped us preserve the knowledge that might otherwise be lost.”

A mage and an ancient gryphon were seated at a massive table covered in books and scrolls. I’d never met the Eastern Guardians, but one look and I knew that’s who they were.

Percy took a minute to introduce me to Anso and Leifr, and I found myself hanging

back slightly as the others greeted each other. They had the easy familiarity of beings who shared a purpose. I was the only being without a mate, and it highlighted Rod's absence.

I stood next to Leo and Gund and felt overwhelmed by the task. Percy and Gio, with Anso and Leifr's help, had pulled dozens of books and set them on a series of tables.

"We searched for anything that had even a passing reference to stone circles, druidic magic, or phoenix-specific spells," Anso said. "There are twice this many or more we haven't pulled yet, so we've got a lot to review."

"We should split up," Otto suggested. "That way we don't duplicate work."

We divided into groups and I was paired with Leo, Gund, and Cael to search for a clue to how Blackstone planned to permanently kill my grandfather.

Fear and resentment churned inside me when asked to work on this task.

I obviously didn't want my grandfather to die, but I hadn't forgiven him for the decades of forced separation from Rod.

Guilt followed when it was clear I hadn't given my full commitment to finding my kidnapped relative.

I took a seat at the worn wooden table and plucked the top leather-bound book from the closest stack.

Harmonized Energies: Phoenix Fire in Combined Spell Casting .

The author's name had worn away, but I doubted I'd recognize the being.

Especially since the date—1602—was still visible.

Still, the mages wouldn't have selected this treatise if they didn't think it was useful.

Hours passed in relative silence, broken only by the rustle of pages or murmured conversation. Despite my best efforts to focus, my mind kept drifting. After I read the same paragraph three times without absorbing a word, I set it aside and got up to stretch.

Roderick would've been more methodical than me. I read the books, but since nothing was on point, I didn't take any notes. Rod would've cross-referenced interesting points to other sources. I envied his discipline, especially now when it mattered most.

Where I struggled most was my motivation. I didn't really care if I never spoke to my grandfather again, but if he died, Rod and I might not be able to complete our bond. In addition to how much I'd personally suffer if that happened, the world was at risk of being overrun with demons if we failed.

“Cinaed?”

The voice broke my thoughts. “Rod! Is everything alright?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” Rod said. “I sensed you're upset.

His presence had slipped into my mind like a warm balm. We'd grown closer since we'd spent that night together, but feeling my emotions was new. “I'm fine, just frustrated.”

“That feels like an echo of my thoughts.” His mental voice sounded amused and I could see his face grinning at me in my mind. “Is there something wrong, or just a

lack of progress?”

“Both and neither.” If anyone could understand me, it was him.

“I didn’t expect we’d find an answer, but I guess I’d hoped we’d have a quick break through.

The real problem is how I feel about my grandfather.

I’m still mad at him. That, and digging through ancient texts doesn’t play to my strengths. ”

“You’re more disciplined than you think,” he said gently. “With all the years we’ve to be together, we could teach a master class in patience.”

Not that I had a choice, but we agreed long ago to make the best of our situation. “I’d wait centuries if I had to.”

“Let not put that determination to the test.” His presence in my mind was stronger, as if he were attempting to wrap his energy around mine. “You should get back to your research. We leave for Maine soon. I’ll update you when we arrive.”

“I miss you.” The words slipped out, but I didn’t regret them.

“And I miss you,” he said. “Be safe, my love.”

His presence faded from my mind, but I felt more centered than I had all day. Taking a deep breath, I returned to the text I’d struggled to read before I spoke to Rod.

C losing my book, I pushed it away and sat back. “We’re missing something,” I whispered.

“What was that?” Leo asked.

I hadn’t meant for the others to hear me since it was a half-formed thought, but it had been so quiet I forgot Leo was seated next to me.

Having put it out there, I decided to go with my thought.

“By every account, Blackstone is a methodical being. He wouldn’t have taken Grandfather unless he believed every aspect of his plan was in place.

The fact he hasn’t acted suggests something didn’t go according to plan.”

The others had stopped what they were doing and looked at me and Leo.

“We don’t know that,” Gund said. “Maybe he needed your grandfather before he could begin his next phase.”

“No,” Leo said quietly. “Cinaed might be onto something. I’ve had similar thoughts.

Holding a powerful being like Ailpein captive is difficult.

Ask the warden at a mage prison if you don’t believe me.

The longer Ailpein is detained, the greater the chance he can escape, we’ll notice the magic used to detain him, or he’ll be able to get us a message.

It makes more sense Blackstone planned to act swiftly, but hit a snag.”

I was glad to hear I wasn’t totally crazy. As a trained inquisitor, Leo’s opinion carried a lot more weight than mine. “If I had to guess, the hitch has to do with how phoenix regenerate. When we die, we go to a place between life and death. It’s possible to

stay there for as long as we want.”

“What if he took away Ailpein’s ashes?” Otto asked.

“It wouldn’t make a difference,” Percy said. “Rising from the ashes is a myth. If the ashes were required, it would make regeneration fairly easy to thwart.”

He was correct, but it wasn’t something we told the world.

If beings were focused on our ashes, they wouldn’t search for a different method to kill our kind.

“That’s correct, but I still don’t understand how he plans to permanently kill a phoenix.

Adelais had to willingly end her life by refusing to regenerate. ”

“I have a question about that,” Bart said. “Do all phoenix know how to do what Adelais did, or is it a secret only a few know?”

My snarky side wanted to ask if he wanted to be sure I could do it if needed.

I didn’t know Bart well, but Rod said his brother had been willing to sacrifice himself to save his mate and brother.

“We’re taught at an early age the danger of releasing our power in the way Adelais did.

The idea being, if we know, we won’t do it by accident. Why?”

Bart suddenly looked uncomfortable. “I’ve been trying to think of how to kill a

phoenix so I could figure out what Blackstone is planning.”

“No one thinks you’re trying to kill beings, Bart,” Anso said. “If we’re being honest, Percy, Darius, Ignatius, and I have had this conversation. Not that we have anything to show for it.”

“I think I know,” Bart said. “The spell that trapped the guards was able to leech dark magic into their souls. When they regenerated, a tiny bit was still there. If Blackstone finds a way to insert a thread of magic into Ailpein’s soul, he might be able to trigger the kill switch.”

Grandfather would point to this discussion as proof of his fears.

The context mattered, but he’d ignore that and focus only on the words.

“It doesn’t work like that,” I said. “There’s no ‘switch’ to flip that sets it off.

It’s about how our energy is focused. When we die, we instinctively go to the place in between and regenerate.

Blackstone would need to convince Grandfather not to go. ”

“If the ashes don’t matter, why can’t he regenerate somewhere other than where Blackstone is holding him?” Thalion asked. “Why not regenerate back at the phoenix castle?”

Regeneration was a deeply personal aspect of a phoenix’s life.

Openly discussing it with outsiders went against everything we were taught from an early age.

I wanted to tell them to ask someone else because Grandfather had already hurt me enough, but I didn't.

I'd agreed to this task and needed to push through my discomfort.

"The short answer is we can't change where we are reborn." The hopeful expressions dimmed when the potential solution was cut short. "I've never tried, but others—many others—have tried. We always return to the place where we died."

I waited for more questions, but no one spoke. The room suddenly felt small and stuffy. "I need some air."

Percy met my gaze with a kindly expression. "There's a small courtyard in the back of the house that's warded. I'll take you there."

Grateful for the offer, I followed him up the narrow staircase. Percy led me out back to a garden surrounded by a low stone wall. The night air had the bite of winter, but after hours in the stuffy library, it felt like heaven against my skin.

"Thank you," I said. "I needed the wind in my face."

"You're very like your father," Percy said. "Compassionate heart, but steely resolve in the face of trouble."

The words stunned me more than anything I'd heard thus far. "You know my father?"

"I do," he said with a fond smile. "When he was a young phoenix, he came to study with Gio's family. I'd perfected my charm by then, and he saw a young unicorn, not an alpha mage. He'd already cut a path different from your grandfather."

Father had always been a softer and more reasonable voice than the king. For as long

as I could remember, he'd talked Grandfather down from extreme positions. "He's far wiser than my grandfather thought."

"Indeed," Percy said. "And more strategic, as well."

There was a lesson in his words, but before I could ask, Percy stiffened and turned toward the front of his home. "Is something wrong?"

"No," he shook his head and seemed more relaxed. "We have an unexpected, but not unwelcome guest."

We reentered the house, and Gio was already in the main room. The others emerged from the library. The mages all had their hands near their stones. Percy joined his mate, and together they opened the door.

"Wexal." Gio stepped back to let their guest into the house. "We didn't expect you today."

The younger unicorn bowed deeply to Gio and Percy.

"My apologies for interrupting your family gathering. There's new magical activity at the Demon Cave.

The mages brought a prisoner with them. It was a being, but we couldn't tell what species.

They also made a great show of their passing, yelling at the prisoner to move along and doing silly, meaningless magic. "

I didn't need Leo's training to know this was to get our attention. "Are we sure the being was a prisoner and not just acting for our benefit?"

“Young master voices our suspicions,” Wexal said. “This is a trap. They made certain we observed what they wanted us to see.”

Of course it was a trap, but they didn’t expect to fool us. It was like that stupid, ‘you know that I know that you know that I know,’ conundrum. The only question was if we’d play along. “Who fancies a game of chess?”

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Chapter Nine

Roderick:

The dragon library was unlike anything I'd ever seen, and I'd visited many of the world's greatest magical archives.

Housed well below the main castle floor, the massive chamber stretched outward in all directions.

Mage globes were affixed to the end of the bookshelves, and I could see most were full of the knowledge that stretched back to the beginning of recorded history.

The air smelled of ancient parchment, dust, and the faintest hint of cinnamon—Syrax's personal touch we were told.

The dragon counselor had welcomed us eagerly, which wasn't surprising considering the urgency of our task.

Leo's bond with Gund didn't hurt as he won over many of the most hardened dragon purists.

Gund's siblings, along with Eldwin and Hro, met us in the library.

Leita greeted Avie like a lost sister, which made me happy.

Avie wasn't close with any of our sisters, so it was good she'd found a close friend.

The king's brother, Emyhr, stood with Jan and Conall and the laughter from the three seemed out of place, yet welcome given our mission.

Darius and Eldwin chatted and I noted the resemblance.

The brothers looked similar, but personality-wise, they couldn't be more different.

Darius was studious and the second-best mage of his generation after his mother Katarina.

Eldwin had been a warrior mage—the perfect match for the dragon champion Hro.

After a few minutes, Leita broke away from Avie. “Syrax pulled numerous volumes that might be helpful in your search.” She gestured toward a row of tables stacked with books and scrolls. “He and his assistants have filled other tables around the library. Given our numbers, I suggest we split up.”

My brothers and their mates, along with Eldwin and Hro, left with Emyhr, leaving me with Avie, Darius, Ignatius, and Leita.

Elsbeth looked a little left out, but before I could move to include her, my sister drew her into their orbit.

Avie never missed a thing, not even when someone was feeling alone.

I'd experienced that skill many times over the last forty years.

Avie gave me a knowing smile. She said something to the two she was with, and then joined me. “Elsbeth and Leita will look through the historical accounts,” she said. “You and I will focus on the magical theory texts. If that's okay with you.”

Growing up, I never noticed how Avie always took charge and organized events.

She was almost eleven when I was born, and I adored her growing up.

Unlike our other siblings, she and I bonded before she had to harden her image to be accepted in the male dominated mage world.

To me, she'd always be the big sister I adored growing up.

"Do I get a choice?" I asked in a light tone.

"No." She turned on her heel and led me to a table near the end of the row. "I want to sit with you because you have the most insight into what we're looking for."

I noticed she left out Darius and Ignatius. They seemed mildly amused, but when she looked at them, she was unapologetic. "I wouldn't presume to tell you two what to do."

"What a refreshing attitude among this generation," Ignatius said. "Did you hear that, Darius? I get to do what I like for once."

"Yes, because this is the first time in twelve-hundred years you're allowed to choose." Darius had mastered the art of sarcasm. "Since we're breaking new ground, you can tell me what I should study."

If he took offense at his mate's remark, Ignatius didn't let on. "I think I'd like to tackle magical theory, so you can help with the historical accounts."

Sitting in the surprisingly comfortable wooden chair, we began to sift through the pile of information in front of us.

The first scroll I unrolled pre-dated the Demon War.

Scanning the content, I realized I didn't know what I was searching for.

The answer to Blackstone's plan wasn't going to jump off the page.

We'd need to piece it together from scraps of information found in various places.

Frustrated, I began at the top and concentrated on what I was reading.

Two hours later, I'd found very little I deemed helpful.

Avie and Ignatius hadn't found much more.

Several times we'd find a passage we thought useful, but after a discussion we discarded it as not pertinent.

I sat back and saw Owen and Lysandor coming toward us through the stacks.

They held hands and exuded a deep contentment.

The knife-edge of envy sliced through me. My youngest brother had found his happiness, while I was denied mine with Cinaed.

"You're scowling," Avie whispered as the boys passed us. "Your time will come, and when it does, it will be perfect."

She was right. Cinaed and I spoke of it often, and I believed it would happen. In moments like this, however, it still hurt. "I know." I'd have smiled, but it would've looked fake. "But that doesn't mean I can always keep the longing at bay."

“No, it doesn’t.” She patted my hand before giving it a squeeze. “I was just reminding you not to lose hope.”

As long as Cinaed was alive, I’d never give up. We would be together, and now that this cycle was coming to an end, I was more hopeful than ever that our time was near. “I haven’t, but I can’t promise not to be impatient.”

We sat quietly for a few seconds, her hand still over mine. She understood being alone all too well. Once I had my affairs in order, I’d turn my attention to helping her find happiness too.

“You look like I feel,” Avie said, pushing away the leather-bound tome she’d been reading for a while. She stretched her arms above her head, and then stood. “Let’s take a proper break and go for a walk. I need to clear my mind.”

Grateful for her suggestion, I pushed back from the table. The others glanced up, perhaps hoping we’d invite them, but Avie wanted a break. I did too. With every dead end, my frustration grew. A short breather would allow me to reset my patience.

Avie led me up a narrow spiral staircase, and we eventually emerged in a small sitting room that overlooked a snow-covered courtyard.

Several chairs had been set on a thick, colorful rug and were arranged facing each other.

It was an ideal place for scholars to come discuss what they’d learned without disturbing anyone still working.

“Leita showed me this place last time I was here,” Avie said, settling into one of the chairs. “We’d been researching the klarion, and our discussion upset Syrax and the others who were still reading.”

I sank into the remaining chair, grateful for the private retreat. “It’s peaceful up here.”

“You seemed aggravated, so I figured this would help rejuvenate you.”

She wasn’t wrong. Negative energy wasn’t going to help find answers. “Does it feel like we’re going about this the wrong way?”

“How so?”

The fact she didn’t act like I was crazy made me feel a bit better.

“Blackstone isn’t crazy—I mean, maybe he is, but he’s been planning this for a very long time.

Destroying the Great Ward will allow mages to summon demons again.

Like 1200 years ago, all it takes is one person to raise a demon they can’t control for the world to be plunged into a new demon war.

How is that scenario worth the effort and risk Blackstone took to get this far? ”

“It isn’t,” Avie said. “So how does he prevent that outcome?”

I didn’t know, but I had a theory. “Remember when Blackstone raised the demon prince to try to kill Bart?”

Avie’s expression soured. “Are you going to remind me I insisted he was wrong about Declan trying to kill him?”

I should’ve realized she was still salty about her mistake. “Not unless you want me to. My point is, did anyone examine the glyph with anyone other than Declan in

mind?”

“You know we didn’t,” she said. “And yes, we erased it before Bart recovered to prevent him from ignoring his doctor’s advice.”

The problem with being one of the smartest people in the room was that you didn’t always have room to hear contrasting opinions. “I did.” I let those two words settle.

“Why.... When did you do that?” she asked.

Maybe we should’ve had this discussion sooner, but I’d known it wouldn’t go down well.

“Before I visited Bart in the hospital, I visited the campus. As for why, once Cinaed and I realized we were mates, we knew that wouldn’t have happened unless it was connected to the Great Ward.

We spoke to the guardians, and they shared that the Ward was slowly losing its potency.

By the time Blackstone unleashed his plans to kill Bart, I was already on alert for something unusual. ”

Avie remained quiet and stared at a spot on the wall. “I assume you didn’t tell me about your visit to Utrecht given my attitude toward Bart’s belief it wasn’t Declan.”

I nodded, glad she hadn’t needed me to spell it out for her.

“I didn’t learn who created that glyph, but it wasn’t a simple summoning circle.

When he’d recovered, I showed Bart the images from the glyph.

It took him a year to guess what the symbols meant, but unless he wanted to test his theory, we wouldn't know for sure. ”

“What does our genius brother think Blackstone meant to do with that glyph?”

Standing, I moved to the window. Nothing disturbed the snow in the courtyard below.

It was as calming an image as I could find.

“Mostly it was a summoning spell for a very powerful demon, but hidden in the greater spell were two others. One was designed to trap the demon, and the second was anchored to the sacrificial mage.” I went back to my chair.

“Had Bart never appeared or had the demon killed him, the demon prince would've been trapped in the circle.

Had it eaten the mage, as it tried to before Bart killed Declan, it would've been subjugated to the will of the person who created the glyph. ”

“Blackstone,” she said. “So that's his endgame.”

“Was,” I said. “I'm not sure what his plan is now.”

“Don't you?” Avie looked at me the way she did when we were kids and she wanted me to figure it out for myself. “He'll try again.”

She saw the obvious, but she didn't know what I did.

“The glyphs would've failed to bind the prince.

Or at least Bart doesn't think it would've worked.

Based on the level of magic needed to contain and kill it, Blackstone wouldn't have had enough power, which is why we believe he created all these attempts to kill the next generation of guardians.

The magic needed to recreate that summoning circle would be enormous.

There's no way he could hide it now that we're searching this intently. "

"What if he used an existing circle?" She raised an eyebrow. "Like Stonehenge or the Ring of Brodgar?"

Those were too public and the magic long since depleted. "Those circles are broken. They won't work with so many stones gone or toppled. If he tried to right them, we'd notice."

"What if he created his own?" she asked. "He could hide his work."

By everything we knew, it would need to be a large circle, especially if he wanted to hold a demon prince. "Anything big enough would be visible. Even he couldn't hide the magic needed to create it and power it. Maybe one aspect, but not both. I don't think he'd take the risk."

"I'm not aware of any fully intact circles," Avie said. "All the catalogued ones I know about are missing pieces. To be thorough, however, I'll ask someone in our European Division."

The nagging sensation crystallized into clarity. Our thinking was too narrow. "Earth magic exists everywhere, not just in Europe. We focused there because those are the best-known structures, but other cultures found ways to channel earth magic."

Avie put her finger to her lip and nodded. "Go on."

“Medicine wheels,” I said, the revelation washing over me. “There was a passage in one of those books that said medicine wheels were sacred circles built across North America. They’re similar to the European stone circles, but built according to different cultural traditions.”

“That makes perfect sense,” Avie said. “Earth magic runs through all beings. The information received is the same, but would be implemented differently.”

Blackstone being a scholar and a meticulous planner, almost surely figured this out.

Unfortunately, we didn’t know which medicine wheel he planned to use.

And we needed to find Ailpein. “Can you tell the others about our conversation? I’m going to contact Cinaed and see if they found any clues to where his grandfather is being held. ”

The excuse was flimsy, and Avie raised an eyebrow. “Of course. I’m sure they are withholding that information until someone asks.”

Avie squeezed my shoulder as she headed for the stairs. I withdrew my mage stone and focused my thoughts. “Cinaed?”

“Rod.” He answered almost immediately. “I was just thinking about you. How’s your search going.”

I filled him in on my discussion with Avie, hoping he could tie the stone circles to the medicine wheels.

“Sorry, love,” he said. “I was never the expert on those places. Elspeth might know more.”

I hadn't expected he'd have information, but as my sister surmised, it was a good reason to contact him. "Avie's speaking to her and the others now. How about your search? Anything useful."

"No, and yes," he said. "We haven't found much in the library, but we have a working theory on how Blackstone intends to kill my grandfather. The bigger news is someone is using the demon cave."

My fear grew as he explained their situation. As Cinaed suggested, it was a test of wills. They were going despite it being a trap, and the other side was daring them to test their skills. One side would be wrong. "What information do you expect to get that is worth the risk?"

"We don't know, but your brothers think we might be able to use these mages to find Grandfather."

I wanted to argue against him going, but I was as much or more in danger than he was. Cinaed could at least regenerate. "Be careful."

"Thank you, Rod." Through our link I felt his relief. "I know you want me to stay behind, and I appreciate you not asking. I'll be careful, and I want you to promise me the same."

If he could read me so well this soon, life was going to be interesting when we completed our bond. "Always. I have plans for us to enjoy a long, happy life together."

Chapter Ten

C inaed:

The wind rushed past my wings as I soared above the Romanian countryside.

Dawn hadn't fully broken, and the shadowy landscape below was a patchwork of dark forests and rocky terrain.

The Demon Cave was just ahead, its entrance a black spot against the mountainside.

Dark magic had corrupted this land for decades and traces of its taint remained. A perfect place for a trap.

Could it really be called a trap if I knew it for what it was? Everyone did. The only part that wasn't settled was who would come out ahead.

My mental link with Roderick was quiet. He'd had a long day and was sleeping along with the rest of his team.

I was grateful for the time differential.

Had he been awake, I'd have had to shield part of my thoughts, which was as good as saying I was hiding something.

As much as I didn't like doing that, letting him know where I was going would've been worse.

Worse, as in Rod would be on the first plane he could commandeer to get to me.

His showing up would defeat the purpose of me going alone.

Even asleep, I could feel him. Our connection had strengthened since our night together in my room.

Grandfather's spell still kept us from completing our bonding, but we were closer now than before.

I landed in front of the entrance and stared into the open maw. Dark magic clung to the walls, the residual energy the demon sword couldn't reabsorb. No surprise that the place gave me chills. If this wasn't our best chance to get information, I'd gladly turn away.

Instead, I flew cautiously into the trap. No one guarded the entrance, but it wasn't comforting. Going in wasn't nearly as essential as getting out, which made waiting for me inside a smart tactical move.

My flames lit my path, but even if it were pitch black, my phoenix eyes could've seen the path.

It was probably my imagination, but the walls seemed to absorb the light I generated.

I'd need to ask Rod if dark magic could do that, though I might want to wait a few days before discussing my solo rescue attempt.

The temperature dropped the farther in I went, and the tunnel narrowed before opening into a larger chamber.

I felt the remains of the defenses Otto and Owen had disabled on their previous visit.

The residual energy still pulsed weakly from a thousand points where the soul-sucking eyes had been.

I was grateful I hadn't been there when they were active.

I paused at a fork in the tunnel, letting my magical senses guide me. One path felt empty, devoid of the energy I was searching for. The other hummed with recent magical activity. Not subtle at all, but then, they wanted me to find whatever was waiting.

The tunnel widened into a vast chamber, its ceiling lost in darkness above. In the center, chained to a stone pillar, was a figure I recognized instantly.

Grandfather. Except it wasn't.

The diminished being lacked Grandfather's regal presence. His hair wasn't the right color, although only a family member might notice, and his skin rippled like it wasn't stable. The glamour might have fooled most beings, but not a phoenix.

I studied the chains, and the glowing energy wouldn't have been enough to hold someone as powerful as my grandfather. As disguises went, this one was terrible. Except it was perfectly fine for the charade we played.

Shifting, I cautiously approached the being, scanning the area for obvious traps. "Grandfather?" I said softly, trying to stay in character.

The being lifted its head, magically altered amber eyes meeting mine. "Cinaed." The voice was hoarse, as though the speaker had been screaming. "You shouldn't have come."

It was hard not to smile at how well he tried to play his part and how much he missed

the mark.

All phoenix voices share a subtle harmonic, imperceptible to humans and most shifters.

This being's attempt to mimic that pitch was off-key and borderline irritating.

I hoped I didn't give away I knew the truth before I got the information I needed.

"I couldn't let you remain a captive." I moved closer but maintained my defenses for the expected attack. "What have they done to you?"

"They want me to help them destroy the Great Ward, but they can't breach my defenses." The false Ailpein coughed weakly. "He needs me to release my power, but I've resisted."

His words had a ring of truth, but if this was all an act, how could we believe anything? I reached out with my magic to probe the chains deeper. The 'spells' were an illusion, like the being they supposedly held captive. "Did you find out any more about his plans?"

"How could I do that when I'm trapped here?" he said. "Don't ask stupid questions, child. Free me instead."

For an imposter, he'd mastered Grandfather's current arrogant tone. The deception flickered like a candle caught in a sudden breeze, and I saw the mage beneath the lure. I didn't know him, but I didn't know many mages.

"Grandfather" raised his arms as if pleading for help, and I braced for the attack.

A blast of dark energy slammed into me, throwing me against the wall with enough

force to crack a human's ribs.

Pain flared across my back and chest as I slid to the ground, momentarily stunned.

My phoenix healing immediately began mending the damage, but I was still dizzy from the impact.

Sigils erupted from the floor, surrounding me in a circle of binding energy. The magic began to crystallize at the edges, and I recognized it was similar to what had trapped our guards. I maintained the appearance of being dazed and twitched my hand.

Through half-closed eyelids, I saw the false facade drop away. The mage impersonator approached the barrier wearing a sadistic smile.

"Fucking phoenixes," he spat as he tapped the barrier. "Don't play dead, little pigeon. I felt you prepare for my attack. In case you missed it, the purpose of the blast was to move you onto the ground with the prison spell, not hurt you. Not much, at least."

It was clear why this mage joined Blackstone. He had no place in a civilized, orderly society. Dropping the pretense I was injured, I rose, my injuries already healed. I pushed against the magical barrier, testing its strength.

"You're stupider than we expected." He waved to the forming crystals. "The closer you are to the edge, the faster you'll be trapped."

As if he controlled the spell, a tiny shard formed around my fingertip.

It was icy cold and tried to smother my inner fire.

I focused on the spot and exerted my will.

The shiny, smooth surface retreated, and the man's eyes opened wide.

With my free hand, I sent a burst of phoenix fire to engulf the still disbelieving fool.

My fire surrounded him and overwhelmed his flimsy defenses. His sneer of contempt turned to fear and horror as my flames used his magic for fuel. The more he battled to smother the fiery attack, the hotter it burned.

Less than a minute later, his ashes collapsed into a pile just outside my prison. “You’re much stupider than I expected,” I said. “There’s a reason phoenixes are the apex species.”

Crouching, I studied the pattern of my prison, searching for the weak points Bart said he’d used to free the guards. There was a slight asymmetry at the base where the sigils generated the energy to maintain the walls. That was where I needed to disrupt the spell.

Before I could attempt to free myself, I sensed someone approaching. I stood and dropped all pretense of being injured. No one would believe it with the ashes at my feet.

“Well played, Prince Cinaed.” The voice echoed through the chamber before its owner appeared. “I’ll admit, I didn’t see that coming. Neither did Gregor, but there was a reason I chose that idiot to pose as your grandfather.”

James Blackstone stepped into the chamber followed by a mage globe.

I was surprised by his attire. I wasn’t sure what I expected—probably something black and sinister, which was very clichéd.

Instead, he wore slacks, a white collared shirt with the top button open, and a gray

cardigan sweater.

The normality of his appearance made him more unnerving.

He looked like a professor, not an evil mastermind.

He appeared older than his age, his face lined with the weight of centuries. A light throbbed deep inside the black hematite clutched in his right hand.

“Nice stone,” I said. “Nothing suspicious about a mage with a black gem.”

“It is rather extraordinary,” he said, turning his palm up. “I was loath to destroy my garnet stone—it had been in the family for centuries—but I couldn’t risk being tracked. This one, however, has been in my real family since before the demon war. It is better suited to my current needs.”

Talk about advertising your true colors. “Where’s my grandfather?”

“Safe, for now.” Blackstone pointed his free hand at the glyphs around me. “He’s proven remarkably resilient to my persuasion. More stubborn than I anticipated.”

As I suspected, Blackstone didn’t plan to wait this long. “He’s going to gut you when he gets free.”

“Brave words, little bird, but also quite inaccurate.” He gestured again, and watched expectantly. “I’ve planned this for centuries. I studied him and his magic while I brought him under my control. His prison required complex methods to build, and it will withstand any attempt he makes to escape.”

He inched closer, studying me and the cage he built around me. “Are you sure? It didn’t stop me from killing your flunky.”

“I can assure you that trick won’t work against me,” Blackstone said dismissively, pointing his stone at the glyphs. “Not that you’ll live long enough to try.”

Another guess proved accurate. He wanted to use me in place of my grandfather. If he thought I’d be easier to corrupt, he was mistaken. “What’s wrong, James? Your spell not working?”

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“Be quiet, brat.” He lifted his gaze and glared at me. “Your grandfather used to think very highly of you before I convinced him you were a pathetic replacement for his beloved cousin. If I hadn’t stopped him, he’d have sacrificed himself to save you.”

Bart had been right. Creating a new ward would thwart Blackstone’s carefully laid plans. “What makes you think I’ll be easier to corrupt than my grandfather?” I tracked his movements, searching for any chance to break free.

“Because you still care,” he said as he continued to examine the area around my prison. “I turned your grandfather’s heart to stone centuries ago. But you are still attached to your family and especially your mate—those are vulnerabilities I can exploit.”

Spoken like someone who had no idea of the power of love. He was also distracted, and I could use that for my benefit. “If you’re waiting for the crystal to form, you’re going to be disappointed, James.”

The way his jaw clenched, I’d struck a nerve. He clearly didn’t like me using his name in such a condescending way.

“You know nothing about what I’m about.” He directed energy toward my cell. “And whatever countermeasure you came with won’t save you.”

The crystal started to grow and his expression regained its confidence. Calling up my fire, I mixed it with the magic Bart and Leo had given me. I wrapped myself in a fiery ball of magic. Most beings couldn’t look at our fire without shielding their eyes. James was no exception.

Through the flames, I watched him shrink back, and when he put his hand up to his eyes, I released the spell and increased the intensity of my aura. After a few seconds, I let the light die away. The new crystals were gone.

“You were saying, James ?”

“Arrogant phoenix.” He stepped back and surveyed the space. “Clearly, I underestimated you. My fault for relying on your weak-minded grandfather for information. I rarely make the same mistake twice.”

I laughed, hoping to provoke him into revealing more. “If you believe that, you’re more deluded than I thought. I wish I could be there when a demon eats your overconfident ass.”

“That will never happen.” His face darkened. “I’ve planned for this longer than you’ve been alive. Believe that it won’t be me who gets eaten.”

This version of him, cold and focused, scared me. Perhaps I had been too arrogant. I’d used up two of the three spells I’d been given and still hadn’t broken free. Sometimes, the best strategy was to double down on what worked. “Forgive me if I don’t drink your Kool-Aid.”

“Enough conversation.” Dark energy coalesced around Blackstone’s black gem and formed into an intricate pattern that hovered in the air between us. “I have no more time to waste.”

Behind him, several mages appeared, their stones glowing in their hands.

Blackstone’s spell swirled toward me, covering my prison.

I held back my fear and considered my next move.

Freeing myself meant fighting off at least five mages, but if I let him finish his new spell, I might be unable to escape.

The light around me dimmed, and I reached for my last charm.

Adding a drop of my flames to the smooth stone, I tossed it at the barrier. A burst of purple and orange light filled my magical cage. I heard at least two shouts of surprise in the room, and the barrier shattered with a sound like breaking glass.

My efforts broke Blackstone's concentration, and his spell dissolved around me. I used the disruption to shift and immediately took flight before he could reform his cage.

"Block the exits!" Blackstone shouted. "Don't let him get away!"

Making for an opening, I swerved and dove at a pair of mages. They'd been focused on barring my escape, and my move caught them off guard. I flew around their legs, and flared my energy when I was inches away.

The pair caught fire and began to scream. Blackstone still stood between me and the exit, but he was paying more attention to me than the opening. The pair of mages on fire struggled to put out my phoenix fire, and the others came to their aid.

That left me and Blackstone. I turned, intending to fly circles around him, when I was struck by a burst of black magic. It hurled me backward against the wall and transformed itself into a thick net that pressed me tight against the rock.

"Impressive attempt, princeling," Blackstone said, advancing on me. He waved his hand at the burning mages, and my fire went out. "But as you can see, it was futile."

"I assume Bartholomew gave you those charms, but he couldn't give you enough to

fight a mage of my skill and power.” Blackstone raised his stone again, dark energy gathering around it like a storm cloud. “This time, you won’t escape.”

The spell began to take shape, and the tendrils of corruption holding me tight began to grow. Hoping to withstand his spell, I reached for all my inner fire. I braced myself for the clash of competing magic, but a flash of bright purple light cut through the darkness.

My bonds dissolved as the spell collapsed. Blackstone’s expression shifted from confidence to rage in an instant, and I used his confusion to fly out of his field of vision.

“Hello, James,” Bart said as he entered the cave, his purple tourmaline blazing with power. Behind him, Otto, Leo, Cael, Anso, and Percy filed into the room, their mage stones out and ready. “You look like someone walked over your grave.”

Chapter Eleven

Roderick:

The plane ride to Minnesota was a tense, harried trip. There were numerous medicine wheels around the country, but the one in central Minnesota had recent activity. It felt too easy, which meant it was a trap.

We focused every source of information we had on figuring out what Blackstone might do next.

Avie was in contact with the Inquisitor General's office, and Jan spoke to Dad and the Mage Council's staff.

Conall made calls to the Shifter Assembly, and Ignatius reached out to the Elven Conclave.

A minute later, Darius motioned to his brother Eldwin, and along with Hro, they found a quiet corner of the plane to contact the Society of Guardians.

That left me, my younger brother and his mate, and Elspeth with nothing to do and no one important enough to contact. I tentatively reached out to Cinaed, but he was focused on his own mission and I didn't want to disturb him.

Owen popped up for the fourth time and I grabbed his arm. "Sit down, Owen." His eyes brimmed with anger, but I didn't back down. "I'm in charge of this mission, and even I can't help with this stage of the plan. Trust that there will be plenty of chances

to help when the time comes.”

Defiance stared at me for another second before he backed down. “Fine.”

I gently pushed him in the direction of the seat opposite me. “I want to do something too, but let those best suited to the task handle it. Right now, it’s those with the right connections. When it comes to a fight, you and Lysandor are at the top of my list.”

“You’re right.” He settled back in the seat. “I’m not good at feeling useless.”

The real issue was Owen had always been the best of his class and didn’t like being a substitute instead of a starter. “Welcome to my world. I’m not the oldest, smartest, most talented, or best mage in the family. You at least might be the strongest mage on this plane.”

“Might?” He puffed out his chest. “You think you can beat me?”

He was teasing, but behind the humor was a hint of truth. “No, but I don’t like your odds against Darius.”

“Oh.” He glanced at the back of the plane where Darius and the others sat. “I forgot he’s the O.G. Bart.”

Avie stood and saved me from responding to Owen. “Did you learn anything useful?” I asked her.

“Useful is a relative term,” she said, looking around the plane. “Let’s wait for the others so I don’t have to repeat myself.”

With the exception of Ignatius, the others joined us before Avie could sit. The silence stretched for a few minutes, and I was ready to suggest we start without him when he

rose from his seat.

“Sorry that took so long,” Ignatius said as he joined us. “The ard ri loves to talk.”

“Must be an elven trait,” Hro said. “I recall a time?—”

“We don’t need to revisit this topic.” Eldwin stared at his mate. “Last time, the debate lasted nearly two years.”

I watched the guardians and wondered if this was how Cinaed and I would be in a thousand years. “Avie, why don’t you go first?”

“Yes, little brother,” she said with only a hint of annoyance.

Like Owen, she was adjusting to not being the top dog.

“About a hundred and twenty-five years ago, a man named Iacob Negru from Romania offered to help an Anishinaabetribe in Minnesota create a sacred place for their people on the new lands the United States Government gave them.

His reason for doing this was to help right an injustice done to these people.

As far as we know, he had no direct connection to the tribe.

The recipients constructed a new medicine wheel in the heart of their reservation.

“This was the first of several wheels he and other Romanians with the last name Negru helped create on newly established lands. There is no record of the wheels being used, but they were activated.” She nodded to Ignatius.

“The ard ri told me the shaman of the tribes would spend days filling the circles,” he

said. “In recent months, someone has been tinkering with the magic in this wheel. Never a lot at a time, and it wasn’t the current shaman who made the changes.”

“How could he tell?” Jan asked.

“Pure earth magic has a different feel than magic we wield through our mage stones,” Ignatius replied.

“Unless the shaman abandoned centuries of tradition, they couldn’t have been responsible for what the elves felt.

The Conclave is sending teams of mages to investigate other sites we’ve identified. ”

“Is it possible to use one or more of these to destroy the Great Ward?” Elspeth asked.

“The stone circles were massive and contained a lot of magic.”

“Under normal circumstances, no,” Darius said.

“Even at the height of their power, stone circles didn’t have the strength to destroy the Great Ward.

Blackstone, however, has accumulated an enormous amount of dark magic.

If he adds that to a medicine wheel, it would have greater strength than any stone circle. ”

“Question.” Owen raised his hand but quickly pulled it down. “If the wheels were created using earth magic, how could they be used to destroy something the earth is supporting?”

“In theory, they cannot,” Eldwin said. “If, however, one could distort the magic in the

wheels, something we don't know can be done, it is possible to create an event strong enough to bring down the Great Ward. This is especially true if it doesn't directly attack the Ward."

Most things were possible with the right spell or tool. "Given Blackstone has prepared for this moment for centuries, I'd expect he's found a way."

"How?" Lysandor asked. "Earth magic will fight against corruption."

"It's as Eldwin suggested—creating a pool of energy isn't itself evil," Owen said. "It's like building a dam to store water. If you attached a hose at the base, you'd be able to generate destructive pressure."

"Or if you destroy the dam, the energy released would be catastrophic," Hro added.

Except that wasn't the purpose of a stone circle or medicine wheel. "What if that's not his plan?" I looked at Elspeth. "What is the purpose of the circles?"

"To banish demons and guard the land," she answered.

"Or to trap them and hold them until they could be expelled." I countered.

"Why would you trap a demon when you could kill it or send it back?" Conall asked.

"Because if you have one inside the circle, the energy generated from its death would be massive," Jan caught on to where I was going. "Could they summon a demon inside a medicine wheel?"

"Yes," Darius said. "During the Demon War, some mages would use the stone circles to summon powerful demons. Once they had enslaved what they'd called, they'd send it out to kill lesser demons."

“That sounds stupid,” Lysandor said.

“Oh, it was,” Darius said, shaking his head. “It worked a few times, but once the demons caught on to the scheme, they adapted and quickly killed whoever had summoned them the moment they arrived.”

Blackstone’s family had been infamous for summoning demons, so some of those stupid mages had been his ancestors.

He’d also surely known this history when making his plans.

“Blackstone’s already raised two powerful demons who died minutes after they were summoned.

His targets will believe he plans to kill them and prepare for that possibility. ”

“Which means he’ll plan something else,” Avie said. “The question is what?”

Different thoughts zipped around my head, each as likely as the others.

Bart’s fight with the demon prince had been a close call.

There was no way Blackstone would’ve based all his plans on Bart winning.

The only way his actions made sense was if he won either way.

“Heads I win, tails you lose,” I whispered.

“What was that?” Eldwin asked.

“I’ve been bothered since Bart’s fight on campus,” I said.

“A meticulous planner such as Blackstone would’ve never left his plans to rely on an outcome so much in doubt.

Yes, Bart is powerful, but this was a demon prince.

The only way his actions make sense is if he didn’t care if Bart won or lost.”

“That’s logical,” Avie said. “What do we make of it?”

I had no good answer. Blackstone had a specific plan he was following, and we were flailing trying to guess his next moves. I looked at Darius and Ignatius. “If Bart had lost, could Blackstone have used that outcome to destroy the Great Ward or destroy the mage world?”

Neither responded right away, and I assumed they were discussing their answer.

After about thirty seconds, Darius drew a deep breath.

“That’s a complicated answer. The short answer is no, he couldn’t.

Not directly at least. Even if the demon had killed Bart, he wouldn’t have been able to extinguish the Great Ward.

The harder part is figuring out what glyphs Blackstone used to summon the Demon Prince. ”

“We’ve studied them extensively, and they weren’t standard summoning markings,” Ignatius added.

“Most likely the summoning circle was built to contain the demon so Blackstone could kill it for its power. The containment elements in the glyph were far more

complex than needed for a simple summoning.”

“Only a fool would try to bend a Demon Prince to his will,” Eldwin interjected.

“Surely that wasn’t his intention.”

“Correct, which rules out trying to use the demon to kill as many of us as possible,” Darius said.

“The entire episode was likely designed to kill Bart, who Blackstone rightly sees as a powerful foe. As a secondary purpose, Blackstone probably intended this as a way to harvest magical power. The death of a being as powerful as a Demon Prince releases extraordinary energy.”

“Bart killing the demon prince reduced the amount of magic Blackstone collected,” Ignatius added. “He got a considerable amount, but not nearly as much as if he’d killed the demon instead of Bart.”

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“He also amassed a lot more across other flashpoints,” Owen said. “He must intend to use it at one of the medicine wheels.”

In theory, Owen was right, but if it were that simple, Blackstone would’ve done it already. “We’re still missing a piece,” I said. “All that energy Blackstone’s collected isn’t enough to tear down the Ward. If it was, he wouldn’t need Ailpein.”

No one told me I was wrong.

The medicine wheel site was tucked into a remote part of the state, surrounded by dense evergreens.

We were met by the three elves sent to assist us, but the introductions were so quick, I never caught their names.

Not that it mattered—they spent all their time speaking with Ignatius, Darius, Eldwin, and Hro.

From their expressions, it wasn’t happy greetings.

I walked along the perimeter, looking for... I had no idea what. The need to always do something was a character flaw, or so my teachers always told me. They were probably right because Bart and Avie never had a problem sitting quietly to assess the situation.

Halfway around the wheel, Lysandor and Owen met me from the other direction. “This feels wrong,” Lysandor said. “Earth magic shouldn’t feel like this.”

I wasn't as Earth Magic sensitive as some of my siblings, so I didn't understand the concern. "Can you be more specific? What about the feel is wrong?"

"I can't point to any one thing, but ever since Transylvania, we've become very attuned to the rhythm of the Earth," Owen said. "The magic outside differs from what's inside. It's subtle, barely noticeable, really. I'd be surprised if even the elves could detect it."

"That doesn't sound good," I said, examining the area more carefully. "Can you pinpoint where the difference is strongest?"

Lysandor closed his eyes for a moment, then gestured to a section between two of the larger stones. "There. The energy feels... contained, like it's been redirected somehow."

I approached the spot, my diamond stone in hand. There was indeed something different about this section—a subtle distortion in the magical field that wouldn't be noticeable unless you were specifically looking for it.

"Owen's right," I said quietly. "Something's been altered here."

As I studied the pattern more closely, a prickle of awareness ran down my spine. My mage stone warmed against my palm, responding to a presence I couldn't yet see. I straightened slowly, careful not to make any sudden movements, and surveyed our surroundings with heightened focus.

The dense trees surrounding the clearing suddenly seemed too perfect for concealment. We weren't alone.

Without turning my head, I reached for my siblings and pulled them into a silent conversation. "Don't react, but we're being watched."

I felt their acknowledgment through our connection. “Where?” Avie asked.

If I knew that, I’d have told them, but I swallowed that snarky comment. “Not sure. Let’s spread out and take positions at the cardinal points. I’ll take North, Jan, you go East, Owen, South, and Avie take the West. Let’s pretend we’re still investigating.”

“Let’s go around again,” I said out loud and pointed North. “I’ll start over there.”

I tried to follow their movements, but didn’t want to raise my head. From what little I could see from my peripheral vision, my siblings were casually walking toward their positions, pretending to examine the ground as they walked.

Jan filled in the guardians, and I expected Avie would alert Elspeth.

Extending my magical awareness into the forest beyond, something caught my attention.

Or rather, it was the lack of something.

Dead spots didn’t occur naturally, so these were carefully constructed to hide something...

or someone. I didn’t want to probe too hard because that would alert them before we were ready.

“Dead zone outside my area,” I said through our link. “It’s subtle and well made. These aren’t novices.”

“Same to the South,” Owen said. “It’s large enough to hold multiple people.”

“At least two mages to the West,” Avie added. “Like you said, whoever did this has

some talent.”

“Big empty space to the East,” Jan reported. “Appears they’ve got us surrounded.”

I took a slow, deep breath, weighing our options. “Did we alert everyone else?”

“I took care of it,” Avie said. “They’re ready for an attack.”

The fact that whoever was out there hadn’t attacked was concerning.

It didn’t make sense to just observe us, not with the level of work that went into concealing themselves.

Which meant they were probably waiting for reinforcements.

“We should force their hand. I don’t like waiting for them to decide when to attack. ”

“Agreed,” Avie said. “The Guardians and the elves are ready to support us. I suggest a wide burst of mage fire at the same time. The way they’re concealed, they can’t be very well shielded.”

“On your mark,” Jan said.

“Ready,” Owen chimed in.

I debated whether to use lethal force or not, and decided not to hold back. “Say when.”

Keeping my gaze down, I pretended to run my stone over a specific location. Any decent mage watching would know I wasn’t doing anything of substance, so it was with relief I received Avie’s signal.

“Now!”

White, green, purple, and blue energy exploded from inside the circle.

Surprised shouts came out of nowhere, followed by groans of pain and angry curses.

The surrounding trees suddenly appeared full of mages and gems. We were outnumbered, but it appeared we’d taken more than a few out of the fight.

Some of those who faced us were not as steady on their feet as they should be for entering a mage fight.

A volley of spells flew toward us from all directions.

“Incoming!” someone shouted as I raised my shield.

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Chapter Twelve

Cinaed:

“Impossible!” Blackstone’s face contorted with rage as he pointed his mage stone at Bart. “How did you get here?”

I’d been skeptical when Bart said he could sneak everyone in with him. Blackstone was an asshole, but he was a very good mage. The others agreed, but they also believed he’d be overconfident.

They’d been right. Behind the glow from Bart’s purple tourmaline, Cael, Otto, Leo, Percy, and Anso had their stones out, ready to fight.

“We followed Cinaed,” Bart said calmly. After fighting a demon prince, it didn’t surprise me that a few mages didn’t rattle him.

I flew higher into the cavern’s shadows. Blackstone’s attention might’ve shifted away from me, but there were other mages in the area.

Blackstone’s eyes narrowed to slits. “This day has been a long time coming, Bartholomew. I should’ve killed you when you were a child, but defeating you now will be so much more satisfying.”

A torrent of midnight energy surged from his mage stone, but Bart deflected it with a shield of purple light. The collision of magic sent tremors through the cavern floor.

Bart didn't engage in a war of words—he simply went on the offensive. I couldn't tell what spell he used, but its power pushed Blackstone back several feet even as he deflected the attack.

A group of mages charged into the room from the same opening Blackstone had used. If they'd held my grandfather in these caves, he'd be in that direction. I stayed in the shadows, waiting for a chance to fly past our enemies.

Blackstone lost some of his swagger after Bart's first blow.

He moved warily and launched a series of swift strikes.

The fight moved too fast for me to follow as Bart blocked the deadly magic and fired back a complex sequence of spells.

Purple light clashed with black, charging the air with magical energy.

From my vantage point near the roof of the cave, I watched the fight unfold.

Blackstone's mages outnumbered our side, but they were still overmatched.

Otto's red zircon blazed against the dark, meeting his opponent with controlled bursts, while Leo's yellow heliodor created bubbles to trap his foes.

Together, they put a group of six mages back on their heels.

Anso and Percy pressed their advantage against another four mages, who spent their time defending rather than attacking. The green and yellow light from their stones wove a deadly dance that Blackstone's associates had trouble following.

The only real contest was the fight between Cael and a woman dressed in black. Her

stone blazed as they attacked each other. After the initial exchange, however, Cael pressed his advantage, and the outcome wasn't in doubt.

Taking advantage of the distraction my companions created, I swooped down and raced toward the opening.

"Stop him!" Blackstone shouted.

I braced for an attack, but a burst of purple light followed by a grunt from Blackstone allowed me to reach the tunnel entrance.

Without looking back, I opened my senses, searching for any sign of my grandfather.

Flying as fast as I could, I wove my way through the warren of passages carved into the mountain.

The tunnels beyond the main cavern formed a labyrinth that seemed designed to disorient. As a phoenix, however, I left a trail of fire in my wake that would help me find my way back.

If Grandfather had been in these caves, his magic would have left traces. Even in human form, a phoenix would exude traces of distinctive energy that would linger for days or more. Any of our flock could detect his presence, but as his grandson, my affinity for him was greater.

As I flew deeper into the maze of tunnels, however, the absence of any such signature became increasingly apparent.

I landed in a small chamber branching off from the main path, but didn't shift back to human form.

The room was unnaturally cold, even for a place the sun had never touched.

There was also a residue of dark magic somewhere close to me.

Centuries of dark magic had tainted this cave and everything around it, but what I felt was different.

Otto and Thal had banished the corruption when they destroyed the Demon Sword.

This, however, was more than an echo of that magic.

Whatever was here was new and made me shiver from its malevolence.

A flicker of energy in an adjacent chamber caught my attention.

Phoenix energy, except not. Similar to the image of Grandfather in the main room, this was fake.

Cautiously, I flew toward the connected room, but didn't enter.

Someone had carved symbols into the walls and across the floor.

I didn't recognize most of the runes, but I knew what the one resembling a twisted flame meant.

It was a glyph meant to capture a phoenix.

Why was this here? If I'd made it this far, I'd have already known the energy signatures weren't real.

Searching around me, I saw faint outlines of spells hidden beneath the dust. Having

found one, the rest were easier to find.

They covered every inch of the floor and walls.

If I'd touched any part of the cave, I'd have triggered the spell.

Coming here, we knew we were walking into an ambush. We wouldn't find my grandfather, but maybe we'd find some useful information. Seeing the surrounding magic, I realized we'd underestimated Blackstone. The entire cave was a snare.

A distant rumble shook dust from the ceiling. The battle in the main cavern was intensifying. Being extra careful, I flew back the way I'd come.

Frustration burned within me as I raced toward the sounds of battle. Blackstone had anticipated our response. Only his underestimating Bart kept us from being captured. It wouldn't, however, save us if we didn't escape sooner rather than later.

When I burst back into the main chamber, I emerged into a war zone.

Three more mages had joined Blackstone, but six were lying on the ground in various states of unconsciousness.

The remaining mages surrounded the woman fighting Cael and devoted all their energy to defending themselves.

Spent energy made the air crackle, and deflected spells had scorched the walls.

The group backpedaled toward the tunnels, collecting two of their fallen comrades. Amid this chaos, Bart and Blackstone remained locked in their personal duel. Neither showed signs of panic or fear, but to my perception, Bart was winning. Or perhaps that was what Blackstone wanted us to think.

“We need to get out of here,” I said, giving the fight a wide berth as I made it to my friends. “This entire cave complex is marked with glyphs.”

I hovered behind Cael, and for the second time in this fight, Blackstone looked surprised and frustrated. His expression confirmed my suspicion. He’d planned for the possibility I might escape the first attempt to capture me.

Blackstone’s eyes darted toward us, and his expression changed.

He slowly moved backward toward his associates, checking the ground as he walked.

After several steps, he stopped and motioned behind his back to the others.

Pointing his gem toward the ceiling, a sheet of black energy dropped, separating us from his group.

Bart seized on Blackstone’s momentary distraction, casting a spell that penetrated his shield and struck him directly in the chest. Blackstone staggered backward, genuine surprise flashing across his face.

“We need to go!” I repeated.

Whatever he’d done, the cave seemed to shudder. An ominous groan came from the ceiling just before dust and tiny rocks rained down.

“He’s bringing down the cave!” Leo shouted.

Not just the cave, the entire mountain. Blackstone proved once again he was a meticulous planner. “Cael, I need your help,” I said.

“My help?” Cael looked at his mate. “Are you sure?”

Bart might be the only archmage, but no one tool fit all problems. “You’re the strongest earth magic user. I need you to amplify my healing energy to repair whatever damage Blackstone caused.”

“Are you sure that will work?” Bart asked.

I wasn’t sure of anything other than we wouldn’t make it out if we didn’t reverse what Blackstone had done. “If we don’t repair the damage, the mountain will crush us before we reach the exit.”

“The idea is sound,” Percy said. “Earth magic will heal the damage, not just give us time to flee.”

“Everyone else out,” Otto shouted. “We’ll keep the tunnel open so you can get out.”

I wrapped Cael in my phoenix flames and watched him call Earth magic through the ground. The instability Blackstone created was wide and deep, and wouldn’t be easy to heal. Merging the power he’d summoned with my fire, he pushed it up and out.

Slowly, our combined energy filled in gaps and healed fissures. The damage, however, was extensive and concentrated in the direction we needed to use to escape.

“Focus on the way out,” I said. “I’ll bet my flames Blackstone has his tunnels protected.”

I sensed Cael’s hesitation. Healing the ends wouldn’t work if the center continued to crumble. Allowing the tunnels to collapse, however, would be worse.

We located the seam meant to destroy the tunnels. We started from the outside to shore it up. Linked as we were, I saw Cael’s intention. If we quickly saved the tunnel, we could work on the center before it swallowed us up.

The mountain rumbled around us, and it didn't feel like we'd make it.

If the center imploded, it would overwhelm our effort to save the tunnel.

My consciousness raced along the magic Cael was using, and he'd cured enough of the damage that the rest was stable.

"Shift back to this cavern," I said, showing him my idea.

Cael left his supports in place and returned to the epicenter of the problem. For a second, I didn't think we'd make it, but a sudden swell of Earth Magic pushed my healing energy up through the mountain like lava through a volcano.

"We did it!" Cael shouted, wiping the sweat from his face. "I'm not sure where you got that burst of power from, but it did the trick."

I thought he'd supplied the extra magic, so I didn't answer. Instead, I turned and led the way out.

The others had regrouped a safe distance from the cave entrance. Otto, Percy, and Anso were in a discussion, so we stopped by Bart and Leo.

"Otto wants to seal the cave," Leo said. "Percy disagrees, and Anso is playing referee."

Shifting, I avoided getting drawn into that conversation—although I agreed with Otto. The place was so corrupted with dark magic that nothing good would want to enter.

"My money's on Percy," Cael said. "This is his home. He knows best what to do with the place."

Watching them discuss the issue summed up how I felt about the mission. Ambivalence. It had been a wasted effort. “Does it really matter? We learned nothing about Grandfather’s location.”

“Not yet, at least,” Bart said, exchanging a smile with Leo.

I didn’t understand how they could smile after everything—or nothing—that happened. “What do you mean?” If I sounded a bit annoyed, sue me. I was frustrated.

“During the fight, we placed microscopic magical tracers on Blackstone’s mages,” Bart said. “If the spell we used works?—”

“And it will,” Leo said quickly.

“— we should be able to track them to wherever James is holed up.”

Leo nodded, satisfaction written on his face. “With any luck, they’ll lead us straight to your grandfather.”

I didn’t share his optimism. Blackstone expected a lot of what happened. “I hope you’re right, but I’d be surprised if he doesn’t find the tracers. He had contingencies for almost everything. Although he didn’t expect you to sneak up on him. If he had, things wouldn’t have gone so well.”

“You said you found glyphs in the tunnels,” Anso asked. They’d finished their debate and had joined us. “What did you find?”

It took a few minutes to explain everything, and when I finished, I was more convinced than before that Blackstone expected what happened.

“I’m not sure that’s correct,” Leo said.

“My guess is Blackstone prepared for two contingencies: you came alone or we came with you. Which I know is totally obvious. If you came alone, then the cage in the main chamber would’ve held you.

If you came with us, he expected you’d feel the fake phoenix energy and investigate while we fought his mages.

Once he had you ensnared, he’d collapse the mountain, hoping your capture would make us hesitate long enough to be crushed. ”

I’d forgotten Leo was a trained inquisitor. “He seemed genuinely shocked when you six popped up.”

“In that, he was overconfident,” Otto said. “He’s spent so many years claiming Bart was overhyped that he bought into his own narrative. Bart bet he could get us in undetected, and he did.”

“Only because Cinaed did such a good job keeping James busy,” Bart said. “He might have caught us if he wasn’t so busy trying to lock Cinaed in his cage.”

I didn’t care why it worked, only that we might have a lead on where to find my grandfather. “How long until we know if the trackers work?”

“They’re already working,” Percy said. “It might take a day or two before we can determine if they lead us to King Ailpein.”

Two days sounded like a lot, but Grandfather could hold on that long. Blackstone would never have risked so much to capture me if he was close to breaking my grandfather. Having failed to capture me, however, he might try harder with Grandfather. “Let’s try to find him quicker.”

Chapter Thirteen

Roderick:

The wave of magic hit my shield with enough force to shake the ground. My diamond flared, wrapping my hand in its brilliant light. Around me, the air crackled with deadly energy as spells collided and exploded. If I'd been a second slower detecting them, we'd have all been dead.

"Don't hold back!" I shouted, pivoting to reinforce my defenses as another volley of spells tore through the undergrowth. "They're trying to kill us."

Tree bark splintered and earth erupted as refracted magic carved furrows in the ground. The pristine medicine wheel site had transformed into a battlefield in seconds. The attackers had used the cover of the terrain to surround us completely.

My siblings responded instantly to my warning. I extended my consciousness through my mage stone, creating a link between us. "Jan and Ignatius, I need you on defense. Darius and Eldwin, take the elves and cover the north and east. Avie, Owen, and I will hit those from the south and west."

Amid the acknowledgments, Owen's exuberant "hell yeah!" gave me pause. If he wasn't our strongest combat mage, I'd have given his assignment to Jan. His bond with Lysandor made him even more powerful, and we couldn't afford to fight without him, but he still made me nervous.

Thinking of my brother and his mate reopened the wound in my soul where Cinaed's

presence should've been. I pushed my pain aside. I'd never mate with him if I died.

Across the clearing, Darius and Eldwin, supported by Ignatius and Hro, fought like the fearsome duo they'd been during the Demon War.

Now, however, their mate bonds amplified their powers beyond anything our enemies could match.

Flashes of pink and blue magic battered the fools trying to breach their defenses.

Several bursts of magic crashed against Ignatius and Jan's shield in a coordinated attack. I watched in satisfaction as their emerald energy barely rippled under an assault that would have overwhelmed an ordinary mage's defenses.

There was a lull as our foes surveyed the battlefield, and Avie used their confusion to order a counterattack.

Owen positioned himself near the edge of the wheel, his purple spinel flashing brilliantly as he engaged multiple attackers. His power was undeniable, but he fought with the reckless confidence of youth. It was as if he felt the need to prove he was the strongest combat mage in the fight.

"Owen! Maintain formation!" I called when he pressed forward too aggressively. "They're trying to isolate some of us."

He sent a nonverbal acknowledgment through our link but continued to press his advantage. Four enemy mages fell back under his onslaught, and Owen surged forward.

"Owen, stop!" I shouted.

He was so focused, he ignored my warning.

Once he made it a few paces beyond our formation, they sprang their trap.

Two mages swung around the four under attack and assumed flanking positions.

A lance of dark energy struck him from the left.

The moment he turned to face the new enemy, the others hit him with enough force to visibly rattle his shields.

I tried to disengage myself from my fight, but the wizards attacked me with renewed vigor. Even though I'd told everyone not to hold back, none of us used lethal spells.

Another trio of blows struck Owen in his exposed position. His protection flickered, but held. Barely.

Across the wheel, Avie fought three older mages who threw black energy at her in coordinated attacks. She glanced at Owen, but couldn't help him.

Jan had to protect the non-mages, but he still sent several spells at those fighting Owen. His actions drew renewed attacks on the beings he protected.

Across the wheel, Darius and Eldwin fended off at least half of Blackstone's cohorts. As good as they were, they couldn't help Owen in time without compromising themselves and the Great Ward.

When my brother screamed in pain, something inside me snapped. A yell ripped from my throat and I lashed out. Gray tinted the white light from my diamond as my first killing spell flew across the open space. One of the three mages I faced burst into flames and screamed.

His companions glanced at him, shock and surprise on their faces.

Moving in rapidly, I fired new spells at the pair, making them regret ignoring me.

Freed from my opponents, I turned to go help Owen.

Before I could launch a counterattack, dark magic hit my brother's defenses with enough force to knock him off his feet.

I felt his pain ripple through our link.

"Owen!" Lysandor's cry cut across the chaotic battlefield.

As Owen tried to clear his head, Blackstone's followers focused their attack on him.

I erected the strongest shield I could create in front of Owen, not caring that it left me nearly defenseless.

The combined attacks nearly overwhelmed my protection, but it held.

It wouldn't withstand a second attack, but I'd bought my sibling's time.

Twin green blasts of different hues struck the group from opposite sides.

Jan struck them with angry emerald energy that caused two of the six to crumple. Avie slashed her peridot mage stone, creating knives of olive-green energy that cut through shields. I'd need to get her to teach me the spell as it proved highly effective.

Using the openings she created, I launched a series of strikes in rapid succession. My concussive balls of white energy struck with the force of metal bullets.

Avie and I sent the two survivors running. Scanning the clearing, at least a dozen of Blackstone's mages were down. Most were dead or dying. Darius had a hand on Eldwin's arm, restraining his brother from chasing three fleeing mages.

Behind me, Elspeth had reached Owen and crouched next to him. Her hands glowed with copper-gold fire as she pressed them against his chest. I didn't see any visible injuries, but she kept her hands on my brother.

"It's resisting me," she said in a strained voice. "Whatever they hit him with is refusing to let me heal the damage."

I nodded to Avie, silently telling her to take over, and knelt next to Elspeth. "I'm not as good as Bart, but I've studied dark magic extensively. Tell me what you need."

"He's in pain," Lysandor said. "It's burning him inside."

Despite his fear, Lysandor kept his wits and allowed me and Elspeth to help his mate. "Come here," I said, harsher than I meant. "I can't find a wound, so I need you to tell me where the magic has taken root."

Lysandor looked physically ill, a byproduct of his mate bond, and stood rooted in place. Conall put a hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"I've been there, watching my mate get hurt, but we need you to stay calm and help the others save him." His voice was kind, but firm. "Just show them the general area."

As if snapped from a daze, Lysandor lurched forward and pointed to Owen's left side. "There."

I closed my eyes and scanned the area. A second presence joined mine, and it was old

and wise.

“I’m here if you need me,” Darius said softly.

My first instinct was to let him handle this, but if he deferred to me, he must’ve had a reason. Pretending he wasn’t there, I pushed deeper into my brother’s now unconscious body, searching for whatever remained from the attack.

At the edge of my thoughts, I heard Avie taking control of the others. Something prickled my senses, but I couldn’t take my focus off Owen. “The trap isn’t over,” I told Darius. “Whatever the others are doing, they’re in danger.”

“I’ll handle it,” he said, as his thoughts slipped out of my mind.

Delving deeper, I found a microscopic trail dug into my brother’s body. Elspeth had linked her presence to mine, and she followed my thoughts as I tracked the malignant magic. A second later, we came to a black spot pressing against golden energy.

“That is me,” Elspeth said. “I can heal him now.”

Elspeth unceremoniously pushed me out of Owen’s body.

The healing glow around Elspeth’s hands intensified, but she kept her eyes closed.

I heard loud, angry voices behind me. Avie and Darius were in a heated discussion.

My heart told me to stay with Owen, but Elspeth made it clear she no longer needed my help.

Silently, I left my brother to join my uncle and sister.

“I’m not leaving them and that’s final,” Avie said. “They might lead us to Blackstone.”

“They’re more likely to kill you.” Darius had the authority of a thousand years of studying magic.

My sister excelled at her job because she’d stayed focused. Some called her a cold bitch, but detachment was necessary. As this argument proved. “The trap’s still active, Avie.” I waited for her to look over. “Owen’s going to be fine. Take a breath and consider what I said before you respond.”

Her eyes blazed in defiance, but my sister had risen to the top for a reason.

No one was better at keeping their emotions in check while sizing up a situation.

This, however, was personal. Avie had seen Bart nearly die, and then Jan.

Those events shook her, but she’d maintained her composure.

Seeing Owen hurt was different. He was the baby and everyone watched over him.

The silence stretched for another few heartbeats, but I let her get to where she needed to on her own. She blinked, and it was over. “You’re both right. Thank you.”

“As are you, Niece,” Darius said. His stone blazed, and tendrils of blue energy flew across the battlefield. “It might be too dangerous to touch them, but we must still secure them.”

Blue energy encased the enemy mage stones.

From across the circle, pink light drifted across the battle-scarred ground and

surrounded those who had fallen.

Two bodies rose, enveloped in Eldwin's magic.

These were the only survivors. The dead, he sealed in energy, like his brother had done to the fallen gems.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 4:53 am

Color returned to Owen's face, but he remained unconscious. A calmer Lysandor cradled Owen's head. All traces of the dark magic were gone from my brother's body.

"How is he?" I asked, still scanning for a counterattack. "Can we move him?"

"He's well enough to travel," Elspeth said, fatigue tinging her words. "But I need to treat him again once we're less exposed. I've never seen dark magic like that before. It... resisted me."

Of course it did. Any chance Blackstone got to kill us, he'd take. Bodies lay scattered across the wheel site, and magic built into the stones hummed with agitation. Something pressed against my senses, unsettled and wary.

Avie approached Darius, pointing to the black mage stones contained in blue energy. "We should take those with us if we can," she said. "They may have useful information we can extract."

"I'd advise against that," Darius said. "Eldwin and I devised that spell because Blackstone has a habit of killing his co-conspirators by detonating their stones."

"I know, Uncle," she said in a tone that was only slightly patronizing. "I was there when his people's stones exploded. I still think we need to try."

Darius sighed and looked at Eldwin. Avie was pragmatic, not stubborn. If she persisted despite the danger she had a good reason.

“Provided we can do it safely, I agree with her,” Eldwin said. “We need as much information on Blackstone and his plans as we can get. I believe our magic will keep the self-destruction spells in the gems dormant until we can study them.”

The chance was slim, but better than letting them explode.

Jan joined us, his emerald stone glowing faintly as he maintained vigilance.

At the edge of the wheel, the two surviving mages lay unconscious, wrapped in Eldwin’s pink containment spell.

If these were like the mages Conall captured on his brother Braylin’s farm, they wouldn’t be privy to Blackstone’s plans.

I studied the nearest captured stone—a smoky quartz that pulsed with unnatural energy. Something about the rhythm of that throbbing struck me as wrong. “Something’s happening.”

We raised shields to protect ourselves and the non-mages. The pulse intensified, the glow grew brighter with each beat. Around the circle the other stones acted similarly.

Darius and Eldwin strengthened their containment spells, but I doubted they could stop the gems from exploding.

Blue and pink energy swirled around the captured stones, fighting against the building pressure.

For a moment, it seemed they might succeed.

Then a gem cracked, and a flash erupted from its core.

Avie cursed under her breath as the stones exploded one at a time. Darius and Eldwin's shields held, and only a fine crystalline dust remained.

I watched the two unconscious captives, wondering if they'd explode as well. Fortunately, only the gems self-destructed.

Beneath the closest stone, I noticed something peeking through the dirt. While Avie discussed what to do with the prisoners, I knelt by the anomaly. Brushing dirt aside, I exposed a partial glyph.

"Darius," I called out, not looking up from my discovery. "Can you look at this, please?"

My uncle joined me, crouching to get a better look. "That shouldn't be there. Not like that."

I pressed my diamond against the soil and channeled a gentle burst of energy. The dirt shifted, vibrating away, revealing more of the hidden pattern beneath.

"Someone—three guesses who—drew runes on the ground and then covered them in dirt," I said. Clearing more space, I realized the glyph was massive.

"Step out of the wheel," Ignatius said, standing behind me with the Elven mages. "We'll uncover the entire casting."

We all stepped outside the circle, and the elves quickly removed the dirt. As I surmised, the glyph filled the entire medicine wheel. "This isn't something he could've drawn in a day, or a week, or maybe not even in a year."

"The symbols match the one at Utrecht that nearly killed Bart," Jan said. "Only this one is much larger."

“The glyph itself is no more powerful than the one on campus,” Darius added. “The size of the wheel, however, makes this one infinitely stronger.”

“Blackstone clearly hopes to capture a demon prince,” Eldwin said. “If the medicine wheel were fully powered, even the mightiest prince wouldn’t be able to escape.”

“These stones contain no energy,” an elven mage said. “The runes are strong, but without more, they won’t be strong enough to hold a prince of hell.”

The work that went into creating one of these was mind-blowing, but Blackstone or one of his ancestors built multiple medicine wheels on tribal lands. Finding the right one before it’s too late might be impossible.

“He’s mad,” Jan said, still studying the exposed glyph. “He thinks he can capture and control a demon prince to kill Ailpein.”

I shook my head, tired of trying to outguess Blackstone. “That isn’t right. He doesn’t need a demon prince just to kill Ailpein.”

“And these runes won’t help kill the demon,” Darius said. “He means to keep it alive.”

“Why?” Jan asked. “It’s not like he can make it do stuff outside the circle.”

“That’s not his game.” Avie touched a symbol before standing. “If he’s able to kill Ailpein, Blackstone will bring down the ward. He’ll likely also generate a great deal of excess energy.”

“Energy he can use to power a medicine wheel,” Ignatius said. “With the Ward down, demons would pour into our world. Control the prince, control the underlings.”

Blackstone would be unstoppable if he controlled a demon prince. “Exactly.” I stood, brushing dirt from my hands. “He’ll be the most powerful mage left and also control the demons who remain after the fight.”

“We need to report this and get back to the mage council,” Avie said.

I let Avie give the report and continued to study the ground.

Blackstone might have more of these circles, but that didn’t mean we had to leave him this one.

“We need to erase this,” I said, pointing to the runes.

“Given the amount of work that went into making this glyph, removing key sections should make this wheel useless to him.”

“We can handle that part.” Eldwin pointed to Ignatius, Darius, and the Elven mages. “As you said, removing several sections is as good as erasing it entirely. He won’t have time to repair this one before it’s time to act.”

Nothing seemed impossible to Blackstone, but there were other wheels still intact. It wouldn’t be safe for him to expose himself to redraw the symbols. And with six mages working on the project, it wouldn’t take long to disable the wheel. “Thank you.”

At the edge of the clearing, Elspeth and Lysandor stood watch over Owen. Cinaed’s sister reminded me of how long it had been since I spoke to my mate. The familiar ache in my chest I got when I thought of him intensified.

I’d been able to feel enough of his emotions to know he wasn’t hurt, but I needed more. My fingers closed around my stone and I reached for our connection. Before I

called him, I released my walls. I didn't want him to panic when I made contact.

"Cinaed?"

He'd followed my example and lowered his walls before answering. Concern flooded through our link, mixed with anger and weariness. "Rod!" he said, relief in his voice. "I didn't want to disturb you."

We'd shut each other out, but that wasn't how mates should act toward each other. "I know. I did the same thing."

"Let's never do that again," he said, and I could feel his smile.

The hollow space in my chest felt less empty with his presence there. "Agreed. I have so much to tell you."

"Same," he replied.

We tried to speak at once, and our thoughts collided. "You first," I said. " You're older."

"That's not a precedent you want to set." We laughed and it felt good. "But since you insist, I'll go first."

Chapter Fourteen

Cinaed:

The wave of wrongness slammed into me like a physical blow, dropping me to my knees in Percy and Gio's sitting room.

This time was different—worse. The earth's warning didn't just invade my senses, it tore through me like molten steel, setting every nerve ending ablaze.

My inner fire flared uncontrollably, and I heard the sharp intake of breath from someone behind me.

"Cinaed!" Bart's voice cut through the roaring in my ears as I fought to keep from shifting involuntarily. The last thing Percy and Gio needed was a phoenix in distress burning down their cottage.

I pressed my palms against the wooden floor, trying to ground myself against the earth's desperate cry. Whatever was coming, it was close. Too close. The warning carried a note of panic I'd never felt before, as if the earth itself was screaming.

"I'm fine." My voice shook with the effort of containing my fire. "Just... give me a moment."

Otto appeared at my side, while Leo stood behind him, yellow heliodor glowing with gathered power. I suspected he was prepared to shield the others if I lost control.

The attack subsided slowly, leaving me drained and shaking. I sat back on my heels, wiping sweat from my forehead. “The warnings are getting worse.”

“What is the warning about?” Thalion asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Leo said, sparing me from giving the snarky answer. “The Ward is failing.”

The assembled group watched me with varying degrees of worry, but my head hurt too much to confirm what Leo had said. “Water?” My voice cracked like I’d swallowed fire, which wasn’t far from what I’d done to keep from shifting.

A few seconds later, a cup of water was thrust into my shaking hands. Gio waited until I’d firmly grasped the drink before letting go. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I wasn’t sure any of us were okay anymore. “The Earth is concerned. Like it’s running out of time.”

“If anyone would know how close Blackstone is to unleashing his plan, it would be the Earth,” Anso said. “He must fear we’ve learned too much.”

“We can never know too much.” Bart waved his purple tourmaline over a large map spread across a table. “But we’ve collected some useful information.”

“The trackers are still working, which means Blackstone and his mages haven’t detected them,” Leo said, joining his brother. “That’s the good news. The bad news is they’ve separated.”

I doubted anyone in the group expected them to stay together. Blackstone had never put all his assets into one scheme. It would be highly unusual if he changed his tactics.

“How many groups?” Leifr asked. “We don’t have time to chase shadows across the globe.”

“Three so far,” Bart’s purple tourmaline pulsed once, and three dots appeared on the map. “They split up almost immediately after they left, so it’s likely the number won’t change. The locations, however, correspond to known medicine wheels in North America.”

Not ideal, but manageable. “Any sign which one has my grandfather?”

“We haven’t had a chance to fully examine the data,” Leo said. “Given the earth magic needed to contain Ailpein, you and Cael are better equipped to find him.”

I examined the map, but I had limited knowledge of North America. “Are any of these sites power centers or a major nexus?”

Cael joined me at the table. “Not especially. They’re all in areas where earth magic is more abundant, but there are hundreds of other similar places.”

According to the map, Blackstone’s associates were congregating in Montana, Arizona, and Nebraska. I traced a line between the points. They formed a rough triangle, each point separated by hundreds of miles. “Is the shape significant?”

Everyone joined us at the table. Anso and Percy exchanged looks with each other and their mates.

“Interesting,” Anso said. “After we created the Ward, we worried people would search for the location. The site itself held no magical significance, but it was where Adelais and Katriana gave their lives for the world. We didn’t want anyone to desecrate the place, so we created a fake location. ”

Gio touched a point on the map. “These locations form a rough triangle around the fake spot.”

This felt like a trap to me. Blackstone was chasing a false lead, and thus far he rarely made mistakes. “Roderick said the site wasn’t important for creating the Ward. Why would he use the fake location for a focal point?”

“Roderick was correct,” Percy said. “The site isn’t important, but Blackstone wouldn’t have that knowledge. Only the guardians and the new guardians know the Ward can be created anywhere.”

Which confused me more. “Then why do we think this will help us find my grandfather?”

“Blackstone choosing these sites proves he thinks the original location is important,” Leo said. “It would be too great a coincidence for him to select these three places at random and happen to triangulate on the fake spot.”

“Which strongly suggests your grandfather is in one of those three spots,” Leifr said.

They were right, but which one? “Can we narrow it down to one?”

No one answered, and when I pulled my gaze up from the map, I found all eyes on me. “What?”

“You tell us,” Cael said. “My earth magic is strong, but with all the interference I can’t focus on your grandfather’s energy. Only a phoenix can find him.”

Tucked into his answer was a gentle rebuke. I’d been expecting the mages to do everything when I was the best equipped to detect Grandfather’s energy. “Not from here,” I said. “We’re too far away. Maybe once we get back to North America.”

“Or maybe someone already in North America can find him,” Leo said. “Your sister’s with Owen in Minnesota while he heals.”

It was the second scolding in as many minutes and a reminder I wasn’t the only one trying to save Grandfather. “Good point.”

“Rod?” I focused on his steady presence. “Are you able to talk?”

Being apart from him was like a physical ache, but connecting through our link always cured some of the pain.

“I’m here.” The joy in his voice was reassuring and warm. “Is something wrong?”

One day soon, I wanted to be able to contact him just because I wanted to feel his presence in my mind. “No, but we might have found Grandfather.”

“Bart’s trackers?” Rod asked excitedly.

His emotions came through our bond. I’d loved him for so long, and this closeness only added to those feelings. “Yes.”

Letting him see my thoughts made it easy to fill Rod in on everything we’d discovered. It excited me how easily we shared our thoughts. I’d fight to my last flame to have that future.

“How’s Owen?” I asked, embarrassed I’d waited so long to check on his brother.

“Better,” Rod said. “His bond with Lysandor helped him heal quickly. It also got him a lecture on being stubborn and acting irresponsibly.”

If it had been Rod who’d gotten hurt because he’d ignored the obvious signs of

danger, he'd be lucky if I just lectured him. "Any mistake you survive and learn from isn't all bad."

"Remember you said that if I get hurt."

I laughed because he knew me too well. "Don't take unnecessary risks, and we'll never have to find out what I do."

"Have you met me?" Rod joked. "All kidding aside, I'll talk to Elspeth and see if she can find your grandfather. When are you leaving?"

The question was about more than seeing each other again. He and I needed to be the ones to find Grandfather. We needed to convince him to let us do what only we could do. "The others are making plans. If they don't hurry up, I'm going to fly there myself."

"Now who's taking unnecessary risks?"

Rod's amusement didn't hide his own eagerness to be together again. "Not me. If I don't see you soon, someone's going to get burned when I burst into flames."

"I'll warn my brothers to act quickly." Rod's mood changed. "We're going to have a long life together, Cinaed. Believe it. I do."

One drawback to our bond was he knew my fears. "I believe, Rod, but given what we're facing, there are no guarantees."

"No, there aren't, but we'll make our future."

His conviction masked the fears he didn't want me to see. I also knew he'd do everything he could to give us the future we both wanted. "You're right but push your

brothers anyway.”

We stayed linked until guilt sapped much of the joy. When I opened my eyes, only Bart and Cael remained in the room.

“How’s Rod holding up?” Bart asked.

The backdoor way he’d asked how I was doing made me smile. “You know what he’s like. We’re both anxious, but he doesn’t let it show.”

“Growing up, Rod was this amazing brother,” Bart said, his eyes focused somewhere only he could see.

“He watched over us, offered advice without judgment, had our backs when we needed it, and was our friend. Always so positive, never a negative word. We knew he carried a burden, but he didn’t talk about it or let us help. ”

Bart swallowed, and he struggled to hold back tears.

“None of us understood. How could we when he didn’t share his pain?

He’s the best of us, but you knew that already.

I’m telling you this because this isn’t just your fight anymore.

If there’s even a sliver of hope for you and him, Cael and I will do whatever it takes to make it happen. All of us will.”

I stared at Bart and Cael, my nose congested and my eyes watery. Cael reached down and laced his fingers through Bart’s. The bond Rod shared with his brothers had always been a source of strength. Now I saw it in action. “Thank you.”

Cael nodded. “What did Rod say about Elspeth checking for your grandfather?”

Changing topics helped calm my emotions. “Elspeth is going to work with Avie. Rod says your sister is a perfect partner for Els.”

“She is,” Bart said. “Observing firsthand will help her more accurately analyze what Elspeth sees.”

Growing up, I’d had a close bond with Grandfather.

The whole family had been close. There’d always been a hint of resentment about Adelais’ sacrifice, but he rarely let it show with us grandkids.

Blackstone’s dark magic had slowly poisoned those connections.

I wasn’t sure enough of him remained for Els to trace.

“You should pack,” Cael said. “Chancellor Hollen made arrangements for a hypersonic military plane to get us to Minnesota. The helicopter will be here soon.”

As if on cue, Thalion entered the room. “Romanian military helicopter is less than ten minutes out.”

Nodding, I returned to my room in the surprisingly spacious cottage.

Everyone else had finished, so I quickly collected the few things I’d brought.

Stuffing the last shirt into my bag, it hit me—we’d reached the end.

Rod and I had started this journey decades ago.

Either we'd win, and finally bond, or we'd die trying.

"Rod?" I had nothing important to say, but wanted to feel his presence.

"Missed me already?"

Rod had always used humor to mask his pain. "Yes."

There was a pause, and in my mind I saw him searching for the right words.

"This is the last time we split up, " he said. "I don't care who says it's for the best. It's not for us."

He was the stoic rock of our relationship, but as Bart had said, Rod hid the pain well. "No, it's not."

"We'll find him, Cinaed," Rod said. "Then we're going to spend the next decade making up for lost time."

He spoke with such confidence, it erased most of my doubts. "I want to see the world. All of it."

"Sounds like a plan," he said. "Though we're going to need a glamour to hide how stunning you are or people will recognize us."

Rod understood what creating a new Ward might cost, but still focused on the future. Our future. "Flattery will get you everything, Mr. Hollen."

"That's good, Prince FionnLaoch," Rod said. "Because I want everything."

There was a knock on the door. Leo stood in the hallway, looking like he drew the

short straw. “Sorry to bother, and tell Rod hello from me, but the helicopter’s landing.”

With all his snark and swagger, it was easy to forget Leo was barely twenty-five. Too young to be given this responsibility. “I’ll be right there.”

“We’re leaving,” I told Rod. “And Leo sends his regards.”

“That’s his way of telling us to stop talking and start doing.”

“He’s right.”

“Yes, he is.” Rod sounded amused. An instant later, his mood shifted. “We’ll find him, Cinaed.”

He didn’t promise what would happen once we found him. I don’t blame him. No one knew what Grandfather would do. “I know we will. Stay safe. We’ll be there in less than twelve hours.”

“In that case, I’d better get some sleep now.”

His flirting didn’t mask the reality that none of us might get much sleep going forward. “I always knew you were the smart one.”

The conversation broke off abruptly because neither of us truly wanted it to end, and the helicopter was waiting. If I missed it, I could follow it in my phoenix form, but the others would wait for me.

Consideration for the others, however, was only a minor part of why I rushed. For the first time in days, the ache of separation eased. Rod was waiting for me at the end of this trip. He and I would pretend nothing was wrong, and the world comprised just

two people. Me and him.

After that brief respite, we were going to finish this. Blackstone's century-long plan was about to end. The only question was who'd be standing when the dust settled.

The rotors warmed up as we boarded. I settled back in my seat and pushed everything but Rod from my mind. We'd waited long enough. It was time to claim our future.

Chapter Fifteen

Roderick:

The Minnesota wind cut across the airfield, carrying the scent of snow and pine.

I pulled my coat tighter and checked my watch.

Eleven minutes until Cinaed's plane arrived.

Two fewer than the last time I checked. The flight had taken less time than I thought possible.

Dad had stressed the extreme danger Blackstone posed when requesting the fastest plane from the president. Clearly, he'd been persuasive.

Planes had been landing all day. Shifters from a dozen species arrived to help with the search.

Gryphons, dragons, and other flying beings would be our scouts.

Beings who hunted by scent—wolves, scent hounds, bears, and even a pair of elephant shifters—came to help search for Ailpein and Blackstone.

Avie called in as many inquisitors as she could spare from other assignments, and the ardrí had sent dozens of elven mages to help.

Even the human military was on alert in case the world suddenly found itself awash in demons.

My diamond thrummed in my pocket, responding to my anticipation. Sensing Cinaed's approach from miles away was crazy, and it would be more intense once we bonded.

Uniting our souls had been a dream for so long. Now when it was so near, it came with a side order of anxiety. Funny how threats to the world can dim your joy.

Behind me, Avie organized our makeshift command center in a small hangar. She'd had equipment flown in and everyone pitched in to help move it into place. Everybody except one.

"I swear to God, Owen," Avie yelled across the runway. "If you don't park your narrow ass in a chair, I'm going to tie you to a bed."

The wind drowned out Owen's response, but I felt confident he didn't argue.

"Narrow ass?" Elspeth asked, joining me at the edge of the tarmac. "Your sister uses colorful language. I like her."

I didn't hide my smile. Bart, Jan, Leo, and Owen might be the four musketeers, but Avie and I bonded long before our brothers were born. "She gets her point across."

"Standing in the cold won't make the plane land sooner." She stared into the sky next to me. "Even you mages can't make it fly faster."

Elspeth was the middle child, and Cinaed said she'd been close with all of her siblings. After spending time with her, I could understand why. "I can't, but it's better than letting my sister critique my butt."

“You’ve got a nice one,” she said. “My brother’s a lucky phoenix.”

The conversation reached its natural end, but it lightened my mood before Cinaed arrived. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” She put her hand on my back and rubbed gently. “Soon you’ll be part of our crazy family. Then all bets are off.”

The dark silhouette of the aircraft appeared as a distant speck. “Would you believe I’m looking forward to that day?”

“Absolutely.” She left me to wait for Cinaed alone.

As the aircraft touched down, the other half of my soul had arrived. It taxied closer and my smile grew. I greeted my brothers, their mates, and the old guardians, but my eyes were fixed on the glint of copper hair bringing up the rear.

Our eyes met across the tarmac, and everything else faded away. His smile, tired but genuine, gave me a few moments to forget the reason we gathered at a remote airport in Minnesota.

I closed the distance between us and took his hands in mine. His skin simmered with the familiar heat of his inner fire. “You look exhausted,” I said, wishing I’d given him a better welcome. “Sorry. Not the most romantic greeting.”

“No, but it’s accurate.” Cinaed squeezed my hands. “You look like you could use some sleep yourself.”

Connected by our hands, I knew his weariness was as soul deep as mine. “Tonight, I’ll sleep well.”

I pulled him into a hug. Despite the work to be done, we took a few moments for ourselves. Until we completed our bond, no amount of alone time would be enough, but it helped.

“We should go,” I said. “They can’t start the briefing without us.”

“If we don’t go, will it go away?” Cinaed took my hand, and we moved toward the hangar.

Digital maps covered portable screens, communication equipment hummed with activity, and a large table dominated the center of the space. Everyone gathered around it as Avie joined me at the head.

“Now that we’re all here, we can get everyone up to date,” Avie said. “Elspeth, can you go first?”

“Using the information from Bart’s trackers, Avie and I found my grandfather,” Elspeth pointed to a spot on the digital map.

“He’s held on the site of a medicine wheel in Nebraska.

It’s approximately three hundred miles from here as the phoenix flies.

The Idaho and Arizona sites have high concentrations of dark energy, but no traces of a phoenix. ”

“You got a lock on Grandfather?” Cinaed asked, his gaze never leaving the map.

“He’s really there?”

“There was considerable magical interference, but we cut through it,” Elspeth said.

“They tried to replicate his signature in the other two spots, but as you discovered,

copies are flawed.”

“Let’s go then.” Cinaed stepped back from the table. “Who’s coming with me and Rod?”

Cinaed’s enthusiasm was understandable, but it was about to be tempered. “Sorry, but it isn’t that easy.” My gaze met Avie’s and she touched a button.

The map zoomed out to show a global view. Red dots appeared across the continents. All of them were outside major population centers.

“These are locations where we’ve detected dark magic accumulation in the past twenty-four hours,” Avie explained. “Blackstone’s plans include more than just these three medicine wheels.”

“These aren’t to bring down the ward. They’re for after the barrier is down,” Bart said, studying the display. “He spread them out hoping to draw our resources from the real threat.”

“That was our thinking.” Avie glanced across the table. “Which means we need to free Ailpein before he can destroy the Great Ward.”

“How does he have that many followers?” Leo asked. “The logistics of hiding that many dark mages is crazy-stupid.”

“Those sites need only one mage to activate them,” I said. “The spell could even be infused into an inanimate object.”

The implications settled over the room like a physical weight. If we didn’t save Ailpein, Blackstone had a detailed plan to enslave our entire world.

“We should focus our energy on saving Grandfather.” Cinaed moved closer to me, his shoulder brushing mine. “When can we leave?”

I thought concentrating our resources on finding Ailpein was the only logical course of action.

Hearing Cinaed voice that thought changed my thinking.

“It’s too simple.” I waited until the others looked up.

“All three wheels are important, but we don’t have enough mages to attack all three at once. ”

“That’s why I brought reinforcements,” a voice said from the hangar entrance.

Dad stood in the opening with Prince Malachy, a company of phoenix guards, and dozens of senior wizards.

Grandpa and Grandma Hollen stood with Mom, my siblings, aunts, and uncles.

Members of the Mage Council, and the Ocular Society, walked beside professors from Utrecht Academy, led by Aunt Gretchen.

I spotted Dylan and Xavier among the academy professors.

“Dad?” Cinaed moved to greet his father. “How did you find us?”

“Chancellor Hollen kept the world informed,” Malachy said. “Now is not the time to sit back and hope. The king’s life isn’t the only one in danger.”

Searching the room, only Avie didn’t appear surprised. “You planned this?”

“Not all of it,” she said. “Dad and the Council decided where to allocate assets. We’ve sent teams to address those pockets of dark magic, but our strongest concentration of mages is here.”

After allowing time for everyone to greet the newcomers, Avie called for attention. Technically, Dad was in charge, but he deferred to me and Avie.

“Currently, a large contingent of elven mages is approaching the medicine wheel in Idaho,” Avie said, pointing to the northern circle. “They only need minor reinforcement. Aunt Gretchen, I’m sending you and Owen to assist. Take three more mages with you.”

Avie tapped the Arizona wheel. “I’ve sent three of our best teams south, but they need more resources.”

“Sally and I will take our Oculars and assist,” Grandma Hollen said. “Beornraed and most of the Council mages will join us.”

The two groups would be a formidable force. “Excellent,” I said. “The rest of us will head to Nebraska.”

I nodded to my sister, and she walked everyone through the plan we’d hammered out with the others. Ours was the largest group, but we had two missions: rescue Ailpein and stop Blackstone.

Cinaed fidgeted nervously next to me. I hadn’t had time to explain everything, but I could sense his frustration. “You and I are leading the group to save your grandfather.” I squeezed his hand. “Did you think I’d let anyone else take that job?”

“With our fathers here, I wasn’t sure,” he said, tightening his grip. “If we don’t free him in time....”

He didn't need to finish the sentence. "Believe we will succeed."

"Rod will lead the team to find Ailpein," Avie said. "Dad and I will take the remaining mages to stop Blackstone."

"I will accompany Cinaed and Roderick," Malachy said in a voice that dared anyone to tell him otherwise.

With the recent additions, I needed a moment to reconfigure who went on which team.

I had planned to take Bart, Cael, Darius, and Ignatius, but with Prince Malachy and his guards, the group was larger than I wanted.

"Of course. If you consent, I'd like to send Elspeth and all but two of your guards with Avie. "

He considered my suggestion for a moment, then inclined his head in agreement. "Bart, Cael, I'd like you with me. Ignatius and Darius, I had thought to bring you both as well, but I'd like your thoughts."

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“We’ll go with your sister,” Ignatius said. “Darius and I have the greatest knowledge of the Ward. I recommend Eldwin and Hro go in our place. They are the strongest fighting pair and if you’re going in lean, they’re best suited for the assignment.”

I glanced at my uncle and he smiled. “Darius has never admitted Hro and I are better warriors. How can I refuse after that concession?”

Avie sorted everyone into their teams, and the rest of the briefing focused on logistics. Goodbyes lingered a bit longer than normal. No one said it out loud, but some of us probably wouldn’t survive. Cinaed and I were at the top of that list.

Throughout it all, Cinaed stuck beside me. His presence was a reminder of everything at stake. As others broke away to find their flights, Cinaed and I found a quiet corner of the hangar, and I pulled him into an embrace.

“Finally,” I whispered against his hair. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” His arms tightened around me. “Our connection has gotten stronger even without completing our bond.”

Concentrating on our link, I pushed my emotions to him. “No matter what happens, I will always love you. Being with you has been the greatest joy of my life. Ailpein’s spell couldn’t take that from us.”

Although I believed we’d make it, we didn’t ignore the possibility we wouldn’t, so we held on as long as possible. Bart finally approached, his expression apologetic.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said, sounding sincere. “But our flight is leaving in ten minutes. We’ll discuss the rescue plans on the plane.”

Reality reasserted itself, and we stepped apart. “We’re coming.”

The rescue plan was less plan and more make it up as we go. We lacked the details needed to thoroughly plot each step. Eldwin and Hro expressed confidence we could reach Ailpein, it was the freeing him that would be hard.

Bart had been working on ways to isolate Ailpein from all outside magic. Once he severed Blackstone’s connection to Ailpein, it would be up to Malachy and Cinaed to free him.

“Based on the information Bart and Cinaed sent me, I think we understand how Blackstone is holding the king,” Prince Malachy said. “It’s not corrupted earth magic, it’s demonic energy.”

“How’s that possible?” Hro asked. “The only demons who made it to Earth died before leaving their containment circles.”

“I know,” Bart said with a smirk. “I was there for both. The death of two powerful demons released a lot of dark energy. Most was contained by the glyphs and the Earth would’ve quickly neutralized most of it.”

Most of it wasn’t all. Blackstone was mercurial and likely had contingencies for his contingencies. “He could’ve siphoned off energy before it all dissipated.”

“None of us were paying attention immediately after the fight, but we assume he did,” Cael said. “We also made plans in case we’re wrong.”

Blackstone wasn’t the only one who made contingency plans. “If it’s demonic

energy, how do we free him?”

“With clean earth magic,” Malachy said. “All the beings except Cinaed will funnel earth magic through Cael, and Bart will shape it with his spell.”

“Why not me?” Cinaed asked.

“Because, love,” I said, rubbing his hand. “You’ll need your strength. Once they free your grandfather, we need to act immediately.”

Mom and Dad walked down the aisle to join us. They sat across from me, but didn’t speak. The edges of Mom’s eyes glistened and Dad swallowed hard. He grabbed Mom’s hand and exhaled loudly.

“It goes without saying your mother and I expect to see both of you when this is over.” He struggled to hold back his tears. “There are always other paths. Be sure you weigh all options before you act.”

“I echo Wilhelm’s words,” Malachy said. “It will be a hollow victory if we lose you boys.”

“We know,” Cinaed said, squeezing my hand tighter. Determination and understanding flowed through our link. “Rod and I have everything to live for, but the world must survive first.”

They tried hard to put on brave faces for us, but it wasn’t necessary. They’d taught us sometimes sacrifices were needed for the greater good. Cinaed and I planned to spend a lifetime living under the new Great Ward’s protection, but there needed to be a new one first.

“Thank you.” I stood and hugged my parents. “Your love has sustained us all these

years. We don't want to die, but if that's the only way to save the world, we'll do what's necessary."

Mom sniffed, so I held on. "We love you beyond words, Roderick. Find. A way. There is so much joy you and Cinaed have to share with each other and the world."

When I stepped back, the rest of our families had joined us. Cinaed and I had survived for all these years with their support. This was a reminder they weren't ready to let us go.

Elspeth wrapped her brother tightly in her arms. Her father joined them and Cinaed's emotions surged. They shared the same bond as the Hollens.

When Cinaed and his family separated, Elspeth surprised me with a hug as strong as steel coils. "Bring him home," she whispered. "Whatever it takes."

Chapter Sixteen

C inaed:

T he wind across the prairie carried the usual scents of the open plains, except something made my phoenix instincts recoil.

I shifted my weight against the rough ground, trying to find a position that didn't make my leg cramp.

We crouched behind a cluster of stones, waiting for the other team to begin their attack.

Bart had hidden us, but I didn't want to test his magic by moving more than necessary.

Rod's thumb traced gentle circles over my knuckles. The simple touch anchored me, but it couldn't block the sickening pulse emanating from the medicine wheel. Dark energy had poisoned what had once been a sacred site. My earth sense urged me to flee from the corruption.

"Are you OK?" Rod asked. "I feel it too, but you and Cael seem especially affected."

After the caves in Transylvania, I thought I understood what Blackstone was capable of, but the depravity of this place... "I'll be fine," I said, trying to convince myself it was true. "This was more than I expected."

“It’s hard to square this version of Blackstone with the man who led Utrecht for all those years,” Rod said. “We thought his standoffish nature was arrogance. Now we know it was to avoid anyone getting too close. I mean, he was still an arrogant asshole, but that only told part of the story.”

Father appeared beside us, his aura dulled by the evil in front of us. “How did he hide something this large?”

“The wheel sat here for a century,” Rod said. “Blackstone corrupted it after he abducted King Ailpein. We were too occupied to notice the gradual creep of darkness over the sacred site. He accelerated his plans after the fight in Transylvania.”

“Hopefully that haste led to mistakes,” Father said.

I didn’t share his optimism. If anything, Blackstone was always steps ahead of us.

A terrible thought crept into my mind. Were we doing exactly what he wanted?

Other than Bart surprising him in the caves, we never outplayed Blackstone.

Before I could voice my concerns, Avie’s presence appeared in my mind.

“Get ready. We’re about to start the attack.”

I pushed past the revulsion coming from below to watch. Magic concealed both sides, but Avie said they’d been able to find Blackstone’s mages. She also said Blackstone most likely wanted us to find them. Inside the circle, glyphs covered the ground.

“How long have they been there?” I asked.

“Hard to say,” Rod answered, knowing exactly what I meant. “All I can say is they’re

not new.”

I didn’t respond and let the silence linger between us. During the drive to this remote corner of Nebraska, I’d tried to prepare myself for what we’d find. Blackstone had held Grandfather for days. Even he had limits when confronted with demonic energy.

The anger and resentment I’d felt for decades gnawed at me. It hadn’t been my grandfather, it had been Blackstone’s influence. I wanted a chance to return to what we’d had before things changed.

“Stop chastising yourself,” Rod’s voice whispered in my head. “We’ll free him.”

His certainty pushed back some of my fear, but not all.

Before I could respond, my perception changed.

Clean earth magic, ancient and powerful, rose from beneath Blackstone’s poisonous influence.

This was a new sensation. The planet reached for me, offering its strength.

A network of energy that ran beneath the corrupted wheel in places Blackstone’s magic couldn’t reach.

There was a deep, steady pulse of life that refused to be silenced.

“Cinaed?” Father’s voice cut through my wonder. “What’s happening?”

I stared blankly at him. How could I explain what I didn’t understand?

“I feel it too,” Cael said. “The Earth understands what’s about to happen and is giving

us its strength.”

“After all the Earth has done to protect itself and all life, why are you surprised?” Eldwin asked. “This was never one being’s fight.”

Pressing my palm flat against the stone, I allowed my consciousness to follow the threads of energy downward.

The corruption’s reach was superficial, like an oil slick on the surface of a deep, clear pool.

Underneath the darkness, I sensed places where the Earth’s natural magic flowed.

Sometimes it was strong and clean, other times it fought to reach the surface.

One of the struggling offshoots had a familiar feel.

“I found Grandfather. He’s alive.”

“Where?” Father asked.

Tracing the path, I pushed through layers of stone and soil and into a small space. “As we expected, there’s a cavern beneath that bluff.” I pointed to the opening near our position. “He’s bound tightly, and the room is well below the surface, but he’s still self-aware.”

Before I could dig deeper, the area around the circle exploded in brilliant flashes of light. Magic erupted in response, and both sides were visible. In terms of numbers, Blackstone had a slight advantage, but our mages were among the most powerful in the world.

The sound reached us a heartbeat later. Cracks of magic collided with stone. Shouts tainted by fear filled the circle. A scream of pain before an enemy collapsed into a heap.

“It’s too much,” Roderick hissed next to me. “We don’t want them to retreat.”

As if on cue, Avie’s team slowed, and their attacks had less effect.

“Your sister’s got this,” Cael said.

Below, Blackstone’s mages pushed back and held their ground. They rallied, but their counterattacks sputtered against our side’s defenses.

“They’re selling it well,” Father said. “Can they maintain the delicate balance without overwhelming the defenses?”

“Avie and Dad understand what’s at stake,” Rod said. “They’ll wait until we’re inside before bringing down the hammer.”

“Time to move,” Bart said, his stone bathing us in purple energy. “That will hide us, but if we get hit with a stray burst of energy, it will reveal our presence.”

Rod led us behind our friends and family toward the cave opening. Before we reached the entrance, three new mages burst out and tried to punch a hole through our line. Roderick’s mother met the trio head on with a ferocious assault.

Her spells were so powerful I worried the enemy would retreat. After a blinding flash, two of the three were prone, their clothes smoldering. The third, visibly shaken, faltered during his spell, and Miriam made him pay for that mistake.

We reached the entrance, and the wrongness had grown stronger. The others surmised

Blackstone would gather a vast pool of dark magic wherever they held Grandfather. It appeared they were correct.

Since I had a link to Grandfather, I took point.

Rod stood beside me, his diamond mage stone lighting our path.

Memories of happy times rose unbidden in my mind.

Grandfather teaching me to fly when I was barely old enough to shift.

The way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he laughed, a rare sight in recent decades.

Darker images tangled with these good ones.

His cold dismissal when I'd tried to explain my connection to Rod.

The spell that kept us apart for decades, causing pain in both our lives.

"Your emotions are all over the place," Rod whispered into my thoughts. "I can feel your anxiety rising."

His concern helped me center myself. There'd be time to address these feelings once we saved the Great Ward. "I've been angry at him for so long. Justifiably upset, but it was still hard. Now, knowing Blackstone manipulated him, I'm sorry I didn't try harder to reach him."

"The pain was real, even if he wasn't fully responsible for causing it," Rod said gently. "You aren't to blame."

Everything he said was true, but it didn't make it better. "It complicates everything. I wanted to hate him because it was easier to believe he was cruel and selfish, rather than that he had legitimate reasons for keeping us apart."

"We can deal with this after he's free." Rod slid his fingers around mine. "Your feelings are valid, and you don't have to resolve decades of complicated emotions in the next five minutes."

A faint pulse of phoenix energy—my grandfather's unique signature—brushed against my senses, growing stronger as we moved forward.

With it came another realization: beneath the anger and hurt lay a bedrock of love that had never fully disappeared.

The bond between us had been damaged, but not destroyed.

"I just want a chance to understand what really happened. And hopefully rebuild what we lost."

"Then let's make sure you get that chance." His grip tightened.

A few paces into the cave, a tendril of clean earth magic wrapped itself around me. It called to me in a new way. Not the gentle invitation I was used to, but more personal. Like it recognized me as an ally and had joined us as a full partner.

It also thrummed with a warning. I held up my hand. "Hold."

I knelt in the passage and pressed my palm to the stone. Guided by my guardian, I identified invisible threads of dark magic crisscrossing our path.

Rod knelt beside me, his hand on my shoulder. Our bond wasn't complete, but that

didn't matter to the Earth. The moment Rod saw the magic, he recognized what I'd seen.

"Detection spells, followed by almost a dozen concealed attacks." He paused and closed his eyes. "They're varied and powerful. If we tripped them all at once, it might overwhelm our defenses."

Cael and Hro put their hands on the walls.

After a few seconds, Eldwin made his way toward the front.

"Most of the spells are minor and can't harm us," he said.

"But they're staggered in such a way that we'd be defending against nuisance spells when the major assaults hit us. An excellent catch, young prince."

I wanted to tell him it was the Earth, not me, but it didn't matter who got the credit. "Can we neutralize them?"

"The short answer is probably." Rod pointed his stone toward his uncle. "Do you want the nuisance spells or the stronger ones?"

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“I’ll take the stronger ones, but are you sure our efforts won’t activate all the spells?” The question didn’t stop Eldwin from extending his diamond toward Rod’s. “It wouldn’t be hard to create a cascade effect tied to the first spells.”

“Agreed,” Rod said. “Which is where Bart comes in. He’ll protect us if the other spells go live all at once.”

It wasn’t the time to admire my mate, but I did. His confidence grew with every decision he made. His commanding presence, however, didn’t stop me from asking questions. “Are you sure that’s a wise move? Blackstone will know we’re here once we tinker with his spells.”

“Your grandfather is in there.” Rod pointed in front of us. “There are no options except moving forward.”

He was right, so we began without further discussion. Hro moved up next to Eldwin, while Cael and Bart remained side-by-side as we worked.

I couldn’t see what Rod did, but the Earth thrummed through my connection.

The danger zone moved further down the tunnel, allowing us to continue.

We stopped at a second spot, and Rod’s diamond pulsed gently.

This time the warning hit me like a truck.

I groaned an instant before a ball of magical fire appeared in the blackness ahead and

raced toward us.

Purple light met the fire, and the two canceled each other out in a brilliant flash. We waited for more attacks, but the Earth had returned to calm.

“The path is clear until the end of this hallway,” I said. “At least I can’t sense anything at the moment.”

We continued, and the tunnel narrowed ahead. The rough-hewn walls glistened with an unnatural sheen. My enhanced senses detected a complex lattice of death woven into the very stone.

“Hold!” I threw out an arm as if that could stop them. “There’s an angry web of energy ahead.”

Rod’s diamond flared, and his magic flowed over the floor. Where it passed, lines of sickly purple-black energy crisscrossed the ground in an intricate web.

“It’s fascinating, in a twisted way,” Bart said. Holding out his purple tourmaline, he stared at the obstruction. “They’re layered, like a deadly composition.”

“Three primary trigger mechanisms, each connected to at least five secondary responses,” Eldwin said, his face bathed in pink light. “If you trip one and neutralize it, the others will probably activate in sequence.”

“There’s a pattern,” Rod said. “See how the energy loops back on itself? The first layer binds, the second drains magical energy, and then the third swoops in for the kill.”

“The targeting spells are keyed to the earth magic in beings,” Cael finished grimly. “It’s designed to distract the mages so it can kill the beings.”

“Can we remove it?” Father asked. “And if not, can we fly over it safely?”

Bart and Cael faced Rod, and then Rod looked at Eldwin. The elder guardian appeared to shrug.

“It can be done,” Eldwin said. “But it will take a few minutes.”

He and Cael knelt at the edge of the magical barrier, their stones casting light in mesmerizing patterns. They traced counter-sigils in the air and floated them to precise spots on the ground.

“The structure is numerical,” Eldwin said. “Three primary nodes, each with nine connections.”

“It will take three mages to do it safely,” Cael said, looking at Rod. “We need you to disrupt one of the primary spots.”

Rod nodded and added his white to the blue and pink floating over the array. Their magic twined together, creating a visual light show that danced over the ground.

Despite the tension, I watched in fascination as the magic darted around the deadly space. The three slid into a rhythm, clearing the ground in short order. When their magic covered the entire space, the dark glyphs slowly faded into the dirt.

“Done,” Rod whispered after several minutes. “Give it another minute to make sure all the dark energy is neutralized.”

We made it safely to the end of the tunnel and paused while I determined which way. “That way.” I pointed left. “We’re getting closer, but there are different spells lining the way.”

The mages consulted again, and when they finished, we set out again. The process was painstaking, requiring everyone to be on high alert. We encountered three more layers of defenses, each one more sophisticated than the last.

After we cleared the third obstacle, we stopped to rest and reassess our position.

The passages beyond weren't natural. Residual dark energy lingered in the walls from magic used to carve them. This was a twisted maze, designed to wear us down. Corridors branched off at odd intervals. My earth sense told me they were dead ends, but checking them cost us valuable time.

I closed my eyes, pushing past the immediate layer of corruption that saturated the tunnel walls. Beneath that sickening vibration lay something else—a rhythm, ancient and pure, that pulsed with stubborn persistence. Like a heartbeat.

Kneeling, I pressed my palm flat against the cold stone floor.

The initial contact sent a shiver of revulsion through me as Blackstone's magic attempted to repel my touch, but I pushed deeper.

The Earth responded—not just responding to my call, but reaching for me with something that felt almost like recognition.

“It's different this time,” I said, looking up at Rod with wide eyes. “The Earth is communicating. Not just allowing me access, but actively showing me things.”

“The Earth remembers this place is a medicine wheel,” Cael said. His connection to earth magic allowed him to see most of what I could, just not Grandfather. “Before Blackstone's corruption, this was a site of healing and communion.”

Beneath the pervasive layer of wrongness, earth magic still flowed.

Blackstone had tried to smother it with his dark arts, but his corruption was just a surface wound.

Below, the ancient magic waited, gathering its strength like a coiled spring.

The Earth found cracks and gaps in the perversion and was helping us find Grandfather.

“This way,” I said when we reached a new hallway.

My connection to Grandfather grew stronger as we walked down a sloped tunnel. Given how far underground we’d gone, I started to question my decisions. If I was wrong, we’d all die, along with any hope of saving the world.

Rod fell into step beside me and clasped my hand. His confidence quelled most of my doubts without him saying a word. It wasn’t blind trust, but a willingness to trust in us, the same way we’d maintained our faith we’d be together one day.

The air grew thicker, heavy with the unpleasant scent of corruption that reminded me of the demon cave in Romania. There was more here than just holding Grandfather prisoner. I couldn’t say what, but it was foul.

After another turn, I felt three life forces ahead of us. None of them were Grandfather. I stopped abruptly and pointed to the right. “Three guards around the next bend,” I said silently.

“How close?” Eldwin asked.

Concentrating on the signals, I traced back mentally. “Twenty feet, maybe a bit more.”

“It’s obviously a trap,” Eldwin said. “They have to know we’re here.”

It didn’t make sense. If Blackstone knew we were here, why let us keep going? I checked to be sure it was really Grandfather I felt. “Father, I need your help.”

“What’s wrong?” Dad asked.

I wanted to appear competent, but getting us killed was worse. “If this is a trap, maybe it’s not Grandfather I’m sensing.”

I opened my thoughts and showed him what the Earth revealed. Father accepted the invitation and moved through the information. I waited anxiously, hoping he didn’t tell me I’d been wrong.

“It’s him, Cinaed,” Dad said, withdrawing from my thoughts. “But I share your concerns. If it’s too easy, something’s wrong.”

We shared our concerns with the others, but no one had an explanation that didn’t scream trap.

“We push ahead and trust in our superior skill,” Eldwin said.

I was still hesitant but didn’t have a better idea to suggest. The mages conferred quietly before Eldwin and Roderick charged around the corner. Bart and Cael continued their role, staying alert for a potential ambush.

The guards were where my earth sense had warned. They had their dark stones charged and glowing with power and released their magic when we came into view.

Our attack unfolded with deadly precision. Eldwin struck first, pink energy streaming from his stone in a protective barrier that absorbed the volley of dark magic. Sparks

cascaded across the tunnel ceiling, briefly illuminating the shocked faces of our adversaries.

Behind him, Rod pivoted to the right, his gem casting a brilliant white light that formed into three arrow-like projectiles. They streaked past Eldwin's shield, targeting the nearest guard with unerring accuracy.

"Cael, the floor!" Bart called, purple energy pulsing in harmony with his mate's blue.

Cael dropped to one knee and pressed his sapphire against the floor. The Earth responded instantly, rippling outward in a wave that disrupted the guards' footing as they attempted a counterattack.

Their spell went wild, striking the ceiling instead of our group. Chunks of rock rained down, but Bart created a dome of purple energy that dissolved the debris.

Father and I moved left as our guards went right. Phoenix fire danced along my fingers, and I hurled flames at the nearest enemy mage. Father's attack mirrored mine, and our burning attacks struck together.

The enemy mage had a smug expression as his shield easily repelled our attack. I smirked back at the fool, because we were a diversion. Rod's white energy sliced through the distracted man's defense, engulfing him in a deadly barrage.

Hro joined the phoenix guards, and the three charged the woman with their swords. Her counterattack washed harmlessly off a pink shield, leaving her open-mouthed with surprise. Eldwin finished her before she could recover.

The entire encounter had lasted less than thirty seconds.

"Everyone alright?" Rod asked, scanning our group.

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The efficient way we dismantled three prepared mages was a testament to how mates enhanced their abilities.

Father's eyes met mine, and I saw understanding in his eyes.

Rod and I needed to complete our bond, not for personal happiness, but because together, we could channel a power greater than either of us could access alone.

"Are there more?" Hro asked, sheathing his sword.

I pressed my hand to the wall, following the trail to Grandfather's position. The ability came easier now, but I still felt like it was working through me instead of me using the earth magic. "No more living guards, but the path is lined with defensive...."

A surge of awareness hit me, not painful, but insistent.

"Cinaed!" Roderick called. "What's happening?"

I held up a finger to silence everyone while I sorted through the sensation. The area around my grandfather had shifted. Where I once saw the space clearly, it was now hazy. "There's someone or something with Grandfather. I can't see it clearly, but it's there."

"It takes a powerful mage or spell to confuse earth magic," Cael said. "It could be Blackstone."

“Can you show me?” Roderick asked. “I’ll share what I see with the others.”

Rod’s mind slotted easily into my thoughts. Together we retraced my path to Grandfather. The distorted area hadn’t changed, but Rod manipulated the magic to give us a better view.

“Whatever it is, it’s close to Ailpein,” Rod said. “I can’t say for sure it’s Blackstone, but it would make sense. If he’s going to make a last attempt to bring down the Ward, he’d need to be near Ailpein. What I can’t tell is if he’s alone or if there are others with him.”

“I think we should assume he’s not alone,” Bart said. “He doesn’t get involved until his lackeys fail.”

“That sounds accurate,” Rod said. “I suggest we stick to the plan. We didn’t expect there’d be no resistance.”

Everyone nodded, but before we left, Eldwin and Hro collected the downed mages’ stones. They put the three together, and a pink light engulfed them. When the light faded, the three gems were fused into one crude rock.

“We don’t need armed mages following us,” Hro said.

“You’re better beings than me,” Father said. “I’d have killed them for their treason.”

No one commented, so we renewed our mission. As I’d seen, there were more spells blocking our way, but Rod had seen them when we were linked. He and Eldwin defused them before they could hurt us.

“How much farther?” Father asked after we’d moved past the third set of defenses.

I'd kept track of our progress and knew we were close. Checking to get a more precise distance, I felt Grandfather's fire. He was alive, conscious, and angry. "Maybe a hundred yards," I said. "Whatever Blackstone was doing to Grandfather, he's resisting."

Those hundred yards felt like miles as we once again were met with magical resistance. Finally, we cleared the last line of defense between us and Grandfather.

No one celebrated. We knew Blackstone had a trap waiting for us.

I steeled myself for what we'd find and led us the last few feet.

The passage ahead opened into a small room and I froze.

Every inch of rock was covered in sigils that hurt when I looked at them.

In the center, sitting in a cage, was my grandfather.

Father moved forward, but Bart held out a hand. "Those runes can permanently kill a phoenix."

Bart's purple tourmaline flared as he examined the nearest symbols. "Some of these prevent Ailpein from shifting, while others attack his inner fire."

My inner fire recoiled at the sight of these glyphs. They'd been carved deep into the stone and filled with dark metal that absorbed light. Grandfather couldn't shift, couldn't walk on the floor, and couldn't escape. This was how Blackstone wore down his spirit.

Using my enhanced sight, I saw what had clouded my vision. A column of corrupt energy surrounded the cage. It was dark and foul.

“Sweet Mother Earth,” Father breathed beside me, his voice thick with grief and rage.

As if sensing our presence, Grandfather’s eyes opened. They found mine across the horrific space, and for a moment, the years of resentment and hurt fell away. I was just a grandson looking at his grandfather, seeing the pain Blackstone had inflicted on someone I’d once loved without reservation.

Recognition flashed in those amber depths, followed immediately by something else—fear.

“Run.” His mental voice was weak. “It’s a trap.”

“We know, Father,” Dad said. “We won’t let him kill you.”

“Not me,” Grandfather said wearily. “Save the ward.”

“Hold on, Ailpein,” Hro said. “We’ll free you before he can release your life force.”

The column of energy pulsed, and I felt rather than heard the laughter echoing through the cavern. A dozen wizards stepped through side doors, their dark stones shining in the dim light. Instead of denying us our prize, they fanned out behind Grandfather. Missing from their number was Blackstone.

“Thank you all for coming as we’d hoped,” a man I recognized as Thomas Reid said. He had the regal tone of a British aristocrat. “For a time we feared you’d figured us out. But you came and brought Bartholomew with you. So very kind of you.”

My heart hammered in my chest. They wanted us here, and we obliged. I looked at my grandfather, his eyes pleading with me to go. I replayed his last words and understood. We’d been duped.

“Blackstone never needed Grandfather,” I said. “It was a ruse to get us down here.”

Chapter Seventeen

Roderick:

The pieces fell into place. It had been too easy. We thought ourselves clever, but Blackstone had expertly maneuvered us into position like chess pieces.

“Clever little birdie,” Reid said, his aristocratic accent making the derogatory name more grating. “And James said you weren’t very bright.”

Bart moved closer to me, but I held him back. We didn’t need to rush further into his trap. “Says the sacrificial pawn sent to die in his place.”

“Die?” Reid’s laugh bounced off the walls. “Centuries of planning, and you think we missed this? Bartholomew was always the prize. Keep you busy while James finishes the real work.”

There was a hint of truth in his words, but like everything else, it was deception.

He didn’t build this place for Bart. My brother hadn’t been born when they began this plan.

Ailpein had been the real plan, but he proved too difficult.

“Translation, Blackstone overestimated his power and couldn’t break the King.

How loyal of you to volunteer to be cannon fodder. ”

“You know nothing!” Reid’s facade cracked. “The Ward falls today. All of you will die with it.”

“Spoken like a being who realizes too late he’s the true fool,” Hro said, his sword glinted as he adjusted his grip.

Ailpein slumped against the bars of his cage, his amber eyes locked with mine. “Leave me! Save the Ward.”

Part of me wanted to do just that for all the pain he’d caused me and Cinaed, but we still needed him to free us before we could create a new Ward. “Not an option.” I kept my attention on Reid. “We don’t leave family behind.”

“Touching,” Reid’s mocking tone reanimated his smile. “But too late. The Ward will be down before you lovebirds can complete your bond.”

Assessing our position, I recalculated our strength. I’d chosen our group to slip in and free Ailpein, not engage in a protracted mage fight. Thank the Earth Darius planned for this possibility. It was time for us to pivot. “Uncles—cover us. Bart, with me! Cael, Malachy, and Cinaed, free the king!”

“Yes,” Cael said. “We’ll need to deactivate the runes or we can’t reach him.”

“We’ve got this,” Cinaed said. “Go wipe the smug off their faces.”

The battle exploded with a blinding flash of pink magic.

The first collision of spells sent a concussive wave through the cavern, dust and small stones raining down from above.

Eldwin’s attack staggered half of Reid’s fellow mages.

One crumpled, probably dead, and another dropped to his knee, leaving a smear of blood on the rough stone floor. I blasted him before he could recover.”

Reid’s stunned expression lasted half a second before Bart pressed our advantage.

The confidence in their numbers had been a mistake.

These fools might not have known the mate bond amplified a mage’s power, but Blackstone did.

Realization flashed across Reid’s face. He had been sent on a suicide mission.

To my right, Cael knelt at the edge of the glyphs. The air near the cage felt wrong. It was thicker, more resistant. Cinaed and Malachy flanked Cael while the guards shielded the trio with their bodies. The air turned icy around them, their breath forming visible puffs.

Blue light seeped into the rock like water, creating rivers of energy that flowed toward the nearest runes.

Where his magic touched the dark symbols, they trembled and cracked, releasing wisps of foul smoke.

Cinaed and Malachy channeled their phoenix fire into Cael’s shoulders, their golden energy merging with his blue in a display that cast emerald shadows across the walls.

On my left, Hro unsheathed a blade that drank in the ambient light.

Ancient sigils etched into the metal glowed gold, each symbol pulsing with its own rhythm.

When he slashed, perfect golden replicas of the marks detached from the sword and spun through the air like deadly throwing stars.

These shattered against the mage's shield with enough force to make her stagger backward.

Eldwin ended her life with a burst from his stone.

The cavern was awash in magical chaos. Dark energies clashed with our bright magic. Showers of arcane sparks rained onto the rune-covered floor.

Bart's tourmaline flared as he cast a spell that appeared to miss Reid completely. The man's smirk of relief froze as Bart twisted his hand, and the purple energy that had sailed past Reid transformed into a dense barrier that sealed the exit like stained glass.

"Can't let the sacrificial mages run away like scared rabbits," Bart said.

Before Reid could recover, I hit him hard enough to rattle his shield. Several blows hit my shields as the others rushed to defend their leader. Bart and Eldwin made them pay for ignoring the two most dangerous mages in the cavern.

Eldwin's pink diamond cast ancient spells forgotten by most. His fingers traced symbols in the air that burned with inner light before launching toward his targets.

Where they struck, enemies erupted in pink flames that consumed them from within, leaving only ash.

Beside him, Hro's enchanted blade hummed with golden energy, cutting into magical shields like they were soft clay.

Reid engaged me, the black energy of his strike fizzled against my shields with a

sound like sizzling oil.

My diamond heated against my palm, almost painfully hot as I channeled more power than it typically carried, interrupting his next attack with one of my own.

Two more concussive arcane balls had him stepping back.

Before I could end the fight, several new mages appeared behind Bart's barrier.

The newcomers attacked the sheet of purple energy meant to keep our opponents from fleeing. Reid and the others fought with renewed strength, the chamber growing noticeably warmer from the concentrated magical energy.

If the barricade fell, at least ten new mages would join the fight. Quickly defeating those in the chamber became imperative.

I focused on Reid, my diamond blazing with white light. Reid was powerful but arrogant, overconfident in his numerical advantage. He also didn't know the full extent of my rarely seen skills.

"You've made a critical error," Reid said with a twisted grin. "We don't need to beat you to win. I only have to keep you in here with us and give James time."

My diamond pulsed, releasing a blinding flash that swept across the chamber like silent lightning.

Reid and the nearby mages threw their arms up, shielding their eyes.

In that moment of distraction, I shaped my magic into a concentrated beam of white energy that struck Reid's shield like a sledgehammer.

Reid staggered backward, his smirk gone. “Impressive, but not enough.”

He slammed his stone into the ground, and the floor beneath me turned liquid with darkness.

Shadow-hands erupted upward, reaching for my ankles and wrists.

I struck the darkness with my fire, creating a nova of light that forced the darkness to retreat with an audible shriek.

Reid’s face hardened with the failure of his assault.

Around me, the battle raged with increasing intensity as magic collided in spectacular fashion.

Bart’s purple spears worked in concert with Eldwin’s pink sigils that burned through the air.

Where their spells overlapped, the magic created shimmering distortions that blinded our foes.

Four of Reid’s mages lay unmoving, their stones scattered across the floor, while three more were pinned against the wall by what appeared to be translucent gold chains conjured from Hro’s blade.

Reid fought with the skill I expected from one in his position. He maintained his composure even as his companions went down. A sliver of darkness lanced toward me, nearly piercing my shield. Grunting, I reinforced my protection and then counterattacked.

I checked on Cael’s progress and was pleased to see many glyphs had disappeared

from the chamber's floor. Soon they'd free Ailpein, and hopefully we could end this by creating a new Great Ward.

"They're breaking through," Bart's voice strained as purple energy flared from his stone.

He'd strengthened the barricade, but we were in a race to free Ailpein before the enemy reinforcements broke through.

Reid and the survivors must've noticed what Bart had, and fought with renewed tenacity.

Brilliant magic bounced around the room, momentarily blinding me.

Before my sight cleared, attacks from multiple directions battered me.

Most weren't strong, but a vicious attack from Reid rattled my defenses.

I barely deflected it, countering with a burst of white energy that forced him back a step.

In the pause between attacks, I saw most of the glyphs had vanished.

The fight intensified as Reid's onyx stone blazed with dark energy as he launched a string of spells at me. I parried his spell and countered with a barrage of crystalline darts that streaked toward his face.

Bart and Eldwin had their opponents backing toward the wall. Once those mages were down, Reid would be overwhelmed.

A flash of blue-gold light caught my peripheral vision. "We're through!" Cinaed

called. “Clear us a path!”

Relief surged through me. I pressed Reid harder, keeping him too busy to stop Ailpein’s rescue.

Panic replaced the smug arrogance on Reid’s face.

He pivoted toward Cinaed, and I sliced my diamond through the air.

A crescent-shaped wave of white energy whistled as it sped toward him.

The spell’s edge carved a gouge in his shield.

His attention snapped back to me, eyes widening.

“The phoenix!” Reid’s voice cracked with panic. “Stop them!”

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The other mages were too busy fighting for their lives to prevent Cinaed's team from approaching the tortured Ailpein. With every new spell, Reid's desperation grew. I kept alert, hoping he'd make another mistake so I could end the fight, but he never gave me the opening.

A tremendous crash echoed through the chamber.

Bart's barrier finally gave way in a shower of rocks and arcane energy, the concussion making my ears pop painfully.

The rush of air from the entrance washed over us, carrying the metallic tang of fresh dark magic.

With their backs to the wall, the mages facing Bart and Eldwin couldn't see the entrance and flinched at the sound, bits of stone dust settling on their shoulders. Three more died before they recovered.

Dark mages poured through the opening, their stones glowing with malevolent energy. Fourteen had entered the cave before I stopped counting. I wasn't giving up, but our chances dropped dramatically.

"Free the king," Cael said, rushing to Bart's position. Malachy and Cinaed hurried to Ailpein's prison.

The enemy rushed forward, expecting their numbers to overwhelm my brother and uncle. They clearly hadn't remembered what happens to a mage when they form a mate bond with a shifter.

Cael and Bart moved in perfect synchrony, their gems glowing in harmony.

Cael's sapphire sent ripples through the stone floor, while Bart's tourmaline created intricate geometric patterns in the air above.

When the spells merged, they erupted into a purplish-blue shockwave that caught the charging mages like insects in amber, suspending them in contorted poses before flinging them backward.

Another example of the sum being greater than the parts.

Their bond amplified two powerful mages to incredible levels.

Together, they created a devastating combination of purple arcane energy and blue earth magic that sent three of the invaders flying backward.

Eldwin and Hro joined the fight, and the four kept the lesser mages back on their heels.

Reid's triumphant expression didn't last long as his back-up failed to turn the tide of the battle. He lashed out at me with magic fueled by rage and desperation. I parried his attacks, my counters calm and measured. I waited for his recklessness to give me an opening I could exploit.

As Reid and I continued our duel, Cinaed and his father had freed Ailpein from his prison. I stole a glance and the king looked diminished. He stumbled as he emerged, leaning heavily on Malachy for support.

Ailpein spoke to his family, but I only heard single words. There was an apology, gratitude, relief, and an urgency we all felt.

The opportunity in Reid's defense happened, but not how I'd hoped. Reid launched a new attack, but directed it at Ailpein, Malachy, and Cinaed.

My brain stopped working at the thought of Reid hurting Cinaed. Logically, I should've used Reid's distraction to kill him. His spell might seriously hurt or kill a phoenix, but they'd regenerate. Seeing any attack on Cinaed, however, overrode rational thinking.

Aiming my magic in the path of the hostile spell, I instantly realized Reid had played me. He quickly pivoted and fired a new spell in my direction. Black energy sped toward me, faster than I could shift back to defense. My shields would probably hold, but I'd still be rattled.

I pulled my stone across my chest, hoping to reinforce my protections. The dark magic hit with the force of a truck. I staggered from the blow, my teeth vibrated, and I stood on wobbly legs. Reid grinned and took advantage of my condition to toss more black energy at me.

Just before the deadly spell struck, something flew into its path. The cracking bolt hit one of the phoenix guards flush in the chest. As the being collapsed, I struggled to clear my head.

The phoenix's sacrifice surprised Reid, giving me an extra second to recover. It wouldn't be enough. My ears still rang from the first blow, and I labored to shore up my protection. My foe shook off his disbelief and raised his black gem to pound on my rickety shield.

A surge of energy filled the chamber. The golden energy warmed me and refreshed my strength. It also distracted Reid before he could release his next attack.

Between one heartbeat and the next, something fundamental changed inside me.

The barrier that kept Cinaed and me from fully connecting dissolved like snow on a warm spring day.

The flood of power should've swamped me under its weight, but this was Cinaed joining his soul to mine.

We'd prepared for this for decades, and far from disrupting my concentration, it grounded me in a way I'd never experienced.

Reid must've realized Ailpein had revoked the magic keeping Cinaed and me apart, as his features contorted with anger and fear. He fired off a string of incantations, no doubt hoping I'd be disoriented for a few seconds.

The black energy washed harmlessly off shields stronger than any I'd ever created.

My diamond blazed with white light, channeling my new power into a blinding ball of magic.

I released the spell into the barrage of Reid's assault.

White shredded dark, and his shields shattered like brittle glass.

Reid's eyes widened a second before he flew back into the stone wall.

He crumpled to the ground with a sickening crack that reverberated in the sudden quiet.

His fingers uncurled and his stone rolled from lifeless fingers.

It rolled slowly, leaving a faint trail of residue on the rough floor.

The few enemy mages who were able fled back through the entrance they'd forced open. For a moment I considered chasing them, but something more important called me.

Cinaed stood halfway between his family and me, his amber eyes wide with wonder. Our connection sang to me with a beauty I didn't believe possible. The feeling of completeness banished the emptiness I'd lived with for so long.

We moved toward each other, drawn by an irresistible force. Raw emotion filled me, and I wanted to laugh at how wonderful it felt. Its warmth thawed the ice I'd surrounded my heart with to survive until this day.

The world fell away, leaving only Cinaed registering in my mind.

The cavern's temperature climbed several degrees as Cinaed's copper phoenix fire merged with my white mage energy.

Steam rose where our combined magic touched the damp walls.

The cave, the battle, even the looming threat, receded into insignificance as our bond, so long frustrated by Ailpein's spell, finally settled into place.

Our connection exploded into fullness, decades of longing crystallizing into a perfect union of souls. His thoughts flooded into mine, and mine into his, not as separate streams but as a single, harmonious consciousness.

Cinaed's inner fire, always kept carefully controlled around others, flared in response to our bond, surrounding us both in a gentle corona of golden light.

My diamond blazed in answer, white light merging with his fire to create a luminescence that was neither phoenix nor mage. It was perfect and uniquely ours.

For a moment, we allowed ourselves to exist in the joy of our newly formed bond. After decades of separation and pain, we relished the chance to breathe in the reality of what we'd fought so long to achieve.

Then the Earth intruded, reminding us of our duty. We needed to create a new Great Ward and frustrate the plan Blackstone had devoted his life to making a reality.

Bart and Cael watched us with huge smiles.

"We're so happy for you." Bart swept me into a huge hug. "You two deserve this happiness after all you endured."

Cael replaced Bart as my brother embraced Cinaed. Even the normally dour Hro looked happy as he congratulated us on our status.

The Earth nudged us again, and this time I obeyed. "We need to create a new ward immediately," I said, slipping my fingers between Cinaed's. I didn't need the contact anymore, but I still craved his touch.

"Yes," Eldwin said. "Prepare the spell while Bart and Cael link in the other guardian pairs."

Cinaed and I opened ourselves and linked our cores tightly together. Bart and Cael joined us, and this time, I saw the vibrant relationship they shared through the lens of my newfound connection.

Jan and Conall joined us next. Their happiness for me and Cinaed pulsed through the link. It was the same when Leo and Gund entered. Leo's love came with a side of snark that made it feel even more real. Finally, the steady presence of Otto and Thal completed our group.

“Everyone ready?” I asked.

Affirmative responses arrived in feeling rather than words.

The spell itself was simple. Any of us could cast it.

Earth magic, flowing through our bonds, would power the ward.

The near-infinite well of energy the planet held would ensure the barrier never ran out of fuel.

My job was to weave the power into something vast and impenetrable.

I gathered the magic needed, but the ground shuddered, disrupting the spell.

A deep vibration traveled up through my bones, setting my teeth on edge.

It felt like the threads of a centuries old tapestry were being violently torn out.

The tremor originated deep inside the earth, and the planet groaned in pain —not just a sound, but a sensation that pressed against my skin like a physical weight.

“No,” Eldwin gasped, as he and Hro steadied themselves against the wall. “It’s fallen.”

We were too late. Blackstone had dissolved the Great Ward. Through our newly formed bond, Cinaed’s heartbreak rose to match my own. We exchanged a silent look as our worst fear became reality.

Connected to the Earth, I felt demons summoned all over the world. Most winked out in seconds, but a few survived the attacks of the mages on alert for their arrival.

Malachy stared at Cinaed, panic written on his face. The fight to free Ailpein had delayed us just long enough to make us too late. I could almost hear Reid's mocking laughter and his voice saying, "told you so."

We grappled with the repercussions of what had just happened in silence. No one wanted to mention the solution to this problem, as if by not speaking the words, it wouldn't come to pass. They meant well, but it wouldn't change things.

Creating the new ward would no longer be simple. The part of the spell needed to push out all the demons who evaded the mages wasn't that much more difficult. It was the enormous burst of power required. A burst Cinaed and I would need to supply personally.

Chapter Eighteen

C inaed:

T he shock of the Great Ward's collapse ripped through my newly completed bond with Rod.

A cry of anguish accompanied demons walking the earth for the first time in twelve centuries.

The echoes of desecration trembled underfoot, and the rocks seemed to shudder in horror at the memory of what once happened.

My inner fire flickered with grief as the reality sank in.

We were too late. All the fighting, the sacrifices, the rush to find Grandfather, it hadn't been enough.

In the silence that followed the initial shock, I felt the weight of our failure pressing down on me like a physical force.

The life we'd waited to have for decades had just vanished.

The taste of joy was cruelly snatched from my grasp.

Rod's emotions mirrored mine. Through our bond his devastation gave way to grim resignation.

The reality of what we needed to do next crushed me like a mountain landing on my head.

Rod said the spell to create the Great Ward was surprisingly simple.

Banishing the demons was slightly harder, but not impossible.

The wrinkle was the latter required a sacrifice. Our sacrifice.

The irony wasn't lost on me. After decades of forced separation, we'd finally completed our bond and had a chance at true happiness.

Having achieved that joy, we learned it would last only minutes.

Fate had a cruel sense of humor. Still, I didn't regret our bond.

The completeness of Rod's soul joined to mine, even if for just a few minutes, was worth the price.

"We need to keep going," Rod said, his hand tightened around mine. His voice was steady, but only I felt the fear he tried to conceal from the others. "Every second we wait, more demons are summoned."

"No." Bart stepped forward, his face pale but resolute. "There must be another way." His voice cracked with emotion as he looked between Rod and me. "The combined power of all the guardians—old and new?—"

"Won't be enough," Rod said gently. "You know that, Bart."

I watched the struggle play across Bart's face. He was the greatest mage in centuries, a being of logic and reason. Bart had wielded incredible magic, and made it look

easy. In that moment, however, he was powerless and desperate.

Through our bond, I felt Rod's heart break.

The bond between brothers was strong. Every one of them would give their lives for their family.

Bart's protective instincts came from a lifetime of protecting his younger brothers and his enormous talent.

He'd never been this powerless before, and Rod knew it would haunt him forever.

"I refuse to accept that, Rod." Bart's usual calm demeanor crumbled and his voice bordered on hysterical. "We can find a way to?—"

"Bart." Rod's voice was kind but firm. "We both know you searched for the last two years, and I love you for that. But even if there was a way, it's too late. We need to do this now, not a week, a day, or even an hour from now."

"Rod—" Bart's voice broke and tears rolled down his cheek.

Cael tried to comfort his mate, but he barely controlled his own grief. "Thank you, Bart," I said. "Knowing you tried to help us means the world to both of us."

"You all need to go," Rod said, his gaze swept over Eldwin, Hro, my dad, and everyone else. "The energy will kill everyone in the room."

My heart ached at the pain Rod tried to keep from his voice.

It was a lie. Bart and Eldwin could protect themselves.

Throughout our long separation, he'd been the strong one, never allowing himself to break.

Faced with the ultimate sacrifice, he couldn't bear to have his family witness his end.

I squeezed his hand, sending reassurance through our bond.

At least at the end we'd be together, and that was enough. It had to be.

"Tell everyone thank you for all the love and support," Rod said, calmer than he was inside. "Cinaed and I appreciated it more than they knew."

I struggled to keep my own emotions in check, my skin warming with the effort of containing my fire.

This wasn't how it was supposed to end. We'd just completed our bond—the connection we'd fought for across decades.

The feeling of wholeness, of finally being truly united with my mate, was so profound that the thought of losing it after just minutes was almost unbearable.

"This isn't over," Bart said fiercely, even as tears streaked down his face. "There has to be?—"

"Go," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "Please. Make sure our sacrifice isn't wasted."

Our deaths needed to have meaning. Our families would grieve, but hopefully they'd find comfort knowing we prevented the unimaginable suffering a world overrun by demons would cause.

Bart looked at me, then back at Rod. For a moment, I thought he would refuse again, but Cael whispered something in his ear. With visible reluctance, Bart stepped forward to embrace Rod. He held on as if he could somehow keep Rod from leaving through force of will.

“I love you,” Bart managed through his tears. “I looked up to you more than anyone else. You were the best of us.”

“No, Bart,” Rod’s composure wavered. “You’re the best of us. The world needs you more now than ever.”

When they finally separated, Cael hugged Rod as well, then me. “Thank you,” he said softly. “For everything.”

Even Eldwin and Hro, typically so stoic, appeared shaken. Eldwin clasped Rod’s shoulder, his pink diamond pulsing with emotion he couldn’t express aloud. Hro bowed deeply to both of us—the highest respect in dragon culture.

The weight of their goodbyes settled on my shoulders. I’d never imagined my end would come like this, surrounded by grieving family. The Hollens had welcomed me without hesitation, just as my family accepted Rod. They treated us like mates despite the difficulties our connection caused.

The four took a moment to compose themselves before heading to the fight above ground. Bart looked back, his eyes already plagued by doubt. Eldwin put his arm around his nephew and led him back the way we’d come.

I turned toward my father, ready to say goodbye, but he shook his head.

“No!” Father’s voice cut through the heavy silence as the others prepared to leave. “I’m not leaving.”

Father's royal demeanor had fallen away, leaving only a father desperate to save his child. My throat tightened at the way his jaw clenched in stubborn love. He'd always been my champion, even when it put him at odds with Grandfather.

"Father—" He cut me off with a sharp wave of his hand.

"I won't leave you, Cinaed." His eyes burned with fierce determination. "If someone must die today, let it be me."

The offer shocked the others, but not me. This wasn't the crown prince offering himself in my place. This was the father who loved his children more than his life. My heart swelled with love even as I shook my head in refusal.

"That's not possible," Rod said the words I couldn't speak. "The spell requires?—"

"I don't care what the spell requires!" Father's voice rose with desperation. "I'm older and more powerful. Use my energy so my son can live."

The pain in his voice tore at my heart. I reached for him, clasping his hands in mine. They were warm, nearly as hot as my own. Father's phoenix fire burned as hot as his emotions.

"The spell doesn't work that way." I tried to sound grateful for the offer. "But even if it could, your sacrifice wouldn't save me. I couldn't live without Rod."

Father struggled to come up with something else. He'd told me back in the garden he'd die for me, but learning he couldn't save me wasn't something he could accept.

"Malachy," Rod said, placing a hand on my father's arm. "The energy has to come through our bond. It's the only path strong enough to channel that much power. I wouldn't be able to shape the power if it came from you."

Father's face fell, and I saw the moment when his hope died. It nearly broke me. I'd spent so many years drawing strength from his unwavering support. Now, when he needed me to be strong, I found myself at a loss.

"There must be a way," he insisted, his voice breaking. "I won't lose you like this."

I looked at Rod, our eyes meeting in silent communication. The time for debate was over. Every moment we delayed, more demons entered our world. We had to act now, regardless of my father's protests.

"There isn't." I took his hands in mine, and his grip was like a vice. "We need to begin. You need to leave."

"I'm not leaving." Father pulled himself up to his full height and released my hands. "The energy might kill me, but I'll regenerate. Your sister, myself, and the guards will stand witness so the world never forgets."

Rod nodded, his expression solemn. Through our bond, I felt his regret, his love, and beneath it all, a steady determination. He twined his fingers around mine, and together, we stepped toward the center of the chamber.

I closed my eyes, drawing deep on my inner fire.

The flames inside me responded eagerly, rising to meet my call.

Through our bond, I felt Rod's diamond pulse with answering power.

We'd never practiced this, but I knew what to do as if I'd done it countless times.

The Earth was guiding us, making the process simpler than we'd envisioned.

The magic built between us, white mage energy and golden phoenix fire intertwining in beautiful, deadly harmony.

I felt myself opening, becoming a vessel for Rod's spell.

The connection was exhilarating and terrifying.

Since our birth, the Earth had meant for us to be a pair.

Together we could save the world. The Earth chose us first, so we'd have decades as mates.

Grandfather's spell had denied us those years, but our destiny remained. Only we could save the world.

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My connection to my inner fire suddenly severed. The energy building between me and Rod flowed back to its original reservoirs. I tried to reengage with my core but something barred me. A solid wall of phoenix fire had taken hold around my essence.

I opened my eyes, and Rod's stunned expression matched mine. We'd felt this blockage before.

Grandfather. He stood straighter now, some of his inner strength had returned. The glow in his eyes held a clarity he'd lacked for decades.

"I can't let you sacrifice yourself, Cinaed," he said in a steady voice that lacked the anger of recent memory. "You've suffered enough."

"Grandfather, no." I begged. "You'll destroy everything."

"No, my little firebird, I won't let that happen either." He smiled as he used the nickname he gave me as a teenager. "It shall be me who powers the spell."

"You can't," Father said. "I would give my life to change fate, but I know in my heart I can't."

"I know you would, son." Grandfather's gaze met my father's. "But where you can't trade places with Cinaed, I can."

My anger flared. After everything he'd put us through, why would he taunt us with something impossible? When he faced me, however, there was no deception or cruelty. The offer was genuine. He believed he could give us our lives back.

“That’s not possible,” Rod said wearily. “The spell requires?—”

“I know what the spell requires,” Grandfather interrupted. “Better than you.”

He stepped closer to us, the aftermath of Blackstone’s torture visible in every stiff movement. There was also the dignity and regal bearing I remembered from my childhood. This was the king I adored, not the bitter old phoenix he’d become.

“Cinaed, Roderick.” He stopped a few feet away as if unsure he was welcome. “I’m sorry for everything.”

I tensed, unsure I wanted to hear what he had to say.

The decades of pain and separation were too raw.

Part of me wanted to reject his apology outright, to hold onto the anger that had sustained me through our separation.

But if I only had minutes left, they needed to be happy.

I let go of my hurt and remembered the doting grandfather I’d loved.

“Adelais was a beautiful being who made gloomy days bright,” he began, his eyes seeing something that no longer existed. “Her sacrifice robbed the world of that light. It devastated all of us.”

I’d felt the same grief I heard in his voice. It was so raw and genuine, that it couldn’t be faked. He looked at me, really looked at me, in a way he hadn’t in decades.

“When you were born, I saw that light reborn. The little firebird to chase away the darkness.” His smile lasted for a second, and his expression clouded over. “I also saw

your terrible fate. The world would once again require the best of us to sacrifice themselves to save the world.”

The ice around my heart melted. I’d tried to convince myself his actions came from a place of love, but always believed it was born of pride and prejudice. Too late I learned the truth.

“I loved you so much. Too much, perhaps.” His hands trembled.

“I couldn’t bear the thought of losing you.

The world didn’t deserve Adelais’s sacrifice, and it wouldn’t claim you as well.

I thought... I thought no mating would give us time to find a new solution.

My intention was never to cause such pain. But my heart?—”

He heaved out a breath and shook his head sadly. “My damaged heart made me vulnerable to dark influences.”

The explanation matched what we knew. Blackstone found an opening and turned the grandfather I remembered fondly into a cruel, implacable king. He poisoned and twisted Grandfather for his own selfish ends.

“I met Blackstone through Thomas Reid. Thomas became a close friend and confidant over the years.” He snorted, and regret etched into every line of his face. “I never suspected the manipulation because I believed myself so superior to a mere mage.”

Through our bond, I felt Rod’s compassion. His anger at Grandfather had melted away once we learned the truth. He understood the power dark magic had to corrupt.

Rage filled me. Blackstone had twisted a good being for his foul scheme. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“But it was,” he said with conviction. “My bitterness and fear created the opening Blackstone exploited. I can’t change what I did, but I can give you the long, happy life you both deserve. It’s what Adelais would’ve wanted, what I want.”

“It’s not that simple,” Rod said gently. “You can’t swap with Cinaed just by willing it. As I told Prince Malachy, the energy has to come through our bond. No one else but Cinaed can do that.”

“I can,” he said confidently. “My magic is greater than my son’s, but more than that, as king, I’m connected to all phoenix-kind.

I used that connection to bar Cinaed from mating with you.

Now, I can use that same link to channel my energy into Cinaed.

It will be a lot, but not more than he can handle if you shape it into a new ward.”

The realization hit me like a physical blow. Grandfather planned to give his life for mine. Not just mine, but Rod’s as well. As king, he’d accumulated far more strength than I possessed. It was so much that Rod wouldn’t need to give up his life force to ensure we had enough power.

Unfortunately, this was his guilt talking. Something that wasn’t justified given how Blackstone manipulated him. “No, Grandfather. This isn’t your task. You are the king. Phoenixes need you.”

“Oh, my little firebird.” Grandfather smiled—a real smile. This was the phoenix who taught me to fly and had delighted in my accomplishments. “You are so like Adelais.

Despite everything I did, you still find it in your heart to forgive.”

I’d obviously never known Adelais, but I’d grown up hearing stories of her.

She was Grandfather’s cousin, and they’d been born days apart.

They were as close as siblings. Losing her would be like Gwyneth dying.

If I’d felt the beings she’d given her life to save were ungrateful, I could see my heart darkening like Grandfather’s.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” I said. “It wasn’t you, it was Blackstone.”

“Blackstone,” he said ruefully. “The magic Blackstone used has tainted my soul beyond what any regeneration can cure. The corruption will haunt me, drive me to madness in time. While I still have clarity of mind, I don’t want that future for me or my phoenixes. It also means I can save my firebird.”

When I was little, he’d call me firebird and I felt his love. The love was still there, but his eyes held a tired acceptance. Life would never be the same for him. This wasn’t about redemption or even forgiveness, it was about peace.

“There must be another way,” Father pleaded. “We can cure you.”

“There is no cure,” Grandfather said softly. “I’ve had days to reflect on the damage Blackstone inflicted on me. He meant to destroy me one way or the other. If I can save Cinaed, at least I won’t die in vain.”

I saw the conflict on Father’s face. One of us had to die. “Thank you, Grandfather, but while you live, there is hope. This is my fate, not yours.”

“Your fate isn’t to die, Cinaed, it’s to save the world,” he said. “You can do that with my energy.”

There was a strained silence in the cavern. How did you choose which family member had to die? His fire was suddenly hotter.

“Besides,” Grandfather said. “It’s too late. I’ve already begun the process, and unlike me, neither of you can stop it now.”

The subtle glow from his skin backed his words. His life force was gathering.

“No—” My father’s voice broke.

“Malachy,” Grandfather turned. “With your compassion and kind heart, you will be a great king. Take my gift and rule as I know you can.”

Father couldn’t speak. Tears streamed down his face as he nodded.

Grandfather turned back to me, his eyes filled with a sorrow so deep it took my breath away. “I am so sorry, firebird. For everything. I hope you and Roderick live the long, happy life you deserve. And perhaps, one day, you can forgive me for the pain I caused.”

My anger and resentment had crumbled once we learned what Blackstone had done. “There is nothing to forgive, but if it eases your heart, we already have.”

He opened his arms, and Father and I moved into his embrace. I pulled Rod in, and for a moment, we stood there as a family united in grief and love. When he released us, his eyes held a clarity missing all these years.

Tears spilled down my cheeks as a complex tapestry of love, grief, forgiveness, and

gratitude threatened to overwhelm me. How could I compress a lifetime of feelings into these final moments?

“I love you,” I whispered. “I always have, even when I was angriest.”

Grandfather’s amber eyes met mine, and for the first time since his capture, he looked truly at peace. “Live well, my firebird. Live for us both.”

“Thank you,” I managed through my tears. “For the greatest gift anyone could ever give.”

Grandfather smiled and nodded. “Contact your brothers,” he said to Rod. “I can’t contain the release for long.”

Rod nodded. Through our bond, I felt the others still there, waiting with desolate hearts. They were ready to mourn our passing as they anchored the spell to save the world.

The glow around Grandfather intensified, his body turning into pure energy. Rod prepared us to accept and channel the immense power we were about to receive.

The moment before his transformation, Grandfather looked younger, the centuries of burden lifted from his features. He’d truly found peace.

Then his body burst into golden flames.

Chapter Nineteen

Roderick:

Gold engulfed my vision as Ailpein burst into flames. Not the gentle transformation of a phoenix shifting form, but a supernova of raw energy. The king's sacrifice exploded outward, washing over us in waves of blistering heat that somehow didn't burn. The air vibrated with the unleashed power.

At the edge of my mage sight, I thought I saw Ailpein smiling and waving goodbye. Next to him was the image of a female phoenix, taking his hand and leading him away. It couldn't have been real, but it had seemed so vivid.

Cinaed's grief spiraled into me through our full mate bond. His emotion was sharp and jagged like shattered glass. His sorrow threatened to overwhelm us both, but we couldn't afford to lose our focus. If we failed to shape Ailpein's life force into a new ward, his sacrifice would be wasted.

Anchoring myself to the Earth, I pulled Cinaed back on task. We'd have time to mourn once we were finished. Every nerve ending in my body thrummed, alive with the massive amount of magic flowing between us.

"Stay with me," I said softly, gripping Cinaed's hand tighter. Linked at the most intimate level, Cinaed instantly understood why he needed to concentrate. His emotional center solidified, and he readied himself to gather the wave of raw magic heading toward us.

Ailpein's life force rushed into Cinaed like water released from a dam's spillway.

In theory, the volume of energy should have killed us, but Ailpein had linked himself to his 'firebird' at a near-cellular level.

I'd seen no suggestion it was possible. Looking deeper, I found the channel Ailpein had used to interrupt our mate bond.

In an ironic twist, by barring us from completing our mate bond, he'd made it possible to save our lives.

Golden flames coalesced into threads of pure Earth magic, spinning around Cinaed like a cocoon of light before sinking beneath his skin.

The amount of power the king had accumulated through countless renewals over his millennia-long lifetime was beyond what I'd imagined.

He'd gathered bits from every phoenix and through his deep connection to the Earth.

There was enough to power the spell and more.

Cinaed's skin blazed with golden light as power coursed through him. Linked now, I saw his inner fire for the first time. It was beautiful and deadly. Flushed with the extra energy, flames flowed through his veins like molten gold.

Staggering under the weight of his grandfather's sacrifice, Cinaed's fingers clutched mine with desperate strength.

Our bond vibrated, the pristine link humming with the long-promised connection.

His consciousness trembled under the onslaught, struggling to maintain cohesion as

ancient power poured through channels never meant to contain such magnitude.

Skepticism flickered into his thoughts, but he quickly tapped into the inner strength he used all those years while we were apart.

His eyes widened, the amber irises consumed by liquid light that spilled down his cheeks in luminous tears.

I worried it was too much, but he refused to give in to doubt.

I pushed myself into his being, ready to shoulder this burden together. Our knees threatened to buckle, but we supported each other and stood firm. My confidence fueled his resolve, and together we created a bedrock of stability to corral the power needed to save the world.

My diamond mage stone pulsed hot against my palm, its facets glowing with intense heat.

The gem resonated as I directed Ailpein's life force into its crystalline structure, molding it into the contours of the spell.

Phoenix energy was chaotic and primal, while magic was structured and precise.

This was why it had to be Cinaed and me who formed the new ward.

No other mage, not even Bart, could create the Great Ward.

Katarina and Adelais understood this truth twelve centuries ago.

Cinaed and I were about to recreate the greatest magical spell in history. Thanks to Ailpein's sacrifice, however, we might walk away to admire our work.

The spell that created the Great Ward wasn't complex.

Making it last for centuries, however, was more difficult.

The four guardian pairs tethered the spell to the world, guaranteeing the protection covered the entire planet.

Once the Ward was in place, their role was almost ceremonial.

The magic needed to maintain the barrier flowed through the Guardians, ensuring it never failed.

Cast properly, the spell became a living lattice of interconnected pathways and nodes, each in perfect balance and alignment.

Pushing out the demons was the hard part. It required an enormous expenditure of energy. Katarina's spell tore open the dimension walls between planes of existence, and then forcibly expelled every demon back into their home realm.

Despite the herculean task, I was confident Cinaed and I would survive.

In addition to the greater energy Ailpein provided over Adalais, the difficulty was tied to the number of demons that needed to be expelled.

Thanks to centuries of peace and the preparedness of our mages, considerably fewer demons walked the Earth than in Katarina's time.

Malachy stood nearby, tears streaming unchecked down his face as he watched his father's essence transfer to his son. The phoenix guards flanked him, their expressions a mixture of awe and grief.

Through our link, I felt Cinaed contain the wild energy, ready to feed it into the spell. His control wouldn't last long, so I had to finish before it overwhelmed him.

"Bart," I called mentally. "Link us now."

"We're ready," Bart responded with a hint of urgency.

I understood. Not only were Cinaed and I at risk the longer this took, but more beings would die trying to defeat the demons being summoned to our world.

Touching Bart and Cael first, Cinaed and I quickly felt the others join our link.

Jan and Conall's steady emerald presence.

Leo and Gund's fierce golden intensity. Otto and Thalion's calm crimson strength.

Each pair pulsed with its own rhythm, yet all resonated in harmony.

Cinaed's skin had gone incandescent. He'd maintained a hold on the energy, but it was too much for him to keep inside for long.

Ever since I realized my fate would lead me to this moment, I'd studied the spells Katarina left for her successor.

Drawing on that training, I formed the energy into the proper shape.

The power filtered through my diamond, turning golden white inside the atomic bonds of my gem.

Ailpein's magic mixed with mine and became an extension of my being.

I constructed the Ward upon a global network that my brothers and their mates anchored to the Earth.

Before inserting the activation spell, Cinaed and I needed to cleanse our world of demons.

Together we ripped open the veil that separated Earth from the demon realm.

This created a vacuum similar to opening a plane door at thirty thousand feet.

Only, instead of flinging passengers into the atmosphere, this sucked the demons back to hell.

The spell created a one-way gate that required an immense surge of energy to keep out unwanted arrivals.

Connected as we were to the Earth, we heard the anguished screams of beings flung back from the prize they'd waited a millennium to claim. I echoed the grim satisfaction coming from Cinaed as we purged these scars from our world. The tear snapped shut once the last demon was gone.

Returning to the original spell, we expanded our consciousness to encompass the spell's full structure. We perceived the Earth in a way neither of us had before. It was more than rock, soil, water, and air. There was a will and wisdom that protected every living thing on the planet.

The ancient magic that imbued all things responded to our call, eager to be woven into a new fortification.

Tendrils of pure energy rose from the ground and spread out to fill the matrix Cinaed and I created.

The consciousness that brushed ours wasn't human, being, or anything mortal, but it was unmistakably alive and aware.

It recognized us as its champions and eagerly allowed us to secure the spell into its essence.

Sweat beaded on my forehead as I worked.

I'd never attempted anything this important.

The obligation we shouldered was a weight almost too heavy to bear.

Except we weren't alone. Eight new consciousnesses pressed against us, supporting and assuming some of the burden.

They accepted a portion of the spell, affixed it deep into the spirit of our world, and made the pillar a permanent bulwark against future corruption.

The energy crested like a wave about to break.

Just before releasing it, I inserted a small modification— something Katarina intended to do had she not died banishing the demons.

Seven minds acknowledged the change and allowed the magic to flow through as intended.

The eighth watched with intense curiosity, but didn't inquire before the procedure moved along.

Through our link, Cinaed and I watched the others seal threads of magic, barring anyone else from tampering with the barrier.

Leo and Gund began the final stage, tying off the northern point.

The eastern guardians, Jan and Conall, were next, followed by Otto and Thalion to the South.

Closing the circle, Bart and Cael wove all four stations into a solid whole.

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I understood now how the Earth chose which pair for which position.

The north required fierce protectors to initiate and hold the line while the others took their stations.

East needed a strong presence to stabilize the spell while the rest onboarded.

The southern pair had to be a calming influence to keep things steady.

Whoever came last needed to take the disparate pieces and make them one.

Together, the four guardian pairs anchored the Ward at cardinal points. At least, that is what everyone thought.

Satisfied the pieces had all slotted into their respective homes, Cinaed and I let go of the magic.

We watched in awe as magic raced outward in all directions.

A shockwave of golden-white energy visible only to the guardians who'd created it.

In one heartbeat, the Great Ward spread to every place on the planet, sheathing the world in a seamless, protective shell.

The magic settled into the Earth itself, becoming part of its natural rhythm.

Cinaed and I exhaled together, like our bodies were now in total sync.

The experience had entwined our souls at an accelerated pace.

Though we were denied the chance to explore our bond naturally, I didn't feel cheated.

My soul was finally complete. Cinaed's too.

It was as if forty years of waiting hadn't mattered now that we'd bonded.

In the process, we'd done what we'd been born to do. The world was safe again.

"You did it," Malachy said, his voice thick with emotion. "And you're still alive."

"Grandfather did it." Cinaed shook his head, tears still streaming down his face. "It was his gift that saved everyone."

The chamber was quiet as everyone processed the full extent of what had just happened.

In a handful of minutes, we'd all lived a lifetime of events.

Above everything was Ailpein's sacrifice.

His gift not only allowed Cinaed and me to survive, but it also allowed me to change the lives of my brothers and their mates.

I closed my eyes to allow Cinaed's essence to fill me. We'd found the calm resonance we'd been denied for so long. I planned to live in this moment forever, joined to his kind, beautiful soul.

Cinaed still glowed with residual energy. We hadn't needed everything Ailpein gave

us, but we already knew how to use it. Ailpein's legacy would not only be the new Ward, but Cinaed and I could use the power we had left to undo much of the damage Blackstone had caused in our world.

The thought of James Blackstone reminded me he was still alive.

We might have created a new Ward, but he could cause untold suffering if left unchecked.

As if that thought flipped a switch, a wrongness tugged at the edges of my awareness.

It was subtle but insistent. At first, I hoped it was just the lingering presence of all the foul beings Blackstone had allowed into our world, but the sensation persisted, growing stronger rather than fading.

"What is that?" Cinaed looked at me, his brow furrowed. "Did we miss something?"

Focusing on the disturbance, I used our connection to the Earth to search for the source. The Ward functioned perfectly, but something had either slipped through before we sealed the breach, or had resisted expulsion. Whatever the cause, this presence was powerful. Extremely powerful.

"It's a demon," I said, trying not to sound as worried as I felt. "Somehow, one managed to avoid the Ward's prohibition."

"That's impossible," Cinaed said.

"If it exists, it is possible," Malachy said. "What matters is figuring out how to defeat it."

Using our connection to the new Ward, I traced the demonic presence. Directly above

us, trapped in the medicine wheel, was something ancient, powerful, and malevolent.

The true scope of Blackstone's planning knocked the wind from my chest. Every time we thought we'd countered him, we found ourselves three steps behind.

Blackstone seemed to have prepared for every contingency.

He didn't care if we'd saved Ailpein, he had other ways to destroy the Ward.

A new Great Ward? No problem, he'd found a way around that too.

"I think it's a demon prince," I said, the words like ash in my mouth. "Blackstone used the wheel to summon it."

"Rod?" Bart's mental voice filled my head.

The timing of his call confirmed my fears. "How did we miss this?"

"I think Blackstone protected the medicine wheel from the banishment spell," he answered. "We need you up here right away."

I had a lot of questions, but none of them mattered. "We're on our way."

"How?" Cinaed asked. "None of the demons escaped the removal spell, and they haven't breached the new Ward."

The how didn't matter. Blackstone circumvented the Great Ward and did it big. A demon prince trapped in a summoning circle nearly killed Bart, Cael, and Jan. If Blackstone controlled this one and unleashed it on the world, he might be unbeatable.

"Bart asked us to come up and help," I said. "We can figure out how Blackstone

summoned it after we defeat it.”

We exited the door Bart, Cael, Eldwin, and Hro had used. The others had been busy once they left the chamber with Ailpein’s cell. Dead mages, their stones lying on the ground near them, lined the corridor. In my mind, I saw a furious Bart taking out his rage on anyone who stood in his path.

“Now that the new Ward is active, can it escape the medicine wheel?” Malachy asked.

It was a good question. “The wheel was designed to contain and control,” I said. “Unfortunately, the person in command of the demon is Blackstone.”

No one needed me to explain the implications of Blackstone in control of a demon prince. If we didn’t stop him, Blackstone would wreak havoc across the Earth.

As we approached the exit, I steeled myself for what we were about to see. Next to me, Cinaed also prepared for the worst.

“Hold onto the excess energy from your grandfather,” I told him. “Unless I’m wrong, we’ll need it once we arrive.”

Chapter Twenty

C inaed:

T he last stretch of the tunnel ended abruptly.

Compared to the dim light inside the cave, the overcast afternoon was almost blinding.

My eyes automatically adjusted, but Rod struggled to see after so long underground.

He squeezed my hand briefly, as much to steady me as to reassure himself.

It was also a reminder of what we were fighting to preserve.

After decades of emptiness, we deserved a future together.

“Sweet Mother Earth,” Father whispered as he moved up beside me.

The still bodies of mages littered the ground. Most, but not all, had been associates of Blackstone. I didn’t recognize any of our fallen mages, but through our bond, I knew Rod recognized at least two.

Blackstone stood facing the medicine wheel, his back to the fighting as if nothing could touch him. His remaining mages were failing. They’d formed a perimeter around Blackstone, their black gems glowing with dark energy.

Avie, Chancellor Wilhelm, and the other Council mages were overpowering the fools who'd believed Blackstone's promises of power.

I almost pitied them, but anyone who thought Blackstone cared about anyone but himself or would share that power deserved their fate.

Only one person could command the power of a demon.

Old stories talked of mindless creatures whose sole purpose was dominating our world.

This being scanned the surrounding area with a calculated intelligence that stole my breath.

It was three times the height of a tall human.

Tiny wisps of smoke spiraled off its skin.

Its features were surprisingly human-like, but the gray skin and red eyes left no doubt as to its race.

Rod's brothers and their mates took positions around the demon. After a moment to orient myself, I realized they'd taken positions corresponding to their assigned points on a compass. The original guardians, no longer needed, but still powerful beings, arrayed themselves next to their replacements.

Gund held a short sword with a golden gem, and Cael held a similar weapon, only its stone was blue. I'd never seen the blades before but knew these were the Dreki and Orme Seaux. The pair glowed angrily, and the demon avoided looking at the swords.

I'd never seen a demon prince before, but I'd expected a warped, foul being.

Instead, he was impossibly beautiful. He towered over the scene, easily three times my height, his red eyes taking in every detail of his captivity.

When his gaze swept over me, the air rippled with a wrongness that made my inner fire blaze in defiance.

He paused at Rod and me. A quizzical expression flickered across his features before he moved on.

“It looks angry,” I said privately to Rod. “Can it get out?”

“Not unless Blackstone falls,” Rod said, his voice tight. “He created the wheel to contain the demon. If it gets out, it will kill Blackstone.”

As if it knew we’d been talking about it, the creature turned its attention in our direction. It seemed to be looking for something. “Can he tell we’re the anchor for the Ward?”

“Anything’s possible, but I don’t think so.” Rod’s stone throbbed once, and the shield protecting us strengthened. “More likely he can sense we’re bonded and is wondering why we haven’t joined the others.”

The demon prince’s head spun suddenly and it walked southeast. At the end of its path, James Blackstone stood, his black hematite raised high. His face was a mixture of celebration, concentration, and concern. Sigils twinkled inside the wheel as dark energy from his gem flowed into them.

Blackstone’s face twisted, and a second later the demon swayed. A cruel smile twisted Blackstone’s lips. “Bow to your master!” he shouted in a voice that carried on the wind.

The demon resisted, and Blackstone poured more energy into the wheel. “Obey me or you will die here!”

Given how quickly his army was being decimated, if the demon died, Blackstone wouldn’t survive either. We needed to take advantage of the dynamics, but I didn’t know how.

“We are,” Rod said, reading my thoughts. “The guardians are going to engage the demon. Once they begin, we attack Blackstone.”

I wasn’t sure who got the better assignment. Blackstone had proven himself to be an exceedingly powerful and skilled mage. The only person he feared was Bart, and he was tasked with controlling the demon prince. “Alone?”

“I am far more dangerous now than I was this morning,” Rod said. “Our bond has enhanced my magic beyond what Blackstone expects.”

“Lend me your power,” Blackstone shouted. “If not, I’ll take it from you and leave your body to wither away inside your prison.”

“You forget who you address, tiny human,” the demon said in a voice like grinding rocks. “Break our agreement and your pathetic runes won’t protect you from me.”

Only fools made deals with demons. “Blackstone truly is insane,” I said to Rod. “Does he think he can win a bargain with a demon prince?”

“I wouldn’t bet against him,” Rod said. “The Negru family perfected the magic needed to control demons centuries ago. Given the scope of Blackstone’s planning, he just might outsmart the demon.”

Blackstone and the demon continued their war of wills. Dark energy slithered into the

wheel from Blackstone's gem. As it neared the demon, he waved his giant hand absently, and the power retraced its path back toward Blackstone.

Focusing intently, James reasserted control over his magic, and it swirled around the demon in a widening circle. This time the dismissal wasn't as casual.

Extending both arms, the demon repelled the energy and dispersed it around the wheel.

"Fool," Blackstone spat. "Our deal requires you to protect me or else you'll remain trapped in that prison, cut off from your realm forever."

"Nothing in our agreement allows you to cage me in a circle of runes," the demon said. "Free me completely if you want my power."

"Nothing said I could not." He glanced at his dwindling line of mages protecting him from Avie and the others. "You thought you'd tricked me, but now you find it is I who holds all the power. Help me kill these fools, and I will free you."

Their standoff showed no signs of resolving itself.

Through our link, I felt Rod reaching out to his siblings, coordinating our next move.

If we attacked Blackstone, the demon would likely free itself from captivity.

Strike at the demon, and Blackstone could use the distraction to exert complete control over the powerful creature. Both were poor options.

"Get ready," Rod said. "As soon as the others hit the demon, we attack Blackstone."

The plan made sense, but it painted a target on me and Rod. Even without the

demon's help, Blackstone was powerful, and it appeared he still had a store of dark magic at his command. "How can we reach him when his flunkies are guarding him?"

"Got that taken care of," Rod said. "Avie and Dad have been probing the remaining mages. They're going to take them out at the same time the guardians hit the demon."

I felt Rod smile. Although it was incredible experiencing his emotions with such depth, getting used to the sensory input was going to take time. "Did you leave anything for me to do?"

I'd been trying for humorous, but I sounded needy. Rod, however, understood as an amused vibe flowed through our connection.

"As a matter of fact, I did." Rod said hesitantly.

His thoughts merged with mine, and I understood his uncertainty.

The plan was dangerous, and all but ensured I'd get hurt, maybe killed.

Being alive carried those risks now that Blackstone had his demon.

If the strategy worked and something happened to me, I'd renew.

Better to risk pain to win than hold back.

Losing meant I'd live in a world without Rod, subjected to the whims of whatever demon captured me.

"I can do that," I said, happy to exact a measure of revenge for Grandfather's suffering. "Should I ask Father or the guard to help me?"

“No.” Rod’s answer was as emphatic as it was swift. “Our bond gives you strength well beyond what even your father possesses. This is something only the firebird can do.”

Using my old nickname was bittersweet. Grandfather had called me that when I was small, long before Blackstone corrupted him.

Now, I carried his final gift inside me.

This wasn’t just revenge, it was honoring a sacrifice by ensuring it wasn’t in vain.

Rod didn’t just understand, he shared my need to strike back at Blackstone for what he’d done.

“I love you so much,” I said. “But you know that already.”

He didn’t answer because words weren’t always needed anymore. Rod gave my hand one last squeeze before we separated.

Grandfather’s energy coiled inside me, but there was more. Rod had been correct. I was stronger than before we bonded. My connection to the Earth was deeper, more pervasive. The power was ready to respond when it came time to execute my part of Rod’s plan.

A surge of magic erupted around the wheel as the guardians launched their attack on the demon.

I spared a glance just as Gund and Cael pointed their seaxes at the creature, and bursts of raw earth magic struck it on two sides.

The mages joined, blasting the demon in multiple colors.

Their attack prevented the creature from joining Blackstone.

The planet let out a groan as the conflict tore at its surface. All the magic charged the air with power that would kill an ordinary being.

Avie and her team pressed forward against Blackstone's mages. Magic flashed with the intensity of a small sun. The last of Blackstone's army crumbled under the assault.

Blackstone's head swung from place to place as his allies came under attack. Rod didn't give him time to adjust. Magic lanced across the open space, its pure white light contrasting with the black energy it attacked. Blackstone looked more surprised than hurt.

Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 4:53 am

“You?” He swept his gaze from Rod to me. “How did you survive?”

I wanted to scream at him and let him know about Grandfather’s sacrifice, but Rod didn’t answer with words. A second burst of energy struck the dark magic swirling around Blackstone’s legs. The attack burned away without touching its target.

“You’re a fool to challenge me, Roderick Hollen,” Blackstone said. “Even your overrated brother can’t match me now.”

A ball of blackness shot from his stone. Unfazed, Rod flicked his stone, and the globe sped toward the demon. The orb struck the beast, eliciting a deep growl.

“Human, your bindings restrain my full power,” the demon snarled. “The longer you wait to free me, the weaker your position becomes.”

“You hold back on what you give me.” Blackstone maintained his composure, his black hematite pulsing with dark energy. “As I knew you would. If you won’t honor our agreement, you will die too.”

Magic struck the demon on all sides, and he roared in frustration at his attackers. “This prison already violates our agreement. You will pay for your duplicity.”

Blackstone didn’t respond, which was answer enough. His deception ran deep enough to fool even a prince of hell. He’d better hope our side defeated the creature.

I used a brilliant explosion of magic to shift. My phoenix form was more connected to the Earth, and Rod’s plan required that deep relationship.

To my left, Avie's people imprisoned the last of Blackstone's mages.

Perhaps sensing he was about to be surrounded, Blackstone waved his stone at his lackeys.

All the black mage stones around the area, even those still in the hands of his allies, flew toward him.

The various gems merged into a gelatinous blob before exploding into a translucent barrier that protected Blackstone from attacks.

Chancellor Wilhelm led the mages with him closer to me and Rod. They fired at the shield as they moved, but their energy slid harmlessly off the surface.

"Anyone know what that is or how to defeat it?" Rod shouted.

Silence answered him. Blackstone lashed out, his attack aimed at Rod.

The white magic absorbed the energy, but it seemed to turn gray for a moment.

"Now do you understand? You've lost. Once I help Prince F'dreg defeat those pathetic guardians, I'll have the power to make the world pay for trying to eradicate my family. "

Without warning, Blackstone struck at the closest guardians to his position.

The blast hit Percy and Gio in their backs with enough force to knock them to the ground.

Otto's red zircon bathed the area in crimson energy, preventing a second blow.

Behind the shield, the former guardians slowly got to their feet.

Rod led an attack on the dark wall guarding Blackstone. Everyone focused their energy at one point. The dazzling display obscured my view for a moment, but when it cleared, the wall looked unscathed.

Blackstone tossed his head back, drunk on his new power, and laughed. It seemed like overconfidence, but given how easily he'd repelled what should have been a devastating attack, he might be justified.

From the west side of the wheel, a purple and blue wave of magic struck Blackstone's barrier. It appeared to have no effect and Blackstone renewed his laughter. "Not even the mighty Bartholomew Hollen and his little elfling can touch me now."

Surprisingly, Bart and Cael didn't renew their attack. Instead, they returned their attention to combating the demon, and their indifference seemed to annoy Blackstone as his smile disappeared.

"Don't pretend you aren't afraid," Blackstone shouted. "I'm the world's true archmage!"

He fired a ball of black energy in Bart and Cael's direction. It immediately exploded, and the magic rebounded back at Blackstone. Caught off guard, Blackstone threw his hands up to cover his face. He fired a second, smaller burst, but this also stopped at the edge of his shielding.

Across the wheel, Cael touched his two fingers to his forehead and gave Blackstone a mock salute.

"That tricky little Bart," Avie said, admiration in her voice. "We can't penetrate his shield, but now Blackstone can't fire through it anymore."

Proof of her assessment came when Blackstone fired dark energy in different directions, but none of them escaped his new prison.

“If Blackstone drops his shield, he’ll probably be able to attack us,” Rod said. “But then we’d be able to hit him.”

That was a tough choice. An angry Blackstone must’ve come to the same conclusion because he let out a frustrated scream.

A new attack hit Blackstone’s shield, this one came from the opposite side. Darius and Ignatius had separated from the others and fired short bursts of energy from their stones. The balls skimmed along the surface until they soaked into the dark wall.

Blackstone tried to strike them, but something incredible happened. The smooth surface of the dark shield cracked like glass. For a few heartbeats, Blackstone kept firing, seeming to not notice the new threat. Then he stopped.

“Impossible.”

“Darius is a brilliant mage,” Rod told me. “I doubt there are many spells Blackstone created that Darius hasn’t discovered over his very long lifespan.”

The spider web of lines spread along the dome.

Dark energy seeped from Blackstone’s hematite, spreading across the shield.

The cracks seemed to disappear, but a second later, they returned.

When his attempt to repair his protection failed, Blackstone lost a little of the cocky attitude he’d displayed.

“Malachy,” Rod called out. “Can you and your guards shift and hit the barricade with your fire? Darius says that will cause it to shatter.”

As my father and the guards returned to their phoenix form, I looked at Rod. “Should I join them?”

“No,” he replied. “You need to be ready to move the moment we get Blackstone moving backwards.”

I waited impatiently as the fight devolved into a stalemate. The demon, hampered by the wheel’s restraints, couldn’t use his full power against his opponents. He roared in anger and lashed out with minimal success.

Although he directed his attacks on the guardians, his anger grew every time he looked in his captor’s direction. Blackstone played a dangerous game. If the pissed off demon ever got free, I didn’t need a list to know who he’d go after first.

The guardians’ approach to the fight confused me. They appeared to hold back, annoying the creature, but not taking it down.

“The demon withholds most of his power,” Rod said. It took me a moment to realize I hadn’t voiced my doubts, but Rod sensed them through our bond. “If they defeat the creature, Blackstone will take full control of its power.”

The plan had always been dangerous, but I hadn’t fully grasped the subtlety.

Rod was forcing our enemies to fight at less than full power.

My chest filled with a happy pride for the mate who would share my life.

The quiet, kind, and thoughtful being who stole my heart was a brilliant, analytical

man who wore command like a glove.

Rod and the other mages continued to hit the black barrier. This extended the fault lines around the entire surface of Blackstone's shield. Father and the guards shifted and hovered close to me. Rage fueled all our inner fire. Blackstone had killed our king, something that could not go unpunished.

"Now, Malachy," Rod said calmly. "Aim just below his head. The shield will be weakest there."

Father and his guards flew to a point directly in front of Blackstone.

He eyed them warily, power gathered around his hand.

Even from this distance, I felt the temperature rise as they gathered their inner flames.

The guards belched their fire first, marking the spot for the new king to strike.

Father, channeling all his anger and pain, let out a massive stream of flaming destruction.

Copper-red energy collided with black, creating a fiery display that made the humans shield their eyes.

For a second, Blackstone's shield impossibly held back the devastating force, seeming to absorb the phoenix fire.

The guards stopped their attack and Father shot a last ball of solid phoenix energy.

The wall shattered into fragments of dark energy that twinkled to the ground like a sheet of broken ice.

Blackstone's eyes widened and his arm wavered.

Before he could recover, Rod's diamond blazed with white light as he unleashed a concentrated beam of energy against Blackstone's personal shield.

Darius and Ignatius joined him, their blue and green magic striking the moment Blackstone recovered from Rod's attack.

Avie added her peridot energy, followed by Wilhelm.

Each blow rattled our enemy, but he steadied himself quickly.

"We're going to repeat the sequence." Rod said.

"You should mix things up or else he'll anticipate your moves."

"That's what I'm counting on." Rod massed power inside his diamond. "He'll raise a solid wall to cushion the force. That's when you strike. Hit him with enough force to move him backwards."

They repeated the combination of attacks, but this time more mages joined the fight. Blackstone stayed on his feet, drawing on the dark energy he'd recently collected.

"You can't defeat me," he snarled, dark tendrils lashing out from his stone. "I've prepared for this moment for centuries."

Despite his confidence, the coordinated attacks were testing his defenses. He'd been too busy repelling hostile attacks to go on the offensive. When the series of attacks cycled back to Rod, Blackstone smirked.

The shield he created was part magic, part dark energy, and a bit of demonic energy.

It was a formidable and nearly impenetrable barrier. Rod's anticipation crept into our link. It was almost time for us to repay Blackstone for the pain he caused my family, me, and Rod.

Avie's strike hit at the same time as Rod's, and Blackstone took a half step backward.

"Now, Cinaed!" Rod's voice shouted into my mind.

Using the last of Grandfather's power, I launched forward like a missile. Since Rod's first attack, Blackstone had ignored me and focused on countering the mages. At the last moment, his eyes darted in my direction. I doubt his mind had time to process my arrival.

I slammed into him with the full force of my enhanced strength.

The impact was an unstoppable force hitting an immovable object.

A sonic shock wave exploded outward from the point of contact, flattening anything not behind a powerful shield.

Pain erupted through my body as even the superior strength of my phoenix bones couldn't withstand the impact.

The force transferred through Blackstone's shield, shoving him backward even as I rebounded violently away. He staggered back one step, then a second, struggling to maintain his balance. His stunned expression gave way to dismissive triumph as he followed my broken form hurtling away from him.

"Now!" Rod's mental voice blared through our bond.

A combined burst of white, green, and blue magic struck Blackstone before he found

solid footing. Rod, Avie, and Wilhelm's combined attack pushed him back two more steps, placing him well inside the medicine wheel's perimeter.

Father caught me mid-air, his arms cradling my injured form.

"Well done, Cinaed," he said softly. His healing fire flowed into me, joining with my healing power to speed up my recovery. The familiar warmth spread through my broken limbs, easing the excruciating pain. Each broken bone straightened under his direction, knitting back together.

The ache I'd been holding inside slowly burned away. Grandfather had been a part of my attack, and together we achieved our goal.

Through our bond, I felt Rod's concern and pride. There was also a measure of guilt for sending me on a mission guaranteed to injure me. I projected satisfaction and let him know making Blackstone vulnerable was worth every broken bone.

Around the wheel, the guardians ceased their attacks on the demon.

Leo sent yellow magic south toward Jan. The energy flowed around the perimeter of the medicine wheel.

Catching Leo's spell on his emerald, Jan fired green energy to Otto, who passed his red power west. Bart completed the circle by sending purple energy to Leo.

Cael put his hands on the purple light coming from Bart's stone.

A pulse of blue magic ran along the line encircling the wheel.

A transparent rainbow-hued dome appeared over the glyph-covered ground.

“Pathetic,” Blackstone spat, regaining his balance. “Your strongest attacks can’t hurt, and now you think a flimsy wall of magic is going to defeat me?”

“Defeat you?” Rod sounded almost amused. “No, James. It just needs to hold you long enough.”

“Were you supposed to be inside the wheel, James?” Leo asked.

Leo’s sarcasm paired perfectly with the terror on Blackstone’s face. I saw the moment he realized not only had he lost, but that he was also in mortal danger. He spun around, raised his stone, and pointed it at the now grinning Prince F’dreg.

“No!” he shouted, shrinking back from the being he’d tricked. A blast of black magic struck the multicolored barrier. It rebounded off the shield, causing Blackstone to flinch.

He stared at the new cage for a second before darting left.

Tendrils of black energy flowed from his mage stone, running along the ground in all directions.

Behind him, the demon prince rose to its full height, a terrible smile spreading across its inhuman face.

It took a long stride and reached out with its massive hand, claws extended.

“Our bargain changes,” it said, voice rumbling like an avalanche.

The lines of his dark magic pooled on seemingly random sigils. Light flickered around the edge of the wheel. As F’dreg moved closer, Blackstone fired a second, stronger burst of black energy at the barrier.

Shock, anger, and desperation played across his face. “Release me!” His voice rose several octaves. “You idiots don’t know the forces you’re playing with.”

“Actually, James,” Otto said. “It seems you didn’t know what you unleashed.”

The demon’s hand closed in on its prize.

Blackstone spun around, raised his hematite, and blasted F’dreg at point-blank range with enough power to shake the ground.

It left a scorch mark on the demon’s skin, but it didn’t stop him.

The demon’s fingers closed around Blackstone, who screamed in soul-rending pain.

Chapter Twenty-One

Roderick:

Blackstone's scream echoed across the field as the demon's massive fingers closed around him. Cinaed's pain pulsed in rhythmic waves through our link. I felt every broken bone and torn muscle, and the echo of his agony twisted in my chest like a blade.

Beneath his pain flowed a current of fierce satisfaction. Only he could've knocked Blackstone into the medicine wheel. Despite knowing the consequences, he hadn't flinched. His courage sent chills across my skin.

I was torn between watching the struggle inside the wheel and checking on Cinaed's condition.

Malachy cradled his son as golden healing energy flowed from the king's hands.

Gently he directed the power to the most damaged areas of Cinaed's broken body.

The worst of Cinaed's pain ebbed as his father's amber phoenix healing power sped up his natural regeneration.

"Don't worry about me," Cinaed said when his eyes met mine. "I'll be fine. Focus on Blackstone."

His reassurance eased some of my concern, but not my guilt.

I gave him a task knowing he'd get hurt.

It had been necessary, but it was still incredibly hard.

I wanted to protect him always, but he was probably stronger than me.

Our new bond was intensely raw. Every injury he sustained felt like a personal failure on my part, regardless of how necessary or willing his sacrifice had been.

Reluctantly, I shifted back to the struggle we'd so carefully orchestrated. "I'll check back in a moment."

Inside the multi-colored barrier, Blackstone struggled in the demon's grasp.

F'dreg tightened his grip, his fingers exerting intense pressure on the shield that kept him from killing his tormentor.

Blackstone grunted as he strained to stay alive.

The sound held none of the arrogance that had defined him for centuries, only panic and terror.

"Release me!" Blackstone demanded, though his voice cracked with fear. "Kill me, and you will never escape this prison!"

My initial satisfaction at seeing Blackstone in fear for his life gave way to the reality of the situation.

F'dreg despised all beings. His hatred of Blackstone was intense, but it wouldn't prevent a mutually useful alliance.

If the two of them reconciled, they'd be harder to defeat.

As gratifying as it was to watch Blackstone squirm, we needed to use the situation to our advantage.

"We need to exploit Blackstone's betrayal," I said to the others. "Getting them to wear each other out, and then take out the winner."

"Easy to say," Eldwin said. "But hard to do."

Blackstone's shield held, and he blasted F'dreg with a flurry of dark energy bursts from his black gem. If they had any effect, the demon didn't let it show.

"You are in no position to make demands, human." F'dreg's beautiful face twisted into a cruel sneer. "Did you think you could betray me so easily? Release me from this cage now if you want to live."

"The wheel was a necessary precaution," Blackstone said through gritted teeth. "Without it, you would have perished. Release me and together?—"

"Silence!" F'dreg's free hand traced a glyph carved into the ground. "Do you take me for a fool? You've woven control sigils into this circle. Did you think I wouldn't recognize them?"

They were both correct. Without the protections Blackstone wove into the wheel, the Great Ward would kill even someone as strong as F'dreg. There were also powerful runes meant to contain and compel the demon lord.

"Anso and I have found something," Percy said, his gaze still focused on the ground inside the guardians' circle.

“The runes Blackstone activated with his black magic control access to the demon realm. They are his insurance against the demon killing him. If he activates them, F’dreg will be sealed inside the wheel.

He’ll be cut off forever from his home and his access to more power. ”

Inside the wheel, the battle entered an assessment phase. Blackstone and F’dreg searched for an advantage to end their standoff. I studied the runes Percy mentioned and I saw the pattern. Blackstone just might outwit a demon prince. “Do they work both ways?”

“No, and yes,” Anso responded. “The portal cannot go both ways at the same time. The runes as selected are poised to seal off the portal for good. Mix some of them with others in the circle and you open a doorway for demons to come to our world. Choose a different configuration of runes and the gate travels from there to here.”

Not the answer I’d wanted, but it gave me an idea. It was crazy, but if it worked it would solve our problem. I needed someone to help me sort this out.

“You’re stressed,” Cinaed said. “How can I help?”

His voice was stronger, less filled with pain, but I hesitated for a moment. Through our bond, however, I felt his resilience. The injuries were healing, but his mind was undamaged. “I have an idea, but it might be insane. What if we bargained with the demon prince?”

“Explain.”

Only my mate would have understood me well enough to hear my thoughts before expressing doubt.

“No matter what happens next, F’dreg has lost. With the new Great Ward in place, he can’t leave the circle.

Blackstone might be able to destroy the Ward if he was on the outside of the wheel, but do you think F’dreg is going to let him leave?

But even if he could get outside again, what incentive does Blackstone have to free his personal power source? ”

“Less than none, if such a thing were possible,” he answered. “F’dreg would fight him for control of the world if he roamed freely.”

Cinaed understood my idea, and his approval gave me confidence. “ Exactly. Which leaves F’dreg three options, two of which were not palatable. Try to leave the circle and the Ward will kill him; stay in his cage and let Blackstone use him to rule the world; or go home.”

I quickly showed him the rest of my idea. He took a moment to consider if it would work. “Can you send him home?”

“I think so.” I smiled despite the seriousness of the moment. “Let’s find out.”

I quickly called my brothers, their mates, and the old guardians into our conversation. “Based on what you told me, I think we can solve both our problems,” I said. “Anso? Can you and Percy co-opt Blackstone’s glyphs?”

Confusion circulated across the link, but no one asked questions. Their trust weighed heavily on me to be sure my decisions were right.

“Yes, but not easily or quickly,” Percy said . “Blackstone sealed the ground so the demon can’t free himself. We’ll need to access them from below.”

My diamond pulsed against my palm as I processed this information. “That may be impossible. I couldn’t understand why Blackstone would create a cave structure below his wheel. It was to prevent doing what you suggest.”

“Not anymore,” Bart said. “I’m not detecting any dark magic in the caves below. The earth magic used to create the new Great Ward must’ve burned it away.”

The assessment, if true, was a glaring flaw in Blackstone’s planning. He wasn’t God, but his attention to detail and ability to anticipate possibilities were beyond anything I’d seen before. “Are you sure it isn’t a trap?”

“I can reach the underside of the wheel with my earth magic,” Cael said. “Why Blackstone’s glyphs are gone, I can’t say, but they’re not there.”

Inside the wheel, a burst of energy hit F’dreg. The demon growled, but didn’t let go of Blackstone.

“If you don’t release me, you will die inside this wheel,” Blackstone’s voice carried across the field, full of tense defiance. “You can’t deactivate the runes that will trap you here forever. No one can other than me.”

“You think little runes can hold me?” F’dreg snarled, dark energy rippling across his gray skin. “I am a prince of hell. My power is far beyond your pathetic magic.”

The demon’s voice didn’t sound as confident as his words.

“Try it and you’ll be sorry.” Blackstone spoke like a man in a dangerous position, but who knew he still held the winning hand. “You’re already cut off from your power. Only I can reverse that.”

Blackstone was the only one inside the wheel who could open the portal. Either he

considered no one outside would be crazy enough to free a demon prince, or he was too focused on F'dreg to remember we were still here. I hoped to make that belief his downfall.

“Do whatever it takes to gain access to those glyphs, but don't take control until we're ready,” I said to the group. “I don't want Blackstone to know what we're doing until it's too late.”

The mages sent their non-verbal agreement and began their work.

“What are you planning?” Leifr asked.

The question required me to reevaluate the plan before I could answer. It held little downside risk that I could see. The two sides hated us as much as each other. They were in a standoff neither could break. “I'm going to give F'dreg a third option.”

“It will work,” Cinaed said. “Father says the demon will go home if given the chance.”

I glanced left, and when I saw him a subconscious worry disappeared. Malachy still held his son, but the glow wasn't as intense. Cinaed's pain was gone, and his injuries nearly healed. Intellectually, I knew he'd recover quickly, but I needed to see it to fully believe he'd be fine.

“Did he say why?”

“Things didn't go as F'dreg hoped.” Cinaed stood up and stretched his wings. “His ally betrayed him, the new Great Ward traps him in the circle, and Blackstone is going to lose.”

Our victory wasn't assured, but I understood why F'dreg could reach that conclusion.

“The irony is he planned to betray Blackstone, but was double-crossed before he could act.”

“That was Father’s thinking as well.” He moved gingerly, and after a moment he shifted.

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Cinaed was beautiful in either form, but I preferred his human side. I couldn't kiss a phoenix or hold its hand. At night, it was his human form I could hold as we fell asleep together. I wanted to live in this idea forever, but we needed to win to make it permanent.

"Blackstone's going to fight this," Avie said from my right. "Once he realizes what you're up to, he'll try to stop you."

I wanted to pull her into a hug, but it wasn't the time.

She'd expressed her doubts only to me because I was the overall commander, and she didn't want to show me up.

I wasn't afraid of pushback, but she was probably wise to avoid a lengthy debate.

"I don't think he can spare the attention needed to stop us," I said.

"F'dreg is waiting for the smallest opening to break Blackstone's protection. "

"Do you think he'll accept?"

The demon would be a fool not to leave. Malachy correctly summed up the situation. The question was, what did F'dreg think. "I can't say I know what he'll do. He has no off-ramp other than to go home."

"Agreed, which is why Blackstone can't let you open the portal." Avie said. "It's not a given he can win even with the demon, but without F'dreg's power he has no

chance.”

“Which is why I’m waiting for the others to finish before I make my offer,” I said, turning from Cinaed to look at her. “Earth magic is stronger than Blackstone realizes. Once we wrestle control, he won’t be able to take it back easily.”

“Is Cinaed OK?”

Through our bond, I felt Malachy mending the last lingering issues in Cinaed’s human form. It would’ve been better and quicker if he could’ve regenerated, but this wasn’t the time or place. “Yes. He’s almost completely healed.”

“That had to be the hardest decision you ever made.” She put her arm around my waist. “I’m so happy for you, Roderick. This should’ve happened decades ago.”

I didn’t need her to tell me how she felt.

In my darkest days, she’d been my confidant and my rock.

“Thank you.” I put my arm around her and pulled her into a side hug.

“He’d have been angry if I didn’t ask him.

My desire to protect him is irrational. He was the right person for the job.

Besides, he’s stronger than me. Not only couldn’t I have done what he did, I’d have died on impact. ”

“Then forgive yourself.” She kissed my cheek and let go. “He’s coming.”

People who weren’t bonded didn’t realize we knew almost everything our mate did.

“Stay.” I said as I released her. “You’re important to him too.”

Avie radiated a happiness she rarely allowed herself.

“We’re ready,” Anso said before Cinaed reached our position. “Say the word and we’ll take ownership of the glyphs we need.”

Cinaed reached me, and I took a second to kiss him. “You were amazing.”

“So are you,” he said. “Now finish this and let’s go home.”

Inside the circle, dark energy crackled between Blackstone and F’dreg. Neither wanted to make the first fatal move.

“Your arrogance will kill us both,” Blackstone said, desperation bleeding through his facade of control. “Release me or we’ll both die.”

“Release you?” F’dreg said in a voice that gave me chills. “You will walk out of this circle, and enslave me. I would rather kill you than let that happen.”

It was time.

My diamond pulsed in my palm as I approached the edge of the rainbow barrier. The fate of the world rested on my shoulders. No pressure, I told myself.

“Prince F’dreg,” I called, my voice carrying across the charged air. “I would like to speak to you, your highness.”

The demon’s beautiful head snapped toward me, his red eyes assessed me like a predator.

“You address me directly, human?” F’dreg’s voice made the ground rumble. “You think we are equals?”

Blackstone seized the moment of distraction to strengthen his shield. The prince’s hand flexed, tightening his grip. “No.” I shook my head. “You are not my equal. I control the Great Ward. You control... nothing.”

His eyes narrowed at my audacious words. I was playing with literal brimstone, but it was the right move. This wasn’t a negotiation. F’dreg needed to know I was in charge or else this would never work.

“Your attempt to save this human is pathetic.” He covered Blackstone’s shield in fiery black energy. A yelp came from inside the barrier a second before the flames died away.

I anticipated Blackstone opposing me, but I didn’t expect F’dreg would think we were in league with his captive. “No, your highness. If you don’t kill him, we will. I come with an offer.”

“An offer?” Curiosity edged into F’dreg’s voice. “What could you possibly have that I want?”

“Don’t listen to him!” Blackstone screamed. “He can’t help you!”

I ignored Blackstone. He was more desperate than I thought if he believed the demon he betrayed would listen to him. “An end to your stalemate,” I said. “And a return to your realm.”

F’dreg’s perfect features shifted with surprise before settling into suspicion. Blackstone’s laugh was brittle with desperation.

“Impossible!” Blackstone shouted. “Only I control the power of this summoning circle.”

His panicked gaze met mine, and I allowed myself a small smile. “Not anymore.”

“You lie.” Blackstone’s face tightened in concentration. “I have control of the sigils not you.”

“What say you to his accusations?”

The demon suspected both of us of deception. To him, we were both human mages. He didn’t care about our politics. “His words are meaningless.” I kept my attention on F’dreg. “I can open a portal back to your realm.”

“And why would you grant me such mercy?” The demon’s eyes gleamed with interest. “Anchor of the Great Ward.”

The last bit was his way of telling me he knew who and what I was. Good. That would make this easier. “I never said this was a gift.”

“You demand payment for my agreeing to spare your world?” F’dreg sounded offended and shocked. “And I thought this human was arrogant.”

“As I said before, you’re not in charge.” I raised an eyebrow. “I have what you need. If you want it, I require a fee.”

Blackstone made another attempt to free himself, but F’dreg stifled it with more black flames. “What is your price?”

I struggled not to smile. The demon had tacitly acknowledged I was in charge. “If I open the portal, you take Blackstone with you.”

F'dreg's laughter shook the ground. "Now that is an interesting proposition."

"No!" Blackstone's composure shattered as he finally understood my plan. Dark energy crackled around him, but he couldn't free himself. "He's lying! He can't control my sigils!"

"Don't let him ask for a demonstration," Anso said. "I can't promise we'll be able to maintain control for long."

Command of the glyphs was at the heart of the bargain, but unlike Blackstone, I had leverage.

"One of us is lying. I have nothing to gain by deceiving you. You're trapped inside the wheel.

The only way you can get out is to let that mage you hold captive leave.

You need to trust him to free you if you let him leave.

What do you have to lose by agreeing to my deal? "

The demon studied me, weighing my offer against his chances of somehow breaking free and defeating us all. His face revealed nothing of his thoughts, but the slight tilt of his head suggested he was genuinely considering it.

I didn't wait for him to ask more questions. Instead, my diamond flickered, and white energy coursed along the rainbow barrier. My energy exposed an intricate network that sat just beyond the limits of the medicine wheel. It coursed with power beyond anything any mage or demon could wield.

"The new Great Ward is complete," I said, letting the image linger for a second

before it became invisible again. “Even if you kill Blackstone and somehow break the constraints of the summoning circle, you can’t leave. The Ward will consume any demon it touches. Even you.”

F’dreg’s expression darkened as he weighed the truth in my words. He was close, but I had more persuasion.

“The glyphs in this wheel siphon off your power,” I continued. “It’s how he has the power to resist you, and it’s why you can’t break free. Every attempt to leave feeds him more of your strength.”

“Preposterous. He’s?—”

F’dreg tightened his grip, silencing Blackstone. “I had suspected as much.”

Cinaed’s approval through our link bolstered my confidence. I wasn’t doing this alone anymore.

“Of course you did,” I said in an only slightly mocking tone.

“Did you also know he planned it from the beginning?” I let my gaze drift to Blackstone’s black hematite.

“Do you recognize his mage stone? It’s been in his family since before the last great war.

It’s designed to work with certain runes to drain the energy of any demon trapped inside a summoning circle. ”

F’dreg’s face contorted with rage, his nails creating sparks as they dug into Blackstone’s shield.

“The plan was always to keep you trapped here. He’d grant you a sliver of access to your home so you’d never run out of power for him to draw from you.”

Blackstone glared at me. F’dreg no longer listened to his protests. “And if I kill him inside this circle?”

This time I couldn’t hold back a smile. I directed it at Blackstone. “The sigils he activated when I pushed him into the wheel will lock permanently. You’ll be cut off from your realm, trapped here until you die from lack of power.”

“He’s manipulating you!” Blackstone growled. “Surely you see that. Release me and together we can kill all of them.”

“Silence!” Black energy flowed from F’dreg’s free hand. It covered the protective barrier around Blackstone. “What guarantee do I have that you’ll truly allow me passage home?”

“None,” I said honestly. “Other than I don’t want either of you on this planet.”

The demon touched a talon to the rainbow barrier, and it rippled like water but held firm. I expected him to test me.

“Promise to release me,” F’dreg said. His smile was colder than ice. “A binding oath you won’t kill me as I leave.”

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The first lesson in defensive magic was never bargain with a demon. “I didn’t come here to make a deal or give you promises. When you leave, you get nothing that will give you a way back to our world.”

“It was worth trying,” the demon smirked.

Negotiations had gone on too long if the demon was confident enough to attempt to trick me.

“Here’s what’s going to happen. I’ll open a portal from Earth to hell.

Nothing can come through. No reinforcements, no energy.

You’ll have one minute to leave. After that I close the opening, and you and Blackstone stay inside the wheel until you both die. ”

“Don’t be a fool, Roderick,” Blackstone hissed. “You need me if he ever returns.”

Blackstone was truly desperate if he thought he could appeal to me for a reprieve. “We don’t need you, James. We’ve created a new Great Ward. The world is safe.”

“Is it?” F’dreg tilted his head. “What if I choose to fight? Do you really think you could stop me?”

It was another empty threat. He couldn’t defeat Blackstone, let alone get out of the wheel.

“One mage bonded to an elf, assisted by an unbonded mage, killed your sibling in a summoning circle far less powerful than this one. And if you were interested in who betrayed your kin,” I nodded toward Blackstone.

“You’re holding him. He used that summoning as practice and to harvest the death energy when that demon was killed. ”

Blackstone’s face contorted with hate. He was staring at me and missed the same expression directed at him from the very angry demon holding him.

“He’s been collecting dark energy for centuries.

” I continued to drive the knife further into Blackstone’s chest. “Your sibling’s death was just another power source for him.

But if you’d rather take your chances fighting your way out of the wheel over going home with Blackstone, that’s your choice. ”

F’dreg’s expression shifted. He’d no doubt been planning to invade our world for centuries. The prize was within arm’s reach. If he left, it would be centuries before he had another chance. Blackstone’s struggles grew more desperate, and that seemed to make the demon’s decision.

“I will leave,” F’dreg said.

A good answer, but not good enough. “I need your oath that you will leave and take Blackstone with you.”

The red eyes fixed on me, and a low growl built in his throat. “I swear I will leave and take the human Blackstone with me. I make no other binding agreements.”

“I expected none,” I said. “We have an agreement.”

“You’d better hope I never make it back in your lifetime, mage.” His voice lowered to a deadly whisper. “I would kill you slowly.”

The demon prince had taken my calm negotiations for weakness.

So long as he left, I mostly didn’t care.

Mostly. “You’re welcome to try and return to Earth, demon.

” Deal in hand, I dropped the pleasant talk.

“If you ever set foot on this world again, however, you will not leave. We held back because we didn’t want the mage to get your full power.

Next time, you will find out how deadly we are. ”

F’dreg nodded once, the gesture strangely formal. “Open the way, mage.”

“No! Wait, F’dreg!” Blackstone abandoned all pretense of dignity, thrashing wildly in the demon’s grip. “You’re making a terrible mistake!”

“My only mistake was trusting a human,” F’dreg said, his attention no longer on me but on his captive. “A mistake I will not repeat.”

A kernel of pity formed in my chest for what I’d agreed to do, but it was smothered under the memories of what Blackstone had done. “Now,” I told Anso and the other guardians.

Anso and Percy worked through Cael and Ignatius’s links to the Earth. Power pulsed

inside and around the medicine wheel. The black magic covering sigils seeped into the ground. Some glowed, while others stayed dark. Other runes Blackstone hadn't activated blazed with greenish-blue earth magic.

The bindings around the wheel shuddered, and F'dreg watched intently, doubt flashing across his face. If I were a kinder being, I'd have reminded him of the immense power the Ward commanded. Instead, I let the question linger, hoping the frustration of not knowing would haunt him for centuries.

Reality fractured inside the wheel. The air split open with a sound like tearing fabric, creating a jagged rift on the floor of the circle.

The line quickly widened into a round, angry doorway.

Below the opening lay a landscape of fire and molten stone.

Waves of scorching heat blasted outward, carrying the scent of sulfur and something metallic that caught in the back of my throat.

I stood silent as I realized all the stories of Hell had been true.

Blackstone's panic escalated to genuine terror. His black hematite flared with desperate bursts of power as he tried to break free from F'dreg's grip, tried to reestablish control over the sigils, tried to do anything that might prevent his fate.

"You fools!" His voice cracked with fear. "You have no idea what you've done!"

"The wheel turns, mage." F'dreg's perfect features twisted into a smile of cruel satisfaction. "How fitting that you should experience my realm firsthand after attempting to harness its power through me."

“Wait!” Blackstone turned to me, eyes wild. “We can still work together, Roderick! I can help strengthen the Ward! I know secrets about demon magic.”

“Goodbye, James,” I said. “Your minute has begun, Demon.”

F’dreg dragged Blackstone toward the portal, his massive form moving with terrible purpose.

The doomed mage fought with everything he had, but it was too late.

The binding oath compelled F’dreg to leave and take Blackstone with him.

Anso and Percy deactivated the runes that siphoned his power and fed it to his captor.

Faced with the demon prince’s full might, Blackstone’s shield buckled.

With each step, Blackstone’s struggles grew more frantic, more primal.

“You’ll regret this!” Blackstone shouted, his composed facade completely shattered.

“When I return?—”

“You won’t return,” F’dreg said with wicked amusement. “I’ve got special accommodations prepared for you. You’re going to be with us for a very long time.”

At the threshold of the portal, F’dreg paused. His red eyes found mine across the barrier, and a chill ran through me despite the heat pouring from the opening.

“Twelve seconds,” I said.

“Remember my words, anchor,” he said.

Cinaed’s strength surged through me, propping up my battered will. “And you

remember mine.”

He stepped into the opening and dropped into the realm beyond. Blackstone’s screams followed him into Hell and then cut off abruptly.

Two seconds later, the glyphs deactivated, and the rift closed. The edges of reality silently knitted back together, obscuring the glimpse into the demon realm. As the gap narrowed to a sliver, I held my breath until it vanished completely with a final pulse of multicolored light.

We all stood staring at the restored ground. Impossibly, we’d seen the horrors of hell and survived.

The heat and smell lingered for a moment before a gust of wind swept through, dissipating the last bit of Blackstone’s evil. It was the earth cleansing itself of a dark stain,

Earth magic surged through the wheel, erasing the sigils used to create the opening. The effect spread until every rune faded and finally disappeared.

Silence replaced the overwhelming chaos of the past minutes.

It was as if no one wanted to break the silence and force us to talk about what had happened.

The tension eventually broke with a collective relief so deep it washed through our mental link.

We’d done it. A new, stronger ward protected the world.

Blackstone was gone. The threat was over.

I turned and pulled Cinaed into my arms. The solid warmth of him against my chest was the most real thing I'd felt in hours. Through our bond, I sensed his relief, his pride, his love—all mirroring my own emotions so perfectly it was hard to tell where mine ended and his began.

Of all the accomplishments of the day, this was the most poignant. The barriers to our bond were gone. A beautiful and lasting love had replaced the loneliness. And the memory of Ailpein's sacrifice would be part of us forever. He'd made it possible.

Chapter Twenty-Two

C inaed:

The medicine wheel was gone. Erased from the soil like a surgeon removes a malignant growth. The dirt beneath my feet felt cleaner and almost relieved. A gentle breeze brought the scent of prairie grass, open sky, and renewal.

The irony of Blackstone's downfall, dragged into the fiery depths by a demon prince he'd tried to control, wasn't lost on me. He'd manipulated my grandfather for decades. Now he faced an eternity of something much worse.

A small remnant of Grandfather's power hummed inside me.

It wasn't the energy he'd gifted me to create the new Ward.

I had spent almost all of that fighting Blackstone.

He gave me a part of himself I could only understand because I had a deep connection with the Earth.

Not only did I have a mate, but I was also a guardian.

They were memories, emotions, and connections.

The complex tangle threatened to overwhelm me.

His pride and love as I flew for the first time.

Others called him back, but he told them he was doing something more important.

The moment he first struggled with a dark influence creeping into his thoughts.

At the end, there was so much regret that he hadn't been stronger.

Underneath it all, he still loved us all, a truth he proved with his sacrifice.

Rod's steady presence filled me, preventing me from losing myself in these emotions. He tied me to him, and to our newly completed bond.

"You're thinking about him," Rod said.

I nodded, not able to put my emotions into words.

Around us, the others were gathering in small groups, voices low and weary.

Bart and Cael stood near the northern edge, holding hands like they were out for a walk on a normal day.

Across from them, Jan and Conall hugged in front of a tired-looking Anso and Leifr.

Leo leaned into Gund, whose eyes still held some of his dragon rage.

To the south, Otto and Thal checked on Percy and Gio, who still showed the effects of Blackstone's attack.

"He loved you." Rod squeezed my hand. "At the end, it was that love that sustained him."

Rod's emotions wrapped around mine, comforting without trying to diminish the pain. "I know. He left me everything." I tapped my head. "His love for me. His regret for what happened. His pride I never gave up. His hope for our future. And relief that he could finally make things right."

With each word I spoke, Grandfather's emotions swirled around me.

This was a wound that no amount of phoenix magic or regeneration could heal.

Rod never broke our connection. He relived each feeling with me, traveling the complicated path of love, anger, resentment, and sorrow.

He didn't offer words because none were more powerful than his presence.

"Cinaed." Father appeared beside me.

His perfect composure had cracked with exhaustion and loss. This wasn't King Malachy, this was Malachy the grieving son, and the relieved parent.

"Father." I freed my hand and gave him a fierce hug. We clung to each other, joined by grief and joy. He'd lost a father to save his son. Now he clung to the only thing that eased his pain.

When we separated, tears ran down both our cheeks. "He was himself again at the end," I said. "The grandfather I remembered from childhood. The father you respected."

"Yes." Father's smile was watery but genuine. "That's how I'll remember him. The phoenix who kept the entire court waiting so he could teach you to fly. Who called you his little firebird."

The grief hit me, sudden and overwhelming.

All the years we'd lost. All the arguments and stony silences.

The pain I'd carried, thinking he hated me, but not fully understanding why.

His intractable refusal to let me be happy.

I resented him even as I kept up hope he'd change his mind. It was never him.

Rod's presence surrounded me. He didn't take away my sorrow. He helped me shoulder it, sort through it, and reminded me of the good.

"I wish we'd had more time," I said through my tears.

"As do I," Father said, fighting his own emotions. "I want to apologize and tell him we know it wasn't him. I think he knew when he made his choice. He gave you... us his love. That's what we'll always have. We'll know that even when we couldn't see it, the love was always there."

Father was right, and thanks to Grandfather, I knew it with absolute certainty.

"I need to speak to Wilhelm and the others," Father said. "A lot has changed that needs to be addressed."

He left, and around us the other survivors moved in weary patterns, taking stock of injuries, checking on friends and family. Blackstone stole from so many. Caused so much pain even in those who followed him. It would take time for the world to heal, but it would.

A flash of purple caught my eye. Bart and Cael approached, their shoulders touching

in the unconscious way of bonded pairs.

They still had their stones out, but they were relaxed.

Bart's face held a mixture of relief and caution.

He was right to be wary. We'd survived, but no one believed we'd found all of Blackstone's surprises.

"How are you two doing?" Bart's gaze swept over me but fixed on his brother.

Rod's emotions swirled in crazy patterns. After the emotional goodbye in the cave, their reunion was an unexpected joy.

"We're fine," I said when Rod struggled to find a voice. "Better than fine. We're whole."

Bart finally smiled and swooped in to hug his brother. A second later, he pulled me into the embrace and Cael joined us. No words passed, but the joy and relief were a salve to some wounds. For every loss, there was happiness. I had the feeling I'd be seeing a lot of Rod's brothers.

"When you created the Ward, something happened," Cael said. "It was there, tethered to our souls, and then it was gone."

"Yes." Bart stared at Rod with an expression that bordered on disapproval. "We're not anchoring the Ward."

Rod's hand tightened around mine. His hesitation wasn't about hiding anything, but stemmed from his uncertainty of their reactions.

“That needs to wait until everyone is together,” I said. “There’s a lot to discuss.”

“Let me call the others,” Rod said. “They should know before everyone else.”

Rod sent a message to all the guardians, old and new. They stopped whatever they were doing and converged on our position.

“Is this about what you did to us when you created the Ward?” Leo arched his brows. “Without asking first?”

“What did we say about being less confrontational?” Gund asked his mate. “And yes, brothers count.”

Laughter surrounded our group. Everyone was in high spirits. Against all expectations, all ten of us survived. Those good vibes would only get better after Rod explained what he’d done.

“Katarina Hollen didn’t design the Great Ward to be linked to the four guardian pairs,” Rod said. “The plan had been for her and Adelais to be the anchor, and you eight were their backups. Unfortunately, they died in the casting, so the duty fell to the Guardians to maintain the spell.”

“Who told you?” Darius asked. “It’s not in the spell book.”

Rod’s doubt crept into his thoughts. He’d planned to tell them before he changed the spell, but once Blackstone destroyed the old Ward, there wasn’t time. “You did the right thing, love,” I told him. “You can tell them the truth.”

“Cinaed.”

Everyone turned to stare at me. I understood their confusion. How could a phoenix

teach Rod a component of the spell that only a few mages could cast? Only Percy and Gio didn't look surprised.

"Before Blackstone corrupted my grandfather, he and I were very close," I said. "He used to tell me I reminded him of Adelais. Once, when something reminded him of her, he took me to visit the home she and Katarina had shared. Built on a small island in the middle of a wide loch, it was isolated."

"It was where Mother summoned us to tell us about her plans," Eldwin said. "Darius, Percy, and Anso helped her conceal and protect their home. Anso always asked the most questions."

"Grandmother told me to ask as many questions as I had while she was still around." He smiled, but it quickly faded. "She knew it was likely she wouldn't survive."

After visiting their house, they must've known Katarina and Adelais wouldn't come back. "The house was exactly how it had been when they left to save the world," I said. "Including notes she and Katarina made about the Great Ward. I didn't understand the concepts, but I read them."

"Cinaed has an almost photographic memory," Rod said. "When we figured out we might need to cast the same spell, he opened his thoughts to me."

"And you, of course, knew what they meant," Jan said. "Why didn't you tell us?"

I'd asked the same thing, but after seeing Bart's reaction in the cave, I understood. "Because you would've tried to stop him," I said. "All of you would've offered to shoulder the burden yourselves."

"We also didn't know if we'd get the chance," Rod said. "We almost didn't. I didn't want to give you false hope."

“So let me get this straight,” Leo said. “You two are the anchors, and we’re free?”

“Yes,” Rod said. “You get to remain royal consort to the king.”

“Ha, ha. So funny.” The others laughed, and Leo’s attempt to snarl gave way to him smiling.

“Oh, no.” Thal covered his eyes with his right hand. “Just what we don’t need, another smartass Hollen brother.”

I realized even his brothers didn’t know the playful, happy side hidden under the sadness. “You think he’s bad? Wait until you meet my family.”

“All kidding aside,” Jan said. “It doesn’t seem right that you two took all the risks and now you have to take on all the responsibilities.”

“You eight still have responsibilities,” Rod said. “You’re our backups. If something happens to us, you four take over as anchors. This is how the spell was supposed to work had Adelais and Katarina survived.”

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“This makes no sense,” Bart said. “If she created the spell so she and Adelais were the anchors, why didn’t she record that in her book?”

Rod looked to me, but I couldn’t answer him. Nothing I’d read explained the omission.

“That would be our doing.” Percy motioned toward the original guardians. “We knew that whoever created the new Great Ward would be like Aunts Katarina and Adelais—selfless and determined to shoulder the entire weight. We hoped by removing that part of the spell, everyone would share the burden.”

The emotions coming from Rod were strong.

To him, anything that saved his family was worth the cost, but he also welcomed the peace.

“After forty years of waiting for this day, we’ll be fine,” I said.

“We’re going to live in Adelais and Katarina’s house.

We’ll be close to my family, and there’s plenty of room for visitors. ”

“In a few hundred years, people will forget what we look like,” Rod added. “Maybe by then we’ll want to be more social.”

“Or we can teach you the spell Bart and I created,” Leo said. “When we thought we were going to have to go into hiding, we created a ‘don’t notice me’ spell.”

“Who gave it that name?” I asked. “It sounds like something a school kid would use.”

“That’s what Leo calls it,” Otto said. “To the grownups, it’s an anonymity spell.”

“Some of us had trouble pronouncing an-o-nym-ity,” Cael said, sounding out the syllables slowly. “Whatever its name, it works.”

I didn’t understand what that meant, but Rod did, and he was skeptical. “Can you explain that?”

The group looked at Bart, but he shook his head and pointed to Leo. “It was his idea, I just helped.”

“By helped he means he took my idea and made it work,” Leo said, nudging his older brother.

“When we were at Grandpa Hollen’s banquet, we tested the spell.

In a room full of powerful mages eager to meet the new gryphon alpha, get selfies with the world’s only arch mage, or talk politics with the reclusive dragon king, no one bothered us.

We sat in the front of the hall, just below the dais. ”

Rod opened his mouth to speak, then shut it. He pointed to his brothers, cocked his head to the right, and stared. I’d never seen him this confused.

“You were there,” he said. It wasn’t quite a question, but it also wasn’t a statement. “Of course you were. Mom, Dad, and Grandma would’ve fussed if you didn’t make his birthday party, but I don’t recall seeing or talking to any of you.”

“That’s because the ‘don’t notice me spell’ works,” Leo said proudly. “If we could be anonymous in a setting where people knew we were there and wanted to speak to us, imagine what it will do if no one is expecting you.”

“Neither of you have predictable schedules,” Otto said. “You’re not alphas, kings, diplomats, or teachers.”

“Or concubines,” Cael said. He shrugged when Leo shot daggers at him. “What? You’re the one who said it first.”

“Staying on topic.” Bart elbowed his mate. “If you don’t take on a public role, you can use the spell to live normal lives. You can go out in public, visit friends and family, or whatever else you want, so long as you don’t announce your plans.”

“And what happens if one of the four pairs dies?” Hro asked. “Would three pairs be enough to support the Ward in place of you two?”

“We can be replaced,” Conall said. “Because we are not anchoring the Great Ward, losing one pair won’t destabilize it. There would be time to find new guardians.”

“I have a question,” Gund said. “How is it you two can do the work of eight guardians?”

The answer appeared in my mind as soon as Rod thought about his response. It was going to take some work keeping our thoughts separate. “Our connection is stronger,” I said. “We created the Great Ward. We were already a part of it before it locked into place.”

“Katarina had to force the link onto the four pairs,” Rod added. “There wasn’t time to transfer it slowly.”

“So you could pass it to one of us if you wanted?” Bart asked.

“In theory,” Rod answered, his words revealing his disinterest in that idea. “I understand what you’re asking, Bart, but it’s not something we plan to do. We don’t know if it will destabilize the Ward. Why risk it needlessly?”

The others had more questions, but they could wait. We’d given them the important bits, and I needed to rest. As if he sensed my thoughts, Rod’s father and mine waved us over. We lagged, because we needed a moment alone.

Walking slower than the rest, I took Rod’s hand in mine. His skin, as always, was cooler than mine, but where our palms met, we created a perfect balance of heat. Around us, the air carried the promise of tomorrow and new beginnings. Not just for us, but for everyone.

“I think we’ve earned a month or two off,” he said. “The others can deal with whatever still needs to be done.”

He wasn’t as convinced of his words as he sounded.

Taking a step back was hard for him after all these years at the forefront, but he was right.

Our contribution from now on was to guard the entire world.

There were no days off or vacations. No one would begrudge us if we stepped aside for a short time.

“Agreed.” I pulled him to a stop. “After forty years of separation, we deserve time to figure out what being together looks like.”

“Let’s go home, my firebird.”

He hugged me, and his joy filled me. It swirled around, joined with mine, and flowed back into him. The pain of sacrifices made would take time to heal, but we no longer had to fight off the soul-draining sadness of being apart.

The world gave us back so much more than it asked. We finally had each other and the promise of all the days to come stretching before us. “I already am.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Roderick:

“... their sacrifices will be remembered for generations to come.”

Dad’s voice carried across the frost-covered grounds of Utrecht Academy.

His breath formed small clouds that dissipated into the pale morning sunlight as he stood before the newly erected memorial.

This was the last of the memorials for all the beings lost. Mages had the highest losses, a fact the other races acknowledged this time.

It would’ve been a lot higher if Malachy, Elspeth, Cinaed, and the guards hadn’t been there to help.

I stood among the mourners, thankful for those close to me who survived.

Grandpa Hollen nearly died taking on three mages to defend a wounded inquisitor.

He won, but it had taken everything he had.

When Malachy arrived, Grandma had already resigned herself to the fact that he wouldn’t make it.

The grateful woman sat next to him in the crowd.

Cinaed sat next to me, his shoulder pressed against mine.

In the sea of formal black attire, his copper hair stood out.

I might be biased, but he was so beautiful, he'd have made an impression even if he wore a hat.

Heat radiated from his naturally warm body, creating a tiny pocket of warmth in the February chill.

Through our connection, I felt his sorrow mingling with my own, a shared ache for those who hadn't returned.

The stone monument gleamed with a thin sheen of ice.

Names etched with magic spiraled around the surface, in a pattern that would glow with mage fire each night until dawn.

Twenty-seven names. Most had fallen to demons at locations other than the three primary medicine wheels.

Out of necessity, we'd sent our most powerful mages to the sites where Blackstone's dark magic had been strongest.

It didn't make it right, but we'd tried our best.

"In their honor, we establish this eternal flame." Dad's stone flared, and a golden fire sprang to life around the base of the monument. "May it burn as brightly as their courage."

Cinaed's grip tightened on mine. Through our bond, I felt his thoughts drifting to his

grandfather and the ultimate sacrifice he'd made.

Ailpein had his own marker inside the phoenix castle courtyard.

His service had been first. At King Malachy's request, Cinaed and I shaped the obelisk with fire and magic.

Every race held a commemoration for their fallen. Cinaed and I, along with all the other guardians, attended every one. Those beings needed to see we didn't count their sacrifices as any less than ours. It was also the right thing to do. Linked to the Earth, we felt the loss on a deeper level.

"He would be proud we didn't waste his gift," I said through our link. Cinaed's smile felt sad, but grateful.

The speeches ended, and representatives from each species placed a flower in front of the flames. I scanned the crowd, noting the faces of those who'd survived. Aunt Gretchen sat with Mom. She'd barely recovered from her injuries, but had attended to honor friends who had died.

Surprisingly, none of the faculty or staff of the university or high school had joined Blackstone. Clearly, the schools had chosen their teachers wisely.

The crowd dispersed in small groups, their voices hushed out of respect. Cinaed and I remained in front of the memorial. This being the last ceremony, it felt like the war was finally over. Soon we could enjoy the freedom all the sacrifices had bought.

"It's strange how close we came to your name being on the stone," Cinaed said softly. "Seeing the families of those who didn't survive gives me a different outlook on life."

I nodded, sharing the sense of awe I felt standing here when we'd been so certain we wouldn't survive. The weight of Ailpein's sacrifice pressed against my chest like a physical thing.

"Come on," I said finally. "The others will be waiting for us to start the meeting."

Walking across campus, I took in the familiar sights of Utrecht Academy.

So much felt the same as when I was a student here for those few short years.

But it had also changed in subtle ways since Blackstone's defeat.

The fond memories of friendships and carefree days were still there, but the shadow of the man who led the school had forever tainted those moments.

New wards guarded the grounds, procedures updated, and trusts shattered. There was also a lighter feeling, as if the place breathed more freely now.

Darius's appointment as dean of the University had brought changes.

Where Blackstone had been a towering figure in academia, Darius was a legend come to life.

He brought a gravitas no one else could match.

More importantly, he maintained trust in the institution that Blackstone's betrayal threatened to destroy.

They'd also removed Blackstone's portrait and replaced it with a painting of Katarina and Adelaïs.

A gift from King Malachy and his family.

We passed students hurrying between classes, their faces bright with youth and purpose.

I'd turned off the anonymity spell for the service, and a few of the kids recognized us.

Some pointed, others waved, and a few said thank you.

Neither of us were comfortable with hero worship, but most days we were invisible, so we didn't get it often.

"I hope this meeting doesn't run long," Cinaed said as we turned down the corridor leading to the administrative wing. "Father wants a full report, and you know my focus wavers after too many speeches."

I smiled and squeezed his hand once. "Translation, you're going to be thinking about the rose garden we're planning and which of your mother's plants you want clippings from."

"All of them, of course." He pulled our hands to his lips for a kiss. "Yes, but that will only happen if this gets to be a long, boring meeting."

My tolerance for boring was better than Cinaed's, but not by much. This meeting wouldn't tax the limits of our concentration. "There won't be a lot of boring speeches, love. Dad promised we'll finish before lunch, so we can go shopping before dinner."

"Seriously?" Cinaed whispered loudly. "Is that what he thinks I do all day? Shop?"

I raised my eyebrows to call him out. "As if you'd care if it got us out of an all-day

meeting?”

“Fair point,” he said. “And you need new sweatpants. Two pairs are not enough. I do laundry every day.”

Three months together had taught us the rhythms of shared life denied us for decades.

Laundry, shopping, cooking—or my attempt to cook at least—the mundane things others had done for us in the past, we learned to do together.

I expected it would get old soon without something more challenging to occupy our time, but for now, it was exactly what we needed.

The door to the University Board Room was partially open, and voices spilled into the hallway. I took a breath before pushing it open. We were the last to arrive, and the group fell silent when we entered.

The room itself breathed history. Ancient oak panels brought over from the original school centuries ago.

Portraits of past deans hung in chronological order, with an empty space where Blackstone’s used to occupy.

The eyes of previous heads seemed to follow our movements as we made our way to our seats.

A massive mahogany table dominated the room and bore the scars of magical “accidents” from angry directors.

It had witnessed the mage wars, the reforms following those dark days, and the transformation of the university into its current status.

Now it would bear witness to this new chapter.

Dad sat at the head of the table, the place Grandpa Hollen usually occupied when the school's board of directors met.

This time, he sat to Dad's right. Avie was on his left, a clear signal she would be the next Mage Chancellor.

The Guardians, old and new, took up most of the chairs, with ard ri Tadgán of the Elven Conclave, and Elowen Sage, a moose shifter and first female president of the Shifter Assembly, making up the last two guests.

No one seemed annoyed at our being the last to arrive. Grandpa winked at us, a sign his injuries hadn't dampened his spirits.

"Now that we're all present, let's get started," Dad said. "Avie, can you bring us up to date?"

This was the pattern after every memorial service. Avie filled us in on what progress the Inquisitor General's office had made uncovering Blackstone's network.

"The new prisoners continue to give us intelligence, but as with the others we've interrogated, they only knew fragments of the larger operation.

Blackstone used a cell structure. No one outside his inner circle knew more than a few details.

We're still learning new names, so we'll continue our search. "

Her green mage stone pulsed, and a map of Earth appeared above the table. Red and yellow dots were sprinkled across the world.

“These are confirmed sites of Blackstone’s influence. Red indicates locations we’ve neutralized. Yellow ones are still under investigation. We’re making progress, but each new person we capture gives up more places to investigate.”

“What about his inner circle?” Tadgán asked.

“Most were killed or captured during the fight,” Avie replied.

“We’re tracking down the survivors we know about as fast as we can.

It’s not all good news, however. Through our interrogation, we’ve learned Blackstone’s plans included a contingency in case he lost. Certain of his followers remained hidden during the war.

They were told to reveal themselves only once the war ended.

If he won, they joined him, if he lost, they were supposed to take up the fight.

We intercepted one of these sleeper agents when he attempted to access a cache of magic near one of the unused medicine wheels. ”

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A murmur passed through the room. Suddenly, what should've been a simple job—anchor the Great Ward—became a lot more dangerous. Blackstone was a vile human, but I couldn't deny he'd been a brilliant planner.

“Have you determined what their goals are?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Avie said grimly. “The weapons we recovered were dangerous, but nothing capable of breaching the Great Ward.”

“For now,” Bart said, tapping the table with his index finger. “Blackstone planned for centuries before he made his move. He identified mages to take his place and seeded sites with the tools to achieve his goal.”

Although it wasn't cheery news, Bart was correct. No plan launched the moment you decided to act. “Cinaed and I will keep a closer eye on any unusual black magic.”

“I don't mean to sound the alarm bells, but we've also detected someone attempting to access Blackstone's frozen assets,” Dad said. “We don't know who it is, but they appear to be well-informed.”

“Have we found his base of operations?” Jan asked. “I can't imagine he had time to wipe it clean right before he began the final phase.”

“Again, not yet,” Avie said, sounding frustrated. “We believe it's in Eastern Europe, possibly Romania, but our attempts to find it have been unsuccessful.”

“We should see if we can help with that,” Cinaed said through our link. “Our

connection to the Ward might be useful.”

I agreed, but until we knew for sure, I didn’t want to suggest it to the group. “We can talk to Bart and Cael tonight at dinner.”

“Let’s move on to the next item on the list,” Dad looked at the ard ri. “What’s the status on the medicine wheels?”

Tadgán stood and looked around the room.

“We’ve identified thirty-seven medicine wheels across North America that show signs of contamination.

Some are heavily corrupted, but most only have traces of dark magic.

All need to be cleansed or they could become focal points for future attacks on the Great Ward.

“The wheels, however, are integral to their tribes. We can’t just erase them,” the ard ri continued. “They require more than standard cleansing methods.”

Cinaed’s desire to help came through our link. Because I asked we hold off, he now hesitated to suggest this was something we could do. “Our new position might be useful. What do you think?”

“I think you read my mind,” Cinaed said, almost preening that I agreed. “Should I make the offer?”

I found his hand under the table and gave it a squeeze. “Yes.”

“Rod and I can help with this problem,” Cinaed said, breaking the silence. “Our

connection to the Great Ward helps us purge runes meant to summon demons.”

“We would welcome the help, Guardians,” the ard ri said, nodding his approval. “The Earth will be grateful for this healing.”

The rest of the meeting was a blur of details and new assignments.

Conall was going to remain alpha for the time being, but would transition to a new role with the Shifter Assembly.

His oldest brother Kelton would assume the leadership of the pack.

That had been the plan when Conall expected to step down to become the Eastern Guardian.

He and Jan wanted a larger position in interspecies relationships, and this would allow them to take on that role.

The decision was easier for them when Anso and Leifr announced their return to gryphon territory.

Leifr would serve as champion to the alpha, ensuring no one would challenge Kelton for control of the pack.

Anso purchased a large farm and planned to test agricultural magic.

He wanted to improve the lives of the farming community in the area.

Bart and Cael would continue teaching at the university.

The new dean, Darius, gave them more independence than Blackstone to create new

and innovative courses.

Ignatius was going to teach the history of the Great Ward at both the high school and college level.

The Mage Council wanted all future students to understand the danger demons presented and the sacrifices a few beings had made to protect the world.

No surprise, Otto and Thal remained in their diplomatic roles, and Percy and Gio remained in Transylvania.

The big change came when Thal's grandmother, Elana, finally agreed to move to Wyoming to be with the rest of the family.

The former guardians used their adopted daughter's departure to move their library to the unicorns' ancestral home.

They had plans to turn their new home into a new interspecies school.

Their eyes sparkled with excitement as they discussed the new project.

The biggest surprise, however, came from the northern guardians—former and present.

Gund would remain king, and Hro would act as an advisor.

Leo, however, decided on a fresh path. He and Rhydder created a renewable energy business, hoping to address the world's energy needs.

The big shock came when Eldwin joined the pair as a full partner.

“This is my world as well,” Eldwin said. “The company will bring innovation and jobs to Prescot Isle and the surrounding area. The area has struggled economically in recent decades. This will turn Northern Maine into an economic destination.”

“Not bad for a concubine.” Leo smirked at his siblings.

All eyes turned to me and Cinaed. Neither of us expected to provide an update. “No one said we were supposed to present on our life plans,” I said. “We’re figuring things out.”

“No new plans,” Mom asked, her interest hiding an unspoken agenda.

“None other than turning the house into a home,” Cinaed said. “We’re also learning to interpret the signals the Great Ward sends. It’s a work in progress.”

“We’re content,” I added. The others needed to hear we weren’t burdened by our new responsibilities. “The quiet life suits us for now. We’ll travel as needed for the cleansing work, but having a peaceful home to return to is essential.”

“Excellent.” Dad nodded, looking satisfied. “We all want you to know you’re not alone. We may not share the burden, but if you ever need support of any kind, we’ll be there.”

The meeting broke up, and people gathered in small groups. They were catching up and making plans to visit. Bart and Cael left Dad and headed our way.

“Still planning to join us for dinner?” he asked.

“Still planning to teach me to cook?” I shot back. “Cinaed is adamant I get cooking lessons.”

Bart's eyes lit up. "I've got the perfect recipe. Even you can't mess it up."

He was trying to be funny, but after almost a hundred years, I had a lot of bad habits to overcome. "Challenge accepted," I said dryly, earning an exasperated sigh from Cinaed.

"Don't encourage him," he said. "I'm the one who has to eat his experiments."

"Gentle heat is key," Bart said. "Don't incinerate the garlic, just coax out its flavor."

Bart hovered at my elbow, watching as I stirred the sizzling pan. The kitchen in his and Cael's home was an amazing place. He'd somehow managed to get high-end appliances that almost perfectly matched the time period of the house. It didn't help my cooking skills, but it was a great ambiance.

"Like this?" I asked, adjusting the flame beneath the pan.

"Perfect." Bart passed me the crushed tomatoes. "Add this, but be careful. The oil will sizzle upon contact."

I followed his instructions, surprised by how much I enjoyed myself. Cooking had never interested me, but it was satisfying creating something with my hands rather than magic. And if I could present Cinaed with something edible, it would be worth all the effort.

"You're improving," Bart observed as I stirred the sauce. "This might actually be worth eating."

I'd take offense at the comment if it wasn't grounded in fact. "Aren't teachers supposed to encourage their students, not be snarky?"

“We’re trained to be truthful,” he said with a grin. “Would you rather be the emperor with no clothes?”

I side-eyed him as I checked the water for the pasta. “Cinaed might enjoy that.”

“Good point.” He moved the pasta from the refrigerator. “Remember your first attempt? Too bad I didn’t film it. No one believes me when I tell them you turned boiling spaghetti into that geological formation.”

How was I supposed to know instinctively that I had to stir the pot? “That was a teacher failure. You shouldn’t have assumed I knew what to do.”

“I thought it was obvious!”

He was right, it should’ve been obvious, but it hadn’t occurred to me. “You know what they say happens when you assume.”

Our banter continued as we finished preparing the meal—a simple marinara that smelled genuinely appetizing. Bart tossed the salad as I cut the bread. Out back, Cinaed and Cael relaxed with glasses of wine.

I went to call them to dinner, but I stopped as I felt Cinaed’s contentment.

His presence was warm and steady in my mind.

I listened as he described the land clearing project to Cael.

We were gradually transforming Katarina and Adelais’s overgrown island into our new home.

The cottage itself had been surprisingly well-preserved, protected by ancient spells

that had kept it essentially frozen in time.

The surrounding land, however, had grown wild over the centuries.

We agreed to tackle it in small bits at a time.

“I’m really thrilled for you two,” Bart said, standing next to me. “After everything you’ve been through, you deserve to be happy.”

The sincerity in his voice caught me off guard. I’d always tried to be a mentor to my younger siblings, but Bart had surpassed me in many ways. He’d said he looked up to me, but seeing the clarity of his soul, it was I who admired him. “Thank you.”

“Always.” He squeezed my shoulder briefly before turning back to the food. “Now, let’s get the food out so we can impress our mates with your culinary progress.”

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We carried the meal outside to the stone patio where Cinaed and Cael had set a table. The evening was cold, but the magical heating charms generated a comfortable bubble around the area. It was an example of how Bart and Cael worked together to create something amazing.

Cinaed looked up as we approached, his amber eyes met mine appreciatively. We'd dreamed of our life together, but we never realized the little things like cooking were so hard.

"You made this?" he asked, his gaze shifting from the food to me. "It smells amazing."

He'd probably have said the same if it was awful, but it was hard to lie to your mate. "Under close supervision from my inhuman brother," I clarified, setting my bowl onto the table.

"Don't let him lie," Bart said, putting down the salad. "Rod did all the cooking. I just gave him pointers along the way. With a little more practice, he'll be experimenting with his own recipes."

The compliment came from a good place, but it was utter rubbish. "Nice try, but you don't need to worry," I said. "If I poison Cinaed, he'll just regenerate."

"The goal isn't to make me hate food," Cinaed smirked. "Stick to the basics for the first decade or so."

Dinner went better than I'd expected. Cinaed didn't need to lie about the food, which

made me ridiculously happy. It even made it worth the indignity of having my baby brother give me lessons like I was a kid.

“How do you get supplies?” Cael asked, refilling wine glasses. “Do they fly them over?”

“By boat,” Cinaed said, before taking a bite of whatever incredible dessert Bart had made. “We take turns moving it.”

“Moving it?” Cael asked. “Doesn’t it have a motor?”

I laughed, because I wasn’t alone. “The loch has strict restrictions on motors,” I said. “Some days Cinaed pulls it, others I use magic. There’s a dock near the castle, and Malachy bought us a car that sits there for when we need it.”

“Which is almost every day,” Cinaed added. “You’d be amazed what it takes to furnish an entire house.”

Cael raised an eyebrow, and glanced at Bart. There was a story here. “Spill,” I said.

Bart’s expression was the closest thing to a scowl I’d seen him give his mate. “Evidently, I’m too organized.”

“I never said that.” Cael pointed to Bart. “When I moved in, I’d realize I’d forgotten things. When I suggested I needed to go get something, your brother always had it somewhere in the house. It might have given me an inferiority complex.”

Cinaed and I exchanged glances before we both laughed. “If the chip on your shoulder was any bigger, you wouldn’t be able to walk,” I said. “What really happened was you complained because he made you look like a slacker.”

“What?” Cael tried to look wounded, but he couldn’t sell the lie. “Fine, but it’s not normal to be so organized.”

“Speaking of organizing,” Cinaed said. “I could use some of that this spring. Rod and I are going to lay out a rose garden. Neither of us have green thumbs.”

“That would be Cael’s area of expertise,” Bart said. “But I’m all in for a visit to help.”

And just that quick, my fears of isolation evaporated. Cinaed had said it would never be as quiet as we thought, and he’d been right.

The conversation drifted to our other projects—expanding the house, creating more open space, and redecorating. Like Bart, I preferred old furnishings over new, but the twelve-hundred-year-old décor was too old. Plus, it gave off a grandmotherly vibe. We wanted something more modern and in line with our tastes. These small domestic details might be painfully mundane to some, but they represented everything we’d been denied for so long.

After dinner, Cael and Cinaed offered to clean up since Bart and I cooked. When my brother led me into his study, I realized that ‘offer’ had been planned.

“Mom gave me something for you.” He unlocked his magically sealed desk and pulled out a small package wrapped in brown paper. “I don’t know what it is, she said it was for you and Cinaed.

Curious, I worked the string off the box. Mom’s gifts were never what we expected. We didn’t need anything, so she always went for something personal.

Inside the package was a small silver key and a note. I recognized Mom’s elegant

handwriting as I unfolded the paper.

For the nursery when you're ready. The chest is in the attic at Hollen Hall—enchanted toys from all your childhoods, preserved for the next generation.
Love, Mom

I stared at the key, and didn't know if I should laugh at the absurdity or cry at her thoughtfulness. "Avie always said, never tell Mom you're thinking of something until you're ready to do it." I passed the note to Bart.

He read it and looked up. He had something that might have been terror in his eyes. "Children?"

Mom was looking way ahead. "Cinaed joked I was taking cooking lessons because we couldn't have kids until I knew how to feed them. It's a joke between us, and I forgot to tell Cinaed about the warning."

"I think you and Cinaed would make great parents," Bart's eyes twinkled. "Don't blame Mom if she's jumping the gun."

I didn't really—not much at least. "I reserve the right to limit the upheavals in my life to one a decade."

Bart laughed and shook his head. "Good luck with that. Let me know how it works out for you."

When we returned, Cinaed and Cael had finished, so we moved to the sitting room. A magic flame burned in the fireplace. It produced just enough heat to make the room warm, but not hot.

"We should head back tomorrow," Cinaed said, leaning against my side. "I like it

here, but we've got a list of things we still need to do."

I put my arm around him and kissed the top of his head. "I know. I'd like to stay longer too, but we should get back home."

"That's right," Bart said, mischief all over his face. "You've got to set up a nursery to make Mom happy."

"Wait, what?" Cael asked, looking at each of us in succession. "You're having kids?"

Bart and I laughed. Cinaed joined us because I'd warned him he'd unleashed a mama bear into our lives. "Mom seems to think so," I said. "You know how she gets when kids are involved."

"I said I'd consider it when your cooking improved," Cinaed said, stifling a yawn. "That's a long way from being ready for children."

"That's your fault for breaking the rule," Cael said. "Even I know to be tight-lipped around Miriam."

The evening continued in easy conversation.

My separation from Cinaed began before Bart had been born.

I'd never had the chance to interact as brothers when my spirit had been whole.

I hoped to forge similar bonds with my other siblings, especially those whose destinies had been linked by an obligation to the Earth.

Cinaed spent most of the night in an animated discussion with Cael about some rare plant that was native to Scotland.

The firelight caught his copper hair, and his hands moved expressively as he spoke.

Forty years of waiting and fighting for this moment—for the simple right to sit beside each other on an ordinary evening and plan for an ordinary future together.

Seeing him this happy again made it worth every second it took to get us here.

We'd always talked about this future, even when we didn't believe it would happen. Now that it had arrived, we weren't going to take even one day for granted.

C inaed:

“ I still can't believe they're five already,” Lysandor said, shaking his head in disbelief. His silver hair moved in the light morning breeze. “It feels like yesterday we were at Hollen Hall celebrating their births.”

Walking up the path from the dock, I thanked the Earth for giving us such good weather for the children's birthday party. Not too cold, and not too hot. The kids could run around without overheating, and the adults would be comfortable watching them.

“Marking time in children's years gives you a new perspective,” Rod said, his fingers linked with mine as we headed toward the house. “It moves at the same pace, but you notice it more when you see the little baby you held in one hand running around like a terror.”

“That sounds way too personal,” Owen said with a laugh.

Rod's youngest brother had grown up in the last ten years.

His once lanky frame was more muscular, and the carefree attitude had been replaced with purpose.

“And accurate. Classes ended last month, and I couldn't believe an entire school year had passed.

It feels like weeks earlier we opened the school and welcomed our first students. ”

“Don’t get too upset,” Lysandor said. “It starts all over again in two months.”

“You two should visit more often,” Rod said, echoing my thoughts. “It’s been way too long.”

“I know, I know,” Owen said. “We’ve just been so busy with the school and the ranch, we forget there’s a world outside Wyoming.”

That was a feeling Rod and I understood all too well. “Welcome to adulting.”

“I know, right?” Lysandor answered.

I loved that life hadn’t destroyed their playful spirits.

Of all the mated pairs, they’d had no defined role when the war ended.

That freedom sounded great in theory, but it left them without direction.

We were all proud of them for taking time to discover their passions before making life-changing decisions.

After traveling the world, Lysandor decided his heart belonged on the open prairie.

He didn’t, however, want to go back to the family’s ranch.

His status as the “almost” Southern Guardian made it difficult to let others make decisions for him.

His mate was one of the most powerful mages alive, and he’d grown beyond being the baby brother.

His solution was to buy a large tract of land adjoining his family's and run it himself. Branimir had spoken of his son's venture with equal parts pride and concern the last time we'd met. "How's the ranch coming along?"

"It's harder than Dad made it look." Lysandor grimaced. "Herd management, personnel issues, feed prices, vet bills. It's way more complex than I expected."

Five years of parenthood gave me a new perspective on 'simple things.' "I'll tell you what our mothers told us—you didn't see the early struggles and growth. By the time you understood what you were seeing, your parents had already gotten good at their jobs."

"You're so right," Lysandor said, shaking his head. "I'd also never expected to run the ranch. I assumed Thal would do it. I figured I could just coast along and enjoy life. Thank the Earth Dad comes over often to give me lessons. It's his excuse to check on us for my mom and O's parents."

"I'm glad he comes over," Owen said. "He's a lot easier to deal with than our moms."

They laughed at some private joke.

Owen had also needed to find himself. He decided his passion was academics, and he wanted to teach.

In any other age, Owen would be the preeminent mage of his generation.

Bart, however, was in a class of his own.

Rather than take a job at Utrecht and work in his brother's shadow, Owen opened his own school.

“Speaking of Mom,” Rod said in a tone that meant Owen might regret what came next, “she said you told her your new school was going to ‘leave Utrecht in the dust.’ Whatever that means.”

“Hey, I needed to sell the product,” Owen said, his expression lighting up with enthusiasm. “I was raising funds for an endowment.”

“Wow,” Rod said with mock surprise. “This must be what they teach at the school. Who knew when we donated to your school, we were donating to your school?”

“Grumpy old man,” Owen said.

Rod put his arm around his brother and pulled him into a hug. Seeing him with his family reminded me of when we first met. “Ignore him, Owen,” I said. “Tell me about your school.”

“It's incredible, Cinaed!” he said, not pulling away from his brother. “In addition to unicorns, we've got eleven different shifter communities sending children. Eleven! I had hoped for three or four.”

“We've had to hire specialized teachers for each species,” Lysandor added, his voice steadier than his mate's. “They all teach other subjects. Do you have any idea how hard it was to find a wendigo who could also teach a core subject?”

Their unique nature as bonded mates gave them the perfect foundation to create such a school. “Nope, but it sounds expensive,” I said. “No wonder you created an endowment.”

“Money won't be an issue.” Owen waved a hand at my concern. “The Shifter Assembly offered to help fund us after hearing about our curriculum. We've already received applications for next year from a jackalope family and three lynx families.

Word of mouth travels fast.”

“I’m not surprised,” Rod said. “The Council and Assembly have been trying to address educational inequities for decades. It’s incredible how you’re filling both at the same time.”

We reached a fork in the path, and Owen paused, looking down the branch we weren't following. “What's down there? More gardens?”

“Guest houses,” Rod replied.

“Houses?” Lysandor raised an eyebrow. “Plural?”

They really hadn’t been here in a long time. “Rod’s parents aren't content to stay at the castle when they visit now that there are grandchildren to dote over. So we built three guest homes. Out of sight from the main house, of course.”

“They’re nice, actually,” Rod added. “When Mom and Dad visited last time, Cinaed and I used one to get some alone time.”

“And that let Mom and Dad have the kids to themselves,” Owen said. “Smart.”

“Let me show them to you,” Rod suggested. “Maybe seeing them will convince you to come visit more.”

“Absolutely!” Owen's eyes lit up. “Let’s do it.”

Rod gave me a quick kiss before the three headed down the fork in the path. “Don’t stay too long. Everyone will be here soon.”

“Okay, we won’t take too long.”

I watched them go, Rod gesturing animatedly as he explained something to his brother. The sight filled me with a contentment I once thought impossible. Even after ten years together, these simple moments of happiness still felt like miracles.

A whoosh of phoenix wings interrupted my thoughts. I didn't need to look to know two of my siblings had arrived. Their two copper-gold forms streaked past me and landed a few feet away. Their feet had barely touched the ground before they shifted. Showoffs.

Elsbeth swept me off my feet while Colum watched with a grin. When she set me down, he did the same. "Okay, what did I do?"

"You saved us from party duty," Elspeth said.

Her cryptic answer explained nothing. Did she think I invited her late so she didn't have to help? "I don't get it."

"Mom's going crazy," Colum said. "This siblings-only party was a great idea."

It took me a moment to decipher this sibling code. I was clearly out of practice. "Oh."

"It's partially your fault," Colum continued. "She is NOT happy you excluded her. She's the grandmother after all."

He used all the right inflections, and I could see and hear Mom telling anyone who'd listen. I laughed and led them toward the house. "She was never this obsessed over us kids."

"Grandkids are different," Elspeth hooked my arm as we walked. "You can expect a frosty reception tomorrow."

She didn't need to explain. I'd seen Mom do that before. "Not happening," I said. "Like you said, grandkids are different. If Mom ices me out, she won't see them."

"You'd stop her from seeing your children?" Colum looked as shocked as he sounded.

My first reaction was annoyance, but I had to remember they weren't parents.

"No, I'm not an asshole. The kids keep us so busy, we need a schedule for everything.

We even made one for contacting all the siblings.

If Mom didn't call me, I might go two weeks or more without calling her.

If she gives me the silent treatment, who do you think suffers more? "

"Oh! My! God!" Elspeth punctuated each word with a slap on my arm. "You're devious. I love it."

When we first had Ailpein and Adelais, I didn't realize how much my life would change. What she saw as devious was reality. "Anyway. We're prepared. When we arrive, we'll send the twins first. Mom will be too busy being in G'ma mode to remember why she's mad at me."

A thought hit me as we neared the house. "Where are your dates?"

"Helping Mom at the castle," Colum looked decidedly unhappy with the answer. "Moirra thinks Mom doesn't like her, so she's trying to earn points."

"Becca can't fly," Elspeth said. "She didn't want me to pull her in a boat. We'll

survive a day apart, and she and Mom get on well. She took one for the team.”

Reading between the lines, I realized two things. Mom wasn’t nearly as mad as they suggested, and I wasn’t paying close enough attention to my siblings. “That’s serious if you left them with Mom.”

“You having a mate and kids is putting pressure on the rest of us.” Elspeth elbowed me playfully. “Mom’s hints get less subtle by the day.”

Rod and I had to start adulting sooner than all of my siblings except Lauch. He had to step into the crown prince role, but even that was simple compared to being a guardian. “Sorry not sorry.” I sighed. “The island is too small for everyone. Even siblings only is a big crowd.”

“We get it.” Elspeth’s tone changed. She was back to being the protective big sister. Or Aunt. “The kids get the party they want before the madness at the castle tomorrow.”

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My sister wasn't as clueless as she pretended. We passed through the rose gardens, and Elspeth paused to touch a copper-colored bloom. "These are stunning, Cini. They look just like Mother's."

That was the highest praise she could give me. "Mom helped me lay out the bed, choose the colors for the original plants, and taught me how to recreate the protective spells she used at the castle. Surprisingly, Rod's a big fan of gardening."

I led them along the path between beds. Sitting between the two was a cement bench—a gift from Rod when we finished blocking off the ground. At the far end, the pride of my garden bloomed in full glory.

I stopped at the first row. "Rod and I planted this when we arrived."

"Your copper and his white," Colum said, as he touched the Ivory petals. "This captures your balance perfectly."

The pale steel-blue row was next. "Ailpein is so like Rod at times, but he has a bold streak Rod says comes from me."

"They're stunning," Elspeth said. "They're almost silver in this light."

I wasn't surprised my sister saw Ailpein's true color. We couldn't get silver, but this was close enough. "These are for my little firebird."

The rose-gold blooms were the essence of my fiery daughter, who had her father's caring heart.

“You’ve done an amazing job, Cini,” Elspeth said. “Who knew you’d inherit Mom’s talent for seeing everyone’s nature?”

Their joyous reactions were enough for me to ignore her use of my hated nickname.

“In those days when Rod and I were apart, I would visit Mom’s garden and feel the connection to everyone she created.

The day I took Rod there, he promised to build me a garden, because he knew in his heart we’d get here. He was right.”

I let them linger in my perfect place. This was the heart of our family—just like Mom’s had been for hers.

“Speaking of Mom,” Colum said. “She has ideas about what the twins should wear to Lauch’s wedding. Be prepared if she brings it up tomorrow.”

Rod and I really didn’t pay enough attention to what happened outside our little bubble. This issue, however, was already settled. “We told Fiona she could pick Adelais’s dress, and we’ve already got Ailpein a tuxedo. He looks really cute.”

Beyond the garden, the house sat beside a playground Rod built for the children. The chaotic mess of toys and equipment embodied our lives. We paid attention to what mattered most, and didn’t sweat the little things.

The front door of the house burst open, and Leo and Gwyneth emerged. Ailpein rode on his uncle’s shoulder, beaming like he owned the world. He looked more like a Hollen than a FionnLoach, but at least he had my amber eyes. Even at five, his magic suggested he’d be a powerful mage.

My daughter was holding Auntie Gwyn’s hand. She somehow convinced my proper oldest sister to skip. Adelais had my copper-red hair, and was all phoenix.

“Papa!” Adelais broke free and raced toward me like we hadn’t seen each other in days. Her hair streamed behind her like a phoenix flame as she ran.

Ailpein studied us for a second before he smiled and got Leo to head in our direction. As with most twins, their different personalities complemented each other.

I scooped Adelais into my arms while Ailpein high-fived his aunt and uncle.

“Busy morning, Auntie Gwyn?” I asked when Gwyneth joined us.

“No more so than usual,” she said. “First we did flame painting, followed by story time with Leo animating images as I read, and now, we’re going outside to play on the swings and slide. Sadly, neither Leo nor I can fit on the slide.”

“They’re too big,” Ailpein said.

“We don’t want it to break,” Adelais said. “Daddy built it for us kids.”

Elsbeth barely held back a snort. “Smart kiddos.”

I tossed my daughter onto my shoulders and jogged with Leo to the playground. It was a good omen for the rest of the day. The adults indulged the kids at their level. A far cry from the state affair we could expect at the castle.

“So glad we had the kids’ party today,” I told Rod. “They’re already having fun.”

“That was my mate’s idea,” Rod answered. “But then he’s an amazing parent.”

Neither of us ever felt like we knew what we were doing, but sometimes we got it right.

“A delais, please sit still,” I pleaded, attempting to thread a ribbon through her hair

while she wiggled in my lap. “You don’t want it to be crooked, do you?”

“But you said I could wear the blue ones,” she protested. Her skin had warmed enough that I kept a closer eye on her. “The red is ugly.”

Trying to teach a five-year-old that their favorite color didn’t match their hair had been an ongoing battle. I scooped her up and stood in front of the mirror. I put the red one to my hair. “Does this look good on me?”

“Oh, Papa.” She giggled. “That’s silly.”

Step one accomplished. While she was in a better mood, I held up the blue to her hair. “Doesn’t the red look better in your hair?”

She considered the two and finally nodded. “Yes, Papa, but I like the blue better.”

I set her down and wrapped the blue ribbon around her wrist. “If I put it in your hair, you can’t see your favorite color. Now you can see it all day.”

Her face lit up, and she gave me a big hug. “Thank you, Papa!”

I would never get tired of hugs and kisses.

“It’s scratchy,” Ailpein complained from across the room. He tugged at his shirt collar. “Why can’t I wear my normal clothes?”

“Grandma Aileen and Grandpa Malachy are having a special celebration at the castle because you two are five years old,” Rod explained patiently. “You don’t want to disappoint them by not being dressed up, do you?”

His face scrunched up slightly, and then he shook his head. “No, Daddy. I don’t want to make them sad.”

He caught my eye and winked. It was a familiar dance—Rod playing the reasonable one with Ailpein, while I found little ways to appease Adelais without letting her get her way. So far, it had worked well. Time would tell if we could keep it up.

“Will Great-Grandpa Hollen be there?” Adelais asked, taking her eyes off her blue ribbon for a moment. “He's funny and he can make candy come from his ears.”

“Yes,” Rod said, trying not to laugh at his grandfather's antics. “Great-Grandpa Beornraed will be there with Great-Grandma Esmerelda.”

“Uncle Gund's coming today too, right?” Ailpein asked earnestly. “He showed me how to roar like a dragon yesterday and said we could do it together at the castle.”

It still amazed me how serious beings could devolve into juveniles when dealing with kids. “He will,” I said, fixing my gaze on my son. “But remember your promise to him—no roaring except when he says it's okay.”

“But if he says it's okay?” Ailpein pressed, his amber eyes serious as he searched for loopholes.

“If he says it's okay, then yes,” Rod said.

“Make sure we talk to Gund before we leave the island,” Rod said. “He needs to adult up until Mom and Dad get their family moment.”

“I want Mr. Snuggles,” Adelais announced, breaking free to retrieve her stuffed unicorn.

“I got my mage stone,” Ailpein said, pulling out the child-size imitation diamond Owen gave him for his birthday the day before.

“Funny how of all the gifts he got yesterday, that's the one he loves most,” Rod said.

It wasn't surprising. Ailpein wanted to be like his daddy. The real shock was no one thought of it before Owen and Lysandor. "He's his father's son."

"We need to leave in ten minutes," Rod announced to the children. "Make sure you have everything you need."

The children scrambled around the room getting things they "needed" but weren't going to make the trip. "Five years," I said softly. "I still can't believe we made it."

"Made it?" Rod raised an eyebrow. "This is just the beginning. Buckle up, firebird, the ride's just starting."

The western dock had expanded since we'd first arrived on the island. The lone berth for our small boat had grown to accommodate twenty vessels of various sizes. Today, most of the slips were filled, as our siblings gathered for the journey to the castle.

"The weather's perfect," Bart observed, his son Eaghan sleeping peacefully in the carrier on his chest. Even at this age, I could see his elven nature. "Much better than the downpour last time we were here."

Cael held their three-year-old daughter Katarina's hand as they stepped onto the dock. The little girl's blonde hair was nearly white in the sunlight, and her blue eyes had the same glint Bart's had even when he was relaxing.

"A'pein!" Katarina called, spotting my son among the crowd. "I wanna ride with A'pein."

Ailpein looked to Rod and me for permission, his expression serious beyond his years. At our nod, he extended his hand to his cousin. "You sit with me and Adie," he said, helping her carefully onto our vessel.

"She's got him wrapped around her finger already," Bart noted with amusement.

“Reminds me of someone else I know.” He glanced meaningfully at me.

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” I replied innocently, watching as Adelais took charge of organizing the seating arrangements in our boat.

Around us, siblings and their mates prepared for departure. Jan and Conall discussed something with Avie, whose fiancé, Malcolm, held out his hand from on board their boat. Elspeth joined their boat, her friendship with Avie had continued after their work together during the war.

Leo and Gund stood with Owen, Lysandor, Otto, and Thal. Colum joined them and said something that made them all laugh. It gave me a thrill seeing how close everyone had become.

“This was a great idea having all the siblings get together,” Cael said, helping Gwyneth onto the boat. “We should make it an annual tradition.”

His comment was perfectly timed. Watching our families interact, we’d maintained the bonds we forged during the fight to stop Blackstone. The shared experience that united our families. “Absolutely,” I agreed. “You’re in charge of the planning.”

“Ready?” Rod called, before Cael could protest.

“I want Kat to sit with me!” Adelais announced, as she stood in front of her brother and cousin.

My little firebird was going to be a handful. “Sit down, love, or you’ll fall in,” I said, walking over to the kids. “Kat, sweetie, can you sit between Adie and Ailpein, please?”

Like the sweet child she was, Katarina happily sat between her two older cousins, looking pleased they’d been fighting over her. They were going to be a handful, all of

them, but they'd also be close. I couldn't ask for anything more.

The castle dock was crowded as our tiny armada arrived.

Mom and Dad stood at the front with Bart's parents.

All four waited with barely contained excitement.

Lauch and Fiona joined our parents, having returned to the castle after the party.

I felt bad seeing his face as they prepared to leave early.

The weight of his responsibilities had already settled onto his shoulders.

I planned to talk to my siblings after the party to see if we could take on a little bit to give him more freedom.

I felt a gentle surge of earth magic as our boat touched the dock. A warm, approving pulse that radiated up through my body. Rod felt it too; I saw the recognition in his eyes as our gazes met. The Earth had asked a lot of us, but now it seemed to offer its blessing.

In that moment, I realized our duties as anchors weren't a one-way obligation. For all we gave to maintain the Great Ward, the Earth had returned our service tenfold: a home, a family, a life richer than either of us could have imagined.

The kids began to wave toward their grandparents, who were reduced to childish displays and waved eagerly back. The moment the boat docked, Cael, Rod, and I helped the three kids off the boat and watched them race ahead.

The four grandparents acted like they had no responsibilities other than entertaining three little beings who never wanted for attention.

Chancellor Hollen and King Malachy ceased to exist, as their formal personas were replaced by doting grandfathers who had no defense against small arms wrapping around their necks.

“Look at them,” Rod said, his hand finding mine. “Worth every sacrifice.”

I couldn't speak past the lump in my throat, so I squeezed his hand instead. The Great Ward hummed steadily in the background of my consciousness, a constant reminder of our responsibility. It wasn't a burden, however, it was the foundation upon which we'd built our new life.

A life filled with love, family, and hope. Something worth protecting.

Exactly what Grandfather intended with his sacrifice.

“Let's go celebrate,” I said.

The End

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed the Mages and Mates world. This is the end of this series, but mates will have lives that span centuries. I hope in time to share more stories of their lives and introduce you to new adventures.