



The Book Witch (The Evelyn Wight Archives #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A cursed book. An ancient coven. And a reluctant witch caught in the middle.

When thief-for-hire Evelyn steals a book drenched in dangerous dark magic, she realizes keeping it out of the wrong hands could be very bad for her health. Trouble is, a book this powerful attracts a lot of attention, so she races to get the book out of town before she gets noticed. But when the world's oldest and most powerful coven becomes aware of its existence—and hers—she quickly finds herself long on problems and short on options.

With Valen—her client's oversized head of security—by her side, she descends into the Dark City, a magically-sustained underworld beneath New Orleans where strange creatures roam, mad kings rule, and hell is very, very real. Faced with dangers beyond anything she's ever seen before, Evelyn must survive and evade capture long enough to escape with the book before it's too late.

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Evelyn pressed her back against a tree and wished, not for the first time, that she was a proper witch.

A nearby light post blocked her path to the abandoned library, the flickering bulb refusing to die no matter how creative the curses she whispered its way. Night had fallen hours ago, and the narrow sliver of moon overhead left the world below in deep shadow except for this one damned flicker. A low howl in the distance made her freeze. Parts of the city were deep in slumber at this time of night. This wasn't one of those parts.

Giving the light post a wide berth, she moved from darkness to darkness, casual in her movements so as not to draw attention to herself as either criminal or prey. The red brick building was swathed in a pale glow from one lone bulb near the front entrance, its twin long since stolen or broken. She kept to the darkened side, breathing more freely the farther she stayed from the yellow glow.

Darkness is your ally when you like to be invisible. Darkness becomes your friend when you need to stay invisible to survive. She traced gloved fingers along the bricks as she circled the building, looking for the old delivery door she'd been told would be unlocked. The wrought-iron fence to her left creaked and groaned in the breeze, sending shivers down her spine despite the warm night. Now was not the time to get spooked. She was a professional, after all.

The shadows at the rear of the building were so inky black that she felt the wooden door before she saw it, and she had to squeeze her body between an overgrown tree

trunk and the wall in order to access the rusted iron door handle. It resisted her touch, sending a shock of adrenaline through her system, then abruptly gave way. It was rusted in place but not locked. Evelyn slipped from the darkness outside to the darkness within.

Although this particular branch had been retired from service as a community library for nearly sixty years, the building itself hadn't gotten the memo. The air was still fragrant with the unmistakable scent of old books—ink, paper, fabric, dust. She savored a breath. It was a heady perfume, filling her lungs and tickling her nerves like the bubbles in champagne.

She'd entered via some sort of storage room. It was so crowded with old furniture and cardboard boxes gone limp with damp and time that she was surprised the door had been able to open at all. She navigated cautiously through the space, going slowly to avoid knocking anything over or disturbing more dust than was absolutely necessary. The less obvious it was that anyone had been here—let alone an unsanctioned borrower like herself—the better.

Her eyes gradually adjusted to the dark, and she was able to move more quickly through the next few rooms, each one more empty of furniture and more filled with echoes than the last. Whispers lingered at the very edges of her hearing, conversations from times long past. It turns out libraries have memories too—and they're better than most.

Next came the tricky bit. Evelyn pulled a crude amulet from around her neck, barely more than a raw crystal wrapped in wire and strung on a cord, and held it in her hand, waiting for it to warm and tell her she was getting close. Warmer. Warmer. Colder. Cold. Freezing. She was going the wrong way. A few more precious seconds passed as she struggled to orient herself in the building's interior. She'd studied the original blueprints—such as they were—but the door wasn't where she'd expected it to be. Or it was, and she couldn't... she stopped. Couldn't see it.

She uttered a few words under her breath, focusing more intently on the crystal in her hand. A whispering voice rose above the rest, swirling around her, tugging at her senses, pulling her toward a dusty corner near the back of the old collections room. Loose scraps of newspaper littered the floor, fluttering in the air disturbed by her footsteps. There it was. The glow of magic around its edges was so faint it could easily be mistaken for moonlight.

Evelyn peeled off her gloves to press her bare fingers into the cracks in the wall, feeling for the switch she knew had to be there. No self-respecting hidden door would have a handle. A breath later, she was padding softly down a set of stairs as old as the building and twice as dusty. The moonstone, now back around her neck, glowed coolly, coating the space in a pearlescent light just bright enough to guide her steps. When her client had said it was an easy job, he must've forgotten that she couldn't see in the dark. Humans couldn't, as a rule.

Urgency pushed her forward. She'd already been in the building too long. She needed to find the book and get out before she was caught. Or the sniffers found her trail.

She ventured into three empty rooms before finding the right one, a tiny closet of space tucked under a second set of stairs. Inside she found a broken stool, a set of collapsed bookshelves soft with rot, and one very shiny book. Shiny to her, anyway.

She'd been barely six years old when she realized that other people didn't see the shine. That all the books and toys and knives and broken teacups looked the same to them. Her great-grandmother, eyes milky with cataracts, had watched quietly as Evelyn collected her little treasures, trash in everyone's eyes but theirs.

Evelyn pressed her palm against the cover of the small book, feeling its power pulse in her veins. Some people could feel the shine, primarily witches and sorcerers, but she'd yet to meet another person who could see it. If you asked the so-called experts, people like her didn't exist.

She quickly tucked the book into her bag, pulling out its replacement, then sealing it in with two iron buckles and a few key words. That should be enough of a cloak to get her out of here and safely to the estate without getting picked up by sniffers. Should be. Evelyn didn't believe in relying on shoulds for shit, but it was the best she could do for now. She carefully smeared dust over the duplicate book, its shineless cover nearly invisible in the dim light, even draping some nearby cobwebs over it to make sure it blended in before leaving.

She took the steps back upstairs two at a time, only slowing when she approached the hidden door into the collections room. Two breaths convinced her it was safe to exit the basement. Three breaths saw her past the now-silent main room. Even the whispers had left the building. Four breaths and she was outside, easing the door closed behind her and thanking the tree for his help in concealing her exit.

The first few blocks were dark and quiet, just the way she liked it. It was warm and humid, but the slight breeze was cooling on the back of her neck. She turned down a side street, then a long, low howl told her she wasn't alone. Sniffers. She broke into a sprint, cursing herself for not fixing her motorcycle in time for this job. She was too slow on foot—it left too much time for the sniffers to catch the scent and hunt her down.

Another low howl, closer this time. Her boots thudded on the sidewalk in time with her heartbeat. If they caught her, she was dead. She caught a glimpse of movement in the corner of her eye and dug deep, forcing her legs to go faster. By the time she reached the edge of Denmark's estate, she was running out of stamina and from the sound of it, at least two sniffers were closing in behind her. No matter, all she needed to do was get one singular toe across the boundary line, and?—

“Making new friends?”

Evelyn collapsed on the grass of Denmark's expansive front lawn and laughed as she

struggled to catch her breath. “All the time. I’m irresistible, didn’t you know?”

“I think they were more interested in the item in your bag than in your personality.”

Oof, burn. From anyone else, she would’ve taken offense. Maybe even caused an offense or two in return. But Valen wasn’t insulting her. Not on purpose, anyway. She looked up at him from her position on the ground, taking in his broad chest and broader shoulders before tilting her head back to see his face. Larger than life in size but not personality, Valen was Denmark’s top security guy. Or only security guy. Quality over quantity, clearly. He grinned down at her, his dimples peeking through the dark shadow of his short beard. God, he was attractive.

“They almost caught you this time,” he continued. “I’m glad they didn’t.”

She returned his smile. His playful smirk made her want to do bad things with him. “Me too. I’ve got enough friends.”

He reached down with one strong, well-veined hand to help her up and lifted her to her feet effortlessly. Her smile widened. Very bad things indeed. Seemingly unaware of her lustful imaginings, Valen led the way across the grassy field that qualified as a front lawn and around the side of the sprawling plantation-style house that her client called home. He motioned her inside.

“He’s expecting you in the study. You can go up.”

“You’re not coming with me?” She tried to hide the disappointment in her voice, but the return of his dimples proved she’d been unsuccessful.

“I want to be sure your new friends respect the boundary line. Can’t start making exceptions. I’ll lose my good reputation.”

She was never completely sure whether he was flirting. She usually had a pretty good radar for these things, but not when it came to Valen. His intentions remained inscrutable. “Thanks. I’ll look for you on my way out.”

He nodded, then took off at a jog back the way they’d come. Evelyn shifted her focus back to her mission. Deliver the item. Collect the cash.

Denmark’s private office was a study in dark brown and burgundy, every surface covered with one of the two shades, including the walls and ceiling. As she did every time she visited his inner sanctum, Evelyn wondered whether it was meant to be intimidating or cozy. The deep leather couches were definitely the latter, but the genuine Gothic gargoyle crouched in the far corner, shining darkly with sinister magic, suggested the former.

“Any difficulties?” Denmark was on the far side of fifty, once handsome, now distinguished in the way that men got to be, but women seldom were. Well on his way to silver fox status, he reminded her of Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*. Maybe he was still handsome. She was too interested in his money to really care.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle,” she said, cringing at her own bravado. But Denmark respected swagger, so swagger she would. “How did you find out about this one, anyway? It was tucked far away from everything. I doubt anyone had seen this book in decades. Maybe longer.”

He looked pleased by her question, clearly taking it as the compliment she didn’t intend. “Thank you. And I have my methods, you know. I’m assuming you were able to—” He made a few hand gestures that she hoped were meant to signify stealing.

“Of course.” She unbuckled her bag and handed him the book, her fingers lingering on the cover ever so briefly. She wanted to read it. She always wanted to read them.

Denmark set the book on his desk, then handed her a plain white envelope thick with cash. Evelyn headed for the door.

“Before you go,” he said, his voice suddenly silken, telling her he was about to ask for something. She turned to look back at him. He sat behind the desk, fingers steepled under his chin. “I have another job for you. A real challenge this time. Not just a retrieval, but a trade.”

Evelyn’s eyes narrowed. She always insisted on leaving a replacement book. A trade meant it was an active location, usually a personal library. Those were riskier, so she charged double. Denmark knew this. “How much?”

“Triple. Plus a bonus if you make it out without drawing attention to yourself. You’ll find the details in that file there,” he flicked one casual finger toward the couch, “and the replacement item is there, as well. Packaged just the way you like it.”

He’d gotten it in his head that she liked brown paper packages tied up with string, something to do with a musical his mother had loved. Evelyn had no idea why he thought she shared this affinity with his mother, but she didn’t care to explore it. She just accepted the packages, happy that the paper obscured the contents. She retrieved the file and opened it. There were photographs of a private residence, large and imposing and neo-Gothic. Not unusual for New Orleans. Blueprints, a map, and security details rounded out the packet. This was too detailed for Denmark to have put it together on his own. Valen must’ve helped him.

“Okay,” she said, shoving both the package and the file into her bag. “I’ll do it. Give me a couple of weeks.”

“Days, darling. You have three days.”

She had to cut through the French Quarter. There was no avoiding it. She was

nervous about the possibility of more sniffers and sticking to more populated areas felt safer than her usual back-alley routes. Even after dropping off the goods, the scent of the shine could linger on her bag, her skin.

This time of night—or morning, rather—even Bourbon Street was relatively quiet. A light rain had left a sheen on every surface, the dark black of the asphalt glowing red, yellow, and green with the changing streetlights. Evelyn trailed her fingers along the back of a bench as she passed, relishing the cold of the metalwork wet with rain.

Warm yellow lights tucked up under intricate trellises guided her path, and she nodded hello to a few stray vampires prowling the nearby alleys. Most, if not all, of them were human, though you'd never know it from their sharpened incisors and pallid complexions. New Orleans had always had vampires, real or imagined. It was simply in the city's nature. Evelyn wouldn't be surprised if there were a few real ones still lingering about, but she hadn't met one yet. Something to look forward to.

She considered calling a cab, but she knew most wouldn't come into the French Quarter this late, not at the witching hour when all the businesses had finally closed their doors and all that remained awake and alive in the streets were the playacting vamps and other strays. And ghosts, apparently. The ghosts were the ones who refused to pay and ruined late night cab rides for everyone else.

She'd read somewhere that there was a place in Japan that had reported similar issues with stranded ghosts after a tsunami, leading to unpaid fares and unhappy cab drivers.

“Hurry up! We'll walk if we have to!”

Evelyn ducked out of the light and into a shadowed alley as a couple burst out of the nearby hotel, obviously agitated.

“I don't care what the clerk says—there was something wrong with our room,

Reggie! I think it's haunted!"

Evelyn shook her head and emerged from her hiding place. Yet another example of visitors to the Crescent City not being ready for what—or who—they'd find there.

On the surface, New Orleans was a lively city filled with great music, even better food, and an eclectic population of the human persuasion—a delightful blend of the eccentric and the mundane, the gifted and the dull, the seekers and the lost souls. Evelyn had arrived only two years ago, seeking and lost in equal parts.

She was nearly home. She'd reached the edge of the commercial strip and was free from the Quarter's lights, but that was a double-edged sword. Darkness helped everything hide, whether you liked it or not. Keeping her ears peeled for the low howls that meant sniffers had picked up a trail, Evelyn hurried down the darkened road. She went through the list in her head:

1. She'd washed her hands in Denmark's kitchen sink on her way out;
2. The gloves she'd worn when touching the book were safely tucked away in her bag, bound by iron and blessed into place;
3. The bag itself was resistant to shine, and even in the dark she didn't see a hint of it.

None of that meant sniffers couldn't find her, but it was a good start. The humidity hung heavy in her lungs, making her whole body feel damp by the time she finally reached the side yard that led to the carriage house she called home. The main house on the property was owned and run by a very inhospitable madame—her clientele were exclusive and nearly invisible—which meant she maintained exquisite wards at all times. Wards that covered her entire property, including Evelyn's rented apartment. Landlords with magical benefits were highly underrated in her opinion.

Once her boots struck grass on Madame Leveaux's property, she relaxed. The wooden stairs up to her apartment creaked in protest as though she'd woken them from their slumber, and they wondered who the fuck she thought she was disturbing them at such an ungodly hour.

Three knocks and four whispered words unlocked the wards she'd left on the door. Her keys took care of the trio of deadbolts—each a different type of metal, just in case. A chorus of mews and six glowing yellow eyes greeted her as she crossed the threshold and sealed the door behind her. Three deadbolts, three knocks, four whispered words. And three hungry cats who were certain she'd missed breakfast (she hadn't, but cats are notoriously bad keepers of time. Or dirty little liars. Or both).

She peeled off her boots and stacked them by the door, murmuring to her cats all the while. "Mmhmm. I know. So hungry. Starving. Poor little foodless babes left all alone for four whole hours without a single bite of kibble. I'm the worst."

They fought for space around her ankles, wrapping and re-wrapping their soft furry bodies, bumping hard little heads against her shins, purring and mewing in simultaneous love and annoyance. Evelyn dropped to the rug in front of the worn couch and let them roam.

There is nothing more grounding than sitting on the floor with friendly little familiars crawling all over you to remind you that you are loved (well, liked) and wanted (or needed?). Evelyn buried her face in their fur and purred back, thankful to be home and safe. Once her heart and heart rate had both returned to normal, she shifted from floor to couch and then from couch to kitchen.

"A little early breakfast never hurt anyone, right?"

She poured a half-serving of dry food into each of their bowls, clearly marked Nona, Decima, and Morta. They always went to their own bowls, which left her feeling

queasily uncertain about whether they could read. Leaning toward yes.

She fixed herself a cup of strong black tea and spread cinnamon-flavored peanut butter on a piece of thick oaty bread.

“Enjoy,” she mumbled around a sticky bite, loosening it from the roof of her mouth with a swig of tea. Perfection. She leaned one hip against the kitchen counter as she drank her tea and ate her breakfast, her mind wandering back over the night’s events—lingering over Valen’s broad shoulders and what she imagined were chiseled abs. Or almost chiseled. She had a thing for almost chiseled. Like a tree wrapped in a blanket. Cozy as fuck. By the time she’d revisited her conversation with Denmark, she was hungry—but not for food this time.

She drained the rest of her tea, then set it down by the kettle. She’d be back for another one later. First, she needed a book. A good one. Something with at least a little shine.

One of the first things she’d done after moving in was fix the bookshelf situation. As in, the apartment had come with none. The apartment was small, formerly belonging to a chauffeur and his wife, but there were two bedrooms down a short hallway from the open kitchen and living room area. One was where Evelyn slept, large enough for a bed and not much else. But the other was where the magic happened, literally. The larger of the two bedrooms, it featured a window seat along the far wall, deeply set enough for an adult to curl up with three cats and not feel too crowded.

She’d loaded it up with soft cushions and fluffy blankets. Every other available inch of wall had been converted into floor-to-ceiling shelves. And those shelves were stacked with books, two layers deep, with additional stacks spilling onto the floor, piling high under the window seat and around the door. A thick rug covered much of the hardwood floor, making it comfortable to be barefoot year-round. Strands of fairy lights crisscrossed the ceiling, lending a gentle glow to the room in lieu of harsh

overhead lighting.

An antique reading lamp was nestled into the corner of the window seat to provide stronger light when needed for reading at night. Evelyn entered her private library, closing the door behind her to keep out the sisters. She didn't want to be distracted. Most of the books were normal, filled with that ordinary magic of stories well-told. She loved them almost as much as the ones that shined. Almost. Even though she was the only person she knew of who could see the shine and even though she'd never had another person in her apartment, human or otherwise, and even though the wards on the property were powerful, she kept certain books hidden away.

Call her superstitious.

Call her overly cautious.

Call her whatever you'd like, but she wasn't going to leave them out where just anyone could see them, feel them, smell them.

She retrieved the key from its book-shaped hiding place, then unlocked the window seat, lifting the pile of cushions and blankets to reveal a storage space underneath. The shine hit her like a kiss on the lips, making her cheeks flush and raising goosebumps down her forearms. She couldn't feel shine from other objects, a quirk to her abilities that confused her but ultimately didn't matter much. For whatever reason, she could see shine all the time but only feel it when it was attached to book-shaped bundles of paper and ink.

She lifted a book off the top of the stack, then closed the lid and rearranged the pillows. She settled into the cozy nook, tucking her feet under her with a sigh. The taste of shine earlier had whetted her appetite. She needed more. She began by tracing her fingers over the book's cover, savoring the shine as it set her pulse racing, following her veins to her heart, then spreading out from there.

She closed her eyes, letting the bubbles race along her nerves until she nearly laughed out loud. This was a good book. The shine was safe, joyful, like a sunny day in an open field. When she was ready, she opened it to the first page and began to read, bringing the shine into her body as her eyes trailed over each sentence. By the time she'd finished the first chapter, she felt filled to the brim, top to toes, with the irresistible light. Satisfied, she tucked the book back into its hiding place, locked the window seat, and re-hid the key.

“I’m walking on moonlight, mmhmm.” She sang the lyrics wrong, but sunshine didn’t have quite the same ring to it when you loved the night as much as she did. And moonshine meant something altogether different in these parts.

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Evelyn slept most of the following day, waking in the late afternoon to eat cold crawfish pasta straight from the fridge and attempt to sort out her life. If she only had three days to prep for this trade, then she couldn't afford a night off. There was too much to do.

For one thing, she had to go by the shop to pick up Marge—the sniffers had gotten entirely too close. For another, she needed to find a different copy of the book Denmark wanted her to use in the trade. She held the substitute in her hands, frowning. It was a perfectly fine book, but it didn't match the one in the photo. Not even close. This one appeared new, whereas the one in the picture had more... rind on it. And she also wanted to visit Granny Lucy's. She was running low on palo santo.

After tossing the now-empty takeout container in the trash, she grabbed her bag from its hook near the door. Three knocks and four words and three deadbolts later, she was venturing out into the gathering dusk. Mosquitos buzzed around the birdfeeder filled with damp green algae and dark brown water. Honeysuckle sweetened the thick air, dancing with the scent of rain.

Fifteen minutes later, Evelyn let out a sigh of relief at the brightly lit "NO VACANCY" sign buzzing in all its neon glory over the roadside motel-turned-car-shop. The wolves were the best mechanics in town, but they were useless after sundown, regardless of the moon. If they weren't running through the woods stripped of their clothes and wits, they were drunk as skunks at the neighboring biker bar.

The motel rooms had been gutted and turned into mechanic's bays. Numbering fourteen in total, they were always full. Today was no exception.

"Hey, baby. It's about time you came to pick up your girl."

Eduardo. Wolf asshole, standard model: inhuman strength, prone to violence, terrible flirt, and dumb as shit. She rolled her eyes and stopped just short of the office door, her hand resting on the handle. Without turning, she said, "I told you not to call me baby."

"Oh, come on, amiga. I'm just trying to be friendly ."

"I don't like your kind of friendly." Evelyn turned to face him. "You might be a big bad wolf, pendejo . But you were born of a bruja under a full moon, and she has told me your true name. Remember that." She watched his dark eyes widen briefly before narrowing into slits, suspicious. Not all wolves were sniffers, but all sniffers were shifters, usually wolves or jackals. Their heightened senses and supernatural sensitivity to the smell of magic made them excellent predators—and made shine-stealing witches their natural prey. When they got a snout full of magic, they were like cats drugged out on catnip, only a thousand times more murderous. Some of them just wanted the high. Some of them wanted to tear you open and climb inside your skin. Evelyn had witnessed Eduardo in shifted form exactly once and that had been more than enough. His nostrils flared, and Evelyn tensed in response. Several seconds ticked by, neither of them breaking eye contact.

The welcome bell jingled behind her, and the tension broke as Eduardo's eyes darted to the person behind her. He bowed his head. "Ma'am."

"Go on and get the lady's bike. You know the one. And don't dawdle, neither."

Eduardo slinked off.

“What were you thinking, girl?”

Evelyn followed the older woman into the main office. The old A/C unit in the window rattled and wheezed, but the room was deliciously cool after the intense afternoon heat. “I’ve told him at least twice already. I don’t like it when he calls me baby.”

“So you thought you’d pick a fight with a half-grown wolf on a new moon?”

Dorine Gousille—”Goose” to those who dared—groaned as she hefted herself back onto her stool behind the front counter. She’d stepped down as the alpha of the Cajun Conclave, the largest organized pack in the Southern states, long before Evelyn came to town. Dorine reached down to pull out the ledger, the thick scars on her forearm straining under the stretch. They said she’d ruled with an iron pelt, never hesitating to challenge wolves twice her size if they needed to be knocked down a peg or two. Evelyn fully believed the lore.

“What else was I supposed to do? Let him think he can do whatever he wants?” Evelyn shook her head at the thought. There was more danger in that than a little measured hostility from her to remind him she wasn’t afraid of him.

Dorine slammed the book down on the counter and flipped through the pages, looking for Evelyn’s entry. “Oh, I don’t know, defuse the situation? He’s a wolf. Easily distracted if you know what you’re doing.”

Evelyn leaned her forearms on the counter. “Dorine, please tell me you did not just suggest I try to flirt with that feral cub.”

Dorine scowled at her for all of two seconds before letting out a bark of laughter. “You’re right. That would be worse. I’ve seen you flirt.” She showed Evelyn where to sign the ledger, then handed her the receipt. “But I won’t always be there to make

sure he stays in line.”

Evelyn nodded her understanding. “I’ll be more careful, I promise.”

Dorine eyes flickered wolf yellow. “You’d better, sha. You reek of magic.”

Evelyn left the office, her mind racing. If the old wolf could smell the shine on her, then her cleansing ritual wasn’t working. No wonder the sniffers had followed her last night.

Outside, Eduardo was nowhere to be seen. Evelyn swung her leg over her bike and settled onto the seat, using the toe of her boot to pull up the kick stand.

“Hello, Marge, old girl.” She turned the key, then held the clutch before pushing the start button. The motorcycle came to life with a familiar rumble. “Miss me?”

Evelyn zipped down a side street, taking a shortcut in hopes of reaching Granny Lucy’s before the tourists got there. The old hag only opened her storefront after dark on the new moon and then only for a few hours. It used to be that only those in the know would queue up outside to speak with the wizened woman, but that was no longer the case. Some tourist blog or other had outed her as a spooky native with wild stories, and so the out-of-towners flocked in. The blog had left out the bit about darkness and new moons, so maybe she would get lucky and there wouldn’t be too many today.

Evelyn couldn’t afford to haggle with time or money tonight.

The asphalt gave way to cobblestones, the old road worn smooth by time and tires. There was a shift when you reached the older parts of New Orleans, where the spirits lingered by choice and the monsters were real, more or less. A gray old man’s shimmering image waved at her from a half-broken store window, and she waved

back. She'd tried for almost a year to get Hank Dowdson to move on, but he refused. Eventually, she'd stopped trying. She didn't believe in forced crossovers for harmless ghosts who missed their wives. Or perhaps he didn't miss her and that's why he wanted to stay here. She'd long gone over to the other side, after all.

The scent of rain and honeysuckle faded the deeper she rode into the commercial district, replaced by the stench of mud and rot and people.

The front of Granny Lucy's shop was empty and dark. Evelyn checked the sky—still too light for her to open her doors for the evening. Fair enough. She took up residence just to the side of the door, the paint peeling and faded by the sun. Crossing her arms over her chest made her look unfriendly. Or at least she hoped it did. Leave me alone, she thought. I'm not interesting or nice. Stay away. She pushed the thought out from her core, shaping it into a barrier around her, willing strangers to keep their distance.

She didn't know if it actually did anything when she projected thoughts this way, but it made her feel better. Shuffling steps behind her made her turn in anticipation just as Granny Lucy unlocked the door, her intricate system of knocks and whispers far beyond Evelyn's humble home wards.

"Oh, it's you. Come in, come in." Her voice sounded like crackling bark, but she offered Evelyn a toothless grin and motioned her inside. "I've been waiting for someone. Guess that's you. What brings you?"

Evelyn looked around the shop, checking to see if anything was different or new. Not that she could spot off-hand. "I'm low on palo santo." She helped herself to several bundles of the fragrant wood. "And I need black obsidian powder, if you have any."

"Always. I wouldn't stick around here for long without it myself. Powerful stuff. How much you want?" Evelyn swore she could hear the old woman creak as she moved back behind the counter, yet she moved with a quick confidence that belied

her age.

“Three ounces, if you can spare it.”

Granny Lucy nodded. “I can spare it.” She pulled a jar down from a high shelf and began scooping the inky powder into a smaller jar. Once it was full, she shoved a cork unceremoniously into the top and slid it across the counter toward Evelyn. “What else?”

“I need something for cleansing.”

Granny’s eyes bore into hers. “What kind of cleansing?” She scurried around the counter to peer up at Evelyn, her dark eyes nearly black in the low light of the shop. “Oh, I see. You’ve got magic residue on you.”

Evelyn’s heart stopped beating. “You can see it?”

Granny scoffed and waved a dismissive claw. “Of course not. Just a turn of phrase. But I can feel it on you sure enough. Sniffers been giving you grief, have they?”

Evelyn’s heart started up again and with it her breath. “They have. Dorine says I reek of it.”

“Dangerous business.” The old woman clutched at her wrist, whispering a few words, tapping at the veins along her inner arm with one yellowed nail. “You’ve tried cleansing it already, but it didn’t work. Hm.”

She held still, letting Granny work. There was no one she’d rather look her over than the oldest witch in Jackson Square. After a few more moments of whispers and tapping, Granny released her.

“It’s done. You’re clean. For now. But if you go around touching things you shouldn’t, it’ll be back and worse.”

“I understand. Thank you, Granny. What do I owe you?” Evelyn reached into her bag to pull out her wallet, but the old woman stopped her.

“This one is on me. The black powder and holy wood, too. When the spirits tell me to wait for someone, I’ve learned to listen. Next time you come, bring me some of that tea you like. Then we’ll call it square.”

She bowed her head in gratitude. “Thank you, Granny. You honor me.”

Granny Lucy scoffed again, but a smile tugged at the edges of her wrinkled lips. “Nonsense. Get out of here before I change my mind. Bringing unbridled magic in here like it’s nothing. Like I won’t feel it and know what you’ve been up to. You’re worse than Bartholomew, and that’s saying something.”

Evelyn looked around for the fat cat, finding him curled into a perfect ball on a cushion by the door. It was saying something, alright—equal parts compliment and insult.

Her next stop was somewhere new but filled with old—a used bookshop that the internet insisted carried books of an ancient and unusual nature, which was exactly what she needed to find.

She almost missed it. Tucked into a crevice that was more alley than road, the cramped door crammed between a building and what must’ve once been an iron fire escape now rotted into mangled nothingness.

There was no bell over the door, but the man standing behind the business counter was welcome enough. Tall and lean, he stood with one shoulder casually leaned

against the nearest bookcase. The man was pure deliciousness, and Evelyn didn't have to be a vampire to want a taste.

"Can I help you?" Smooth baritone wrapped in an English accent. Her night was definitely looking up.

"I certainly hope so," she said, stepping the rest of the way inside. The door slammed shut behind her, making her jump and him smile. His eyes crinkled at the corners in a way that was absolutely bewitching. It wasn't fair how good a few years could look on a man. "I'm looking for a book."

"I did assume, given your current location."

"Right. So I actually already have a copy of it, but it's the wrong one. Or, rather, it looks wrong." Evelyn took another step closer, wondering when she'd be able to smell his cologne. Because a man this attractive was never unscented. It was against the rules.

"I see. I think perhaps you'd better show me what you've got then." He remained leaned against the wall, so casual yet so sexy, waiting for her to approach. She didn't mind at all closing the distance. Her pleasure, really.

She fumbled with the iron clasps on her bag, hardly noticing the way his striking blue eyes narrowed ever so briefly before his expression returned to its neutral yet handsome state. She withdrew the dummy book, perfectly shineless and new. She set it on the counter. Now that she stood within three feet of him, his cologne reached her nose. Leather, tobacco, vanilla, a hint of spice she couldn't place. It was the kind of scent that made you want to lean in and breathe deep, savoring the heady combination of fragrance and skin.

She shook her head to clear it, returning her focus to the task at hand. She had a job to

do, dammit.

He finally moved from his position and reached for the book. It looked even smaller in his long-fingered hands, strong yet nimble and with just the right amount of veiny goodness.

Is this what it felt like to be a vampire? Because goddess help her, she wanted to eat him for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

“Hmm,” he murmured, a delicate scowl creasing the skin between his brows. “I do believe I have what you’re looking for. Same edition but a bit more... well-loved, we’ll say.”

Evelyn nodded to show she agreed but also because she didn’t trust her voice at the moment. Her throat had gone dry and not with fear.

He arched a single eyebrow in her direction. “Wait here, please.” When he moved from behind the counter, she finally got the full view: dark gray slacks well fitted around the important bits (they were all important bits, to be honest), a crisp white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and a matching dark gray waistcoat. The first two buttons of his shirt were undone, giving him a rakish air and showing off just a hint of neck cleavage.

She had lost her mind. That was the only possible answer. Sure, it had been a minute since her last relationship (or non-relationship relations), but that was no excuse. She’d been around a hot guy before. Hell, she’d run into Valen just last night and had managed not to drool on his shoes. Externally, at least.

His cologne returned before he did, signaling his proximity to every cell in her very attuned body. To eat or be eaten. Or both. That was all she could think about.

“I found it. Will this do?” His hand brushed hers as he handed her the book, sending goosebumps up her arm and down her spine.

“Yes,” she said without looking. “I’ll take it. How much?”

His grin told her she wasn’t hiding her arousal very well, but it was too late to do anything about it. “It’s an old one, fairly rare, but it’s been here a while with little interest. Shall we say \$200?”

She would’ve agreed to twice that if it had earned her another grin or maybe even an eyebrow arch. Or both at the same time but then she might die. Better not to be greedy.

“That seems more than fair.” Despite her quaking fingers, she managed to pull two hundred-dollar bills out of her wallet and hand them to the devastating shop owner.

“Do you need a receipt?” His voice was lowered and dripping with sex. The quaking moved from her hands to her now-molten core. She shook her head and swallowed, hard.

“No, I’m good. Thank you.” She accepted her original book back from him and tucked them both into her bag. “Nice place you have here. I don’t know how I didn’t know about it before. I love old books.”

“We have that in common. Among other things, I would wager.”

Her cheeks flushed. “Maybe so. Anyway, thanks for your help. You’ve really saved the night here, more than you know.”

“Any time.” He’d returned to the casual yet sexy lean against the bookshelf behind the counter. She thought she saw his eyes flick to her bag again, but maybe not.

She had one foot out the door when his smooth voice washed over her, raising the hairs on the back of her neck. “I’m Henry, by the way. What’s your name?”

True names are dangerous things. Much like words, they hold more power than most people realize. Name magic was some of the oldest and most powerful in existence with the potential to give the practitioner pretty much unlimited power over someone, should they want that sort of thing. And if she’d still had both feet firmly planted within his store, maybe she would have given Henry her true one. She liked to think not, but she hadn’t been very good at thinking just a moment ago.

“Evelyn,” she said, giving the name she’d adopted that held no power for her or anyone else. His eyes narrowed again, and this time she was certain she hadn’t imagined it. But one more breath saw her back on the sidewalk and free from whatever powerful magic was cast on that store.

Henry was many things, but she would wager “human” wasn’t one of them.

Two nights later, Evelyn sat on the floor in front of her couch, evidence of her tea-fueled preparations scattered across the coffee table, the couch cushions, the rug. To her relief, it looked like the book she'd gotten from Henry the creepy-sexy shop owner would work. The powerful deception cast over his store had left her concerned that she was walking out with a blank notebook or something equally unhelpful instead of the volume she needed. But thankfully it was an authentic book of exactly the title and year she needed. She shivered at the memory of the way she'd felt when he stood close to her, how narrowly she'd escaped doing something truly dangerous.

Evelyn rubbed her arms to chase away the goosebumps before getting back to work. A little brown wax and rough handling later, the trade book looked nearly identical to the shine version in the photograph. Or at least she was assuming the version in the photo had shine. She couldn't see it in photos at all. It was as though the phenomenon she processed as visual wasn't actually physically there. At least not in a way that could be captured digitally. She'd never tried with older photography methods. It'd be an interesting experiment.

She wrapped the replacement book in wax paper and tied it with strong twine before tucking it into her bag. Not taking any chances this time, she strangled three different charms around her neck—her great-grandmother's moonstone amulet, a small glass bottle of black tourmaline (freshly charged under the last full moon), and a hag stone—just in case. Granny Lucy's black obsidian powder was tucked into the zippered pocket of her light jacket, ready to be deployed at a moment's notice. She hoped she wouldn't need it.

The clock ticked slowly toward midnight. Her impatience mounted as she waited. When the hands were finally vertical and overlapping, she grabbed her bag and slung it across her body, hugging it against her hip to make sure it was secure. The last thing she needed was for something to happen to the acquired book after she made the exchange.

The manual garage door groaned in protest, showering her with dirt when she shoved it up above her head to lock it into place. Her landlady let her use the old garage under her apartment as storage space, though Evelyn's limited worldly possessions meant it was mostly just filled with various wildlife—some worse than others—and Marge.

She rolled her bike out to the sidewalk, not bothering to close the garage behind her. She didn't want another dirt shower, thanks. If anyone noticed her absence, she could just say she went out for a ride to enjoy the night. Madame Leveaux was used to her odd hours. It was something they often shared.

Helmet on, visor down, Evelyn took off down the street. The breeze was cooling even in the humidity, and she savored the fresh air. She stuck to side streets and quiet neighborhoods where people minded their business and avoided yours.

She stopped a few blocks from the target address to tuck her bike behind a bushy outcropping. Close but not too close. She would've preferred to leave Marge another couple blocks away, but after what happened last time, she was willing to trade a degree of stealth for a speedy getaway. Besides, she didn't want to get caught lingering around the neighborhood if someone raised the alarm. Black obsidian powder and quick access to Marge were her best options if everything went to shit. Denmark had insisted the place wasn't warded, but could he be trusted? He wanted her to do the job, so he made it sound easy. Simple. Valen was responsible for the estate's security, and Evelyn had wondered again as she read the report whether the surveillance had been performed by the large security guard or someone else.

Because if Valen said it wasn't warded, she would consider believing him. Denmark or some other third party? Not so much.

She approached the property cautiously, not entirely sure where the line was. She'd know when she crossed it. The house loomed out of the darkness, much larger than she'd expected. It was at least twice the size of Denmark's estate, and Evelyn had gotten lost trying to find her way out the first few times she visited. Four white columns announced the front entrance of the three-story home. Metal trelliswork surrounded the second- and third-floor galleries, green with age and moisture. Dark shutters concealed the windows.

It looked old. And expensive.

Evelyn approached from the side, experience telling her that the front and back entrances were the most likely to be covered by security—magical or otherwise. Everything seemed quiet. No stray beams of light peeked out from gaps around the shutters or under the doors. Even the streetlamps directly in front of the house were out.

She took a slow breath to calm her nerves. She'd seen this movie, and it didn't turn out well for the trespasser. Literally ever. She held her hiding place for ten long minutes, observing closely for any signs of movement, glints of camera lenses, anything. The house was set back from the road enough that she didn't have to worry too much about neighbors or passersby noticing her.

Evelyn freed one of the cords from around her neck. The pale gray hag stone was rough against her fingers, uneven in shape. She held the nickel-sized hole up to her eye and looked through it, scanning for anything previously unseen. She checked every window, searched the trelliswork, even swept over the yard and the nearby road. Still nothing.

Satisfied, she tucked the stone away and moved from her hiding spot. The grass was dew damp and slick under her boots as she slipped across the yard to the side of the house. There it was. The storm shelter. Most houses in New Orleans didn't have basements—the water table was too high—but whoever built this house had clearly spared no expense.

She opened the wooden doors, feeling like Dorothy before Oz, then dipped out of the night and into the dark once again. Instead of the dank smell she was expecting, the room smelled... clean. Once the doors were closed behind her, she pulled the moonstone necklace from underneath her shirt and held it up so that the pearlescent light could wash over the room. It was empty.

Pristine concrete floor, pure white beadboard walls, not a speck of dirt or drop of water to be seen. Evelyn frowned. Weird. She moved quickly, finding the door to the stairs unlocked and unwarded. The steps felt solid, new, with not even the slightest bend or creak to them. The interior didn't match the exterior at all. If pressed, Evelyn would've guessed the house was upwards of a hundred years old, maybe even older. But the interior looked and smelled brand-new. Not renovated. Not updated. New. The door at the top of the stairs swung open easily, the hinges smooth and silent. This was too easy.

She stepped out into a kitchen so modern and polished that it would be the envy of any social media influencer or television chef. It was spacious and open with a well-appointed island and tons of cabinet space, and Evelyn was pretty sure her entire apartment could fit inside it with room to spare. Consulting the map in her head—she'd committed Denmark's file to memory as part of her preparations—she turned to the left and pushed through a swinging door into the most magnificent home library she'd ever seen.

Spanning all three stories, the bibliophile's dream room was filled to the brim with rows upon rows of bookshelves. A spiral staircase in one corner provided access to

the second and third levels. Hanging lights dropped several feet down from the second-floor ceiling. Soft leather chairs and couches were arranged artfully around the ground floor, and a large worktable big enough to seat six was situated opposite the spiral staircase. The center of the ceiling towered skyward all the way to an eagle's nest nook at the very top of the highest bookshelves. A skylight featured an intricate stained-glass design that she couldn't quite make out. The library was a stunning architectural achievement, to be sure. But that wasn't what had Evelyn frozen to the spot.

Every single book had shine. The space was brilliant with it. Some light, some dark, some blended or peeking out from behind deceptions. The intensity of that much shine in one place tightened her chest, making it hard for her to breathe. Her head started to spin as the familiar scent of books filled her lungs. So much shine. It was overwhelming. A part of her—a pretty damn big part, if she was honest—wanted to leave. Just call it a loss and run. This wasn't some random collector who happened to have a book with shine and was utterly clueless about the magical item in his possession. No. Every single book in the entire library—there had to be literal thousands—was magical. This was no coincidence. No accident.

Whoever owned this house was a different kind of collector, and they would absolutely notice the substitute she'd brought with her. No matter how much effort she'd put into making it look right, it wouldn't feel right to anyone who could sense magic. And whoever curated this collection—whether it was the owner or someone who worked for them—would feel it immediately. There was no win scenario left for her. She needed to leave. Now.

But she couldn't.

Her legs weren't responding to her instructions. She struggled, even reaching down and trying to physically force her feet to take even a single step. Panic tightened her throat.

It's like my boots are melded to the floor.

"Not exactly right, but not exactly wrong either." The woman's voice came from everywhere and nowhere. Evelyn whipped her head around, trying to identify the source. "You can stop struggling. It won't work."

Evelyn looked down at her boots and saw it. Faint tendrils of dark shine curled up around the thick rubber soles like so much smoke. She'd stepped in a trap.

"Yes, but do not blame yourself. The entire house is a trap." The voice was reading her mind. Evelyn flung up internal defenses, whispering words and tapping her fingers, blessings and curses twining together to form barriers in her mind, crafting a labyrinthine maze to protect her thoughts from intruders.

"Clever little witch." A woman, almost impossibly tall, built of sharp angles and straight lines, appeared at the top of the spiral staircase. Her hair was pure white and hung smooth and straight past her waist. Her skin was so pale it appeared translucent, dark veins visible even from this distance. As she drew closer, her skin took on a waxen appearance, making it impossible to guess her age. She could just as easily be twenty or two hundred. Her irises were entirely black with no visible pupil.

She paused at the bottom of the stairs but her dress—a long, flowing gown of gossamer gray—kept moving, giving the illusion of being underwater. Evelyn fought for a steady breath and continued to build the labyrinth in her mind.

The woman stretched out one long-fingered hand to drag a dangerously sharp fingernail down Evelyn's cheek. When had she gotten so close?

"You are precisely what I expected, and that is the finest compliment I have granted anyone in many years." So not young then. Evelyn grit her teeth, determined to keep her mind free. "You can relax your efforts, witchling. I will respect your privacy."

“Who are you?” She forced out the words, keeping them clear as crystal in her mind to avoid anything else slipping out. The woman kept her hand on Evelyn’s face.

“I am the owner of this house.”

“What do you want?”

She bared her teeth in what might have been a smile. “What an odd question considering you are the one trespassing here.” Her expression hardened. “But I do not have to ask you what you want. This is what you’re looking for, is it not?” She tilted her head toward the nearby table. A small book sat on its surface. The book.

The tip of the woman’s nail pressed harder against Evelyn’s skin, piercing the surface. A bead of blood trailed a warm path down her cheek, and she watched the woman bring her bloodied nail to her mouth and let a single drop fall onto her tongue.

That was more than enough to convince Evelyn that leaving was now all she wanted, all she would ever want. She slid her fingers into her zippered pocket and grabbed a pinch of black obsidian powder. The woman had her head tilted back, her eyes closed as she savored the taste of blood. Evelyn sprinkled the black powder on the trap at her feet. The shine faded as the trap disengaged.

She dipped her hand back into her pocket, grabbing a small handful this time. As the woman lowered her head and opened her eyes to focus on her once again, Evelyn drove her obsidian-coated palm into the woman’s chest.

“I in malam crucem!”

The woman hissed and staggered back, a black handprint singed into her pale flesh. Evelyn fled from the library to the sound of a banshee screech echoing off the walls.

She wanted to read it.

Frankly, she always wanted to. It was one of the great disciplines of her life that she didn't always have time to read the books she (cough) acquired (cough) for her clients. But just the one touch as she'd swiped it from the table on her way out had told her this was a special book. Sweet. Wholesome. What the fuck did Denmark want with such an item? It was magical, sure, but the dark and dreadful ones sold the best on the black market. The nasty ones made from human skin and written in blood were the most prized when it came to private collections. But this tiny happy little thing?

The temptation tugged at her, pulling her mind toward the iron buckles on the bag slung across her body. Maybe just a peek.

Halfway to Denmark's estate, Evelyn eased her bike into a side alley and pulled the book from its hiding place. This wasn't a good idea. The whole point of the iron and the words was to disguise the shine so she wouldn't get sniffed out. Followed. Bringing it out in the open was downright stupid. And yet here she was cradling it in her arms like a newborn babe. She stroked the cover longingly, then allowed herself the treat of peeling open the front cover ever so carefully.

A burst of shine so black and violent that she nearly lost consciousness scraped its nails across her brain.

Deception.

Evelyn gathered all the strength she had left and shoved the book back into her bag, slamming the iron buckles into place and using stronger words this time. Twice. Thrice. It all made sense now. Why Denmark's trade book hadn't been a good match. Why he was willing to pay triple. The replacement didn't matter because he knew about the collection. And he readily offered to pay a premium because he was

sending her into a viper's nest. It had been a suicide mission. On the off chance she managed to succeed? Triple her rate was pocket change compared to what something like this was worth.

It was the darkest book she'd ever seen. No one should own a book like this. It should never have been made. It shouldn't exist anywhere, but definitely not in the hands of someone like Denmark or whoever he might sell it to on the black market. Anyone with enough wealth to acquire this book would have access to someone who knew how to use it. Evelyn groaned. She couldn't deliver it. Not tonight. She needed time to think. To make a plan. To definitely not touch the book again even though she very much wanted to. She pulled out her phone and called Valen.

“Hey, it's me. Tell Denmark I'm not going to make the delivery tonight. The sniffers picked up the scent, and I can't get around them. Tell him I said, ‘WHAT THE FUCK,’ and I'll bring it by tomorrow as soon as it's safe. Yeah, I'm okay. Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

A long low howl alerted her to danger, and Evelyn sped out of the alley, cursing her own foolishness for listening to the shine when she fucking knew better.

This wasn't her first deception.

“ S hit, shit, shit, shit, shit.”

Evelyn took her bag with both books inside straight to her library and closed the door. From the closet, she pulled out an iron box covered in ancient inscriptions. She had only managed to translate roughly a third of them so far—the writing being even more dead than your standard, white bread dead languages—but that was enough to convince her this was her best bet at buying herself at least a few hours. She placed her entire bag in the box and sealed it shut, whispering an incantation her great-grandmother taught her.

“Place your hands on it like this, little duck,” her great-grandmother had said, demonstrating with a small wooden box they’d found at the nearby dollar store. One of the hinges was loose and the front latch didn’t hold, but young Evelyn didn’t care. It was her very own treasure box. Her great-grandmother continued, “Now repeat after me.” The words had been little more than magical nonsense to six-year-old Evelyn, but she’d never forgotten them or how safe she’d felt with her great-grandmother there to guide her.

If only she were here now.

Once the dangerous book was safely sealed behind her great-grandmother’s generational incantation, she collapsed on the floor, hands covering her face. Her heart pounded in her chest as she replayed the night’s events in her head. The weird house, the weirder woman, the sickly sweet pull of the deception followed by the blast of pure darkness. What had she done? Sure, handing this over to Denmark

would be like giving Elon Musk his own personal nuclear bomb. But she, Evelyn Wight, didn't want to have her own nuke, either. Especially one she had no idea how to defuse.

“Shit, shit, shit .”

She was going to die. That was clear. She wouldn't go down willingly, obviously, but there was no coming back from this. She'd stolen seriously dangerous shine from a maybe-vampire and then failed to deliver it to her extremely wealthy client. If the scary blood-taster didn't find her, Denmark would. She could only hope Valen had relayed her message effectively enough to buy her some grace. The fact that she wasn't currently being thrown into the not-just-for-sex dungeon Denmark was guaranteed to have somewhere on his estate was a good sign, right?

Quiet mews sounded at the door, followed by several small paws reaching through the narrow gap above the floorboards. They were hungry. Evelyn looked at her hands. She saw no trace of the dark shine on her skin or on anything she'd touched, but that didn't mean it wasn't there. Not with deception at play. She forced herself back to her feet. She could indulge in more panic and self-sabotage later. For now, she needed to cleanse herself the best she could and feed the sisters.

Evelyn took a hot shower, scrubbing her hands and body with black salt and sulfur until her skin took on the pale gray pallor and eggish odor of a hell-dweller. When she was done, three black furry faces stared at her, their whiskers twitching as they sniffed the air in what she could only assume was judgment and disdain.

“Don't look at me like that, Morta. I'd like to see you handle dark shine like that and not try to scrub it out of your soul.” She went through the familiar routine of feeding them, chatting at them to try to stay calm. Despite the layers of wards and blessings she'd applied on top of Madame Leveaux's already impressive security system, she jumped at every small sound outside. One of the sisters finished first and wandered

over to weave around Evelyn's legs, purring her thanks.

"You know, Decima, I think I'm going to take up weaponry. Every girl needs a hobby, and the practical applications are undeniable." Decima mewed in response. "I knew you'd agree. We always see eye-to-eye on matters of violence, you and I." She bent down and scooped the reluctant feline into her arms, resting her chin on Decima's soft head. "I think I have a ritual knife around here somewhere. Let's find it."

Once the sisters had finished their meal and Evelyn had forced herself to eat an old protein bar she'd found in the back of one of the kitchen cabinets, she locked herself in the library once more. She had no idea whether cats could be impacted by dark shine and now wasn't the time to find out. She set the ritual knife on the rug beside her, the exposed blade wickedly sharp while the garnets set in the handle glinted in the light. She had half a plan. It might be a bad plan, but at least it half existed.

She couldn't give Denmark the book, that was decided. She still didn't know what she could do with it—that was the missing half of the plan—but keeping it out of anyone else's hands was enough of a challenge for now. She had the trade book that she had procured herself. Denmark didn't know it existed, and other than being totally shineless, it looked a hell of a lot like the real one. She needed to find a way to infuse it with enough magic to pass whatever preliminary tests Denmark would put it through, then convince him to lock it up for safekeeping. It should be an easy sell—she was genuinely scared of the damn thing. No acting skills required.

There was just one problem with the half plan: turning a mundane object into a magical one was way above her witch-grade. It generally required a great deal of power, years of focused practice, and a degree of sacrifice that was distasteful at best and downright barbaric at worst.

Evelyn dug through her collection, searching for any volumes that might help her. It

didn't have to be dark shine. She could try mimicking the whimsical brightness she'd felt at first. Denmark was unlikely to sense the deception himself, and unless the Lybbestre were in town, he'd find it difficult to locate a local witch willing to test it for him. A chill ran down her spine at the mere thought of the ancient coven of witches that called New Orleans home. The Lybbestre were a closed society, their existence only known to those who either really knew their witch history or had crossed paths with one of the Lybbestre and lived to tell anyone about it. The latter was a rare occurrence. Loose-lipped witnesses tended to disappear. Evelyn had made a point of staying off their radar, and she planned to keep it that way.

The rest of the night passed quickly, and soon dawn was warming the window, filling the room with pale light. Evelyn scrubbed her hands over her face. The half plan was, thus far, a full failure. Her phone buzzed. Voicemail number twenty-seven from Denmark. She was running out of time. Creating a magical item wasn't something she was going to master in one night. She needed help, and she was going to have to take the book with her to go find it.

“FUCK!”

A daytime excursion was normally safer than night, but with shine this powerful, Evelyn was unsure what rules still applied. She would have to just keep moving and try to stay ahead of anyone that picked up her trail.

She waited until the very last minute to take her bag out of the iron box. Her hands shook as she released the locks and opened the lid. To the naked eye, her bag looked the same as it always did—plain green canvas, soft with use. But she knew what it contained. Picking it up felt like snake handling, and she was no faith healer. A few seconds of stern self-talk later, she was once again wearing the bag slung across her chest and headed out the door.

The French Quarter was an entirely different place during the day. The jazz clubs and

bars were closed, the streets quiet except for a few tourists with their faces buried in their ghost tour brochures seeking out haunted breakfast options. The colorful buildings with their cast-iron balconies showed their age in the morning sun. Trash from last night's festivities littered the sidewalks and gutters.

Evelyn nudged the kickstand down with her foot, then left Marge parked in front of Granny Lucy's store.

Although she only opened her shop after dark on the new moon each month, Granny Lucy also maintained normal business hours most mornings, selling basic supplies to friends and witchy nonsense to strangers. Evelyn frowned when she found the door locked, the sign still turned to "Closed." Up on her tiptoes, she tried to peer into the shadowy interior.

"She's not here."

Evelyn jumped at the voice, her hand going instinctively to the bag on her hip. She nodded at Lady Plumeria, resident psychic and self-proclaimed medium to the stars. Which stars, she always declined to disclose, citing strict confidentiality agreements that transcended life itself.

"Sure looks that way. I thought she was normally open at this time." Evelyn tried to look relaxed. Chill.

Lady Plumeria waved one ring-laden hand dismissively. "So she does. But have you considered that perhaps today, my dear, is not normal? Therefore, how could she be keeping normal hours?"

Evelyn fought the urge to roll her eyes. She really didn't have time for this. "Have you seen her this morning?"

Lady Plumeria didn't respond right away. Instead, she stared at a point roughly six inches above Evelyn's head, her eyes glazed over. She hummed softly. Evelyn shifted from one foot to the other, impatient. If she couldn't talk to Granny Lucy, then she'd have to find someone else to help her. This was clearly a waste of time. Evelyn took a step toward her bike, but Lady Plumeria lunged forward and grasped her forearm roughly, long nails biting into Evelyn's skin.

"She's gone dark, and she won't be returning for some time. An emissary was snooping around just after dawn, but she was already gone."

"An emissary?" Evelyn tried to free her arm from the older woman's grasp.

"From the you-know-who. Sneaking around like a common criminal. But she didn't find anything, did she? No. And neither will you."

A cold chill ran down Evelyn's spine at the suggestion that a member of the Lybbestre was looking for Granny Lucy. What could they possibly want with her? She'd never had contact with them before—at least not that Evelyn was aware of.

"What was she looking for? The emissary."

Lady Plumeria waved her hand again. "You ask the wrong questions."

Evelyn sighed. Getting anything of value out of Lady Plumeria would require patience and probably some kind of high-level interrogation technique that she simply didn't possess. "What are the right questions?"

It was Lady Plumeria's turn to look annoyed. "I cannot tell you. That is for you to determine. What do you most need to know right now? Perhaps the spirits will bless us with the answer."

Evelyn hesitated. The last thing she wanted was to reveal too much about her current circumstances, but without access to Granny Lucy, her options were limited. Hopefully it would be worth the calculated risk.

“I’m looking for someone who can enchant an item for me.”

Lady Plumeria’s eyes glazed over again. This time she was staring at Evelyn’s right kneecap. “There are many purveyors of magical items in this street alone.”

“I don’t need a purveyor. I need an enchanter.”

Lady Plumeria’s body language shifted, her stance becoming softer, almost sultry. When she spoke, her voice sounded feminine and breathy, the accent stronger with an old New Orleans flair. “An enchanter, you say? My, my. What have you gotten yourself into, sha ? Dangerous business, enchantments.”

“I know. I wouldn’t be looking if it wasn’t important. I’m...” Evelyn cleared her throat. “I’m trying to keep people safe, but I can’t do that without an enchanter.”

Lady Plumeria stepped closer until Evelyn could smell her flowery and slightly fruity perfume. She wondered if that’s what plumerias smelled like. Evelyn wouldn’t put it past the eccentric to wear her namesake as a signature scent.

“Ah, I understand, mon ami . You wish to protect those who cannot protect themselves. And from such a danger as I have never felt before! Yes, yes—we can help you. The one you are seeking is Dominique Gareau. He lives in the Garden District. Plummy will give you the address. Just be sure to take him a snack. He’ll be hungry this early in the day.”

Lady Plumeria stepped back abruptly, her eyes returned to their normal brown. When she spoke, she sounded like herself again. “Well, then. Let me get you that address.”

She pulled out her phone and began scrolling through her contacts.

“Plummy?”

Lady Plumeria sneered without taking her eyes off the task at hand. “A grotesque familiarity, no? Aurélie has fine manners, but she often chooses not to use them. Ah, here we are.” She handed the phone to Evelyn, who quickly sent the contact information to her own device and handed it back.

“Thank you for your help. If you see Granny Lucy, will you let her know I was looking for her? I’d like to know she’s alright.”

Already turning away, Lady Plumeria spoke over her shoulder at Evelyn. “I won’t be seeing her. She’s gone dark, as I said. If you’re meant to see her again, you will. Oh, and good luck with Dominique. You’ll need it.”

The drive to the Garden District took only a few minutes, and before she knew it Evelyn was standing in front of the most tired house she'd seen in a while. Similar in architectural design to the other homes in the neighborhood, this one still stood out for its faded facade and pale trelliswork. It was as though the sun had bleached the life out of the paint, the wood, even the cast-iron designs framing the second-floor gallery. The street was quiet.

Evelyn stepped up onto the porch and rang the doorbell, listening as it echoed inside the home, followed by soft footfalls just out of sight. She peered through the small square window in the front door to see a tall, lean man with light brown skin and striking gold-green hazel eyes appear in the shadows on the other side of the glass.

“What you want, then?” he asked.

“Are you Dominique?”

He didn't respond.

She hesitated, then said, “Aurélie sent me. She said you might be able to help me.”

His strange eyes flicked to the street behind her, then back to her face. “Door's unlocked.”

Evelyn opened the front door and stepped across the threshold into the darkened house. The man she assumed was Dominique had stepped deeper in the shadows as

she opened the door and stayed there until she closed it behind her. He wore house slippers and what her great-grandmother would have called a smoking jacket and not much else that she could see, making it really just an uncomfortably short robe in this situation. Uncomfortable for her, that is. The house smelled like stale incense and cigarette ashes. His eyes caught the light, looking almost as though they were lit from within, and she suddenly remembered what Aurélie had said—he'd be hungry this early in the day. Shit. Evelyn's pulse throbbed in her neck, and she moved to leave, but his eyes were suddenly very close to her face.

In a blink, she found herself back outside facing the street to the sound of the front door closing behind her with a click. Her blood rushed in her ears. She stumbled forward to brace herself with one hand against the porch pillar, her knees weak and untrustworthy. A vague ache in her wrist revealed two small puncture wounds near the vein. She was holding the trade book, its cover now brilliant with shine. Panic tightened her chest as she opened her bag still slung against her hip, but the dark book remained in place with no indication of tampering. What had just happened? Evelyn stepped down off the porch and turned around to search the front of the house for any signs of the owner, but there were no gold-green eyes peering through the window or peeking behind the curtains. Nothing.

She checked her wrist again just in time to see the puncture wounds fade to pink dots before disappearing completely. A painful pressure like a tension headache throbbed at the back of her skull. Shit. Her phone buzzed in her pocket. Denmark again. Double shit. She had to go before she lost any more of Denmark's good graces. She needed him to believe her without too much hassle. Whatever had just happened would have to wait. She had acquired what she needed inside that house, but everything comes at a price. She only wished she could remember exactly how high a price she'd paid.

She took the ride to Denmark's estate slowly, the pain in her head making her cautious. Valen met her at the edge of the property.

“Hey,” she greeted him as she dismounted, then set her helmet on the seat of her bike.
“How bad is it?”

“Bad.” Valen’s eyes searched her face, his own expression even more inscrutable than usual. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Things got a little hairy last night, but the streets were calmer today. No sniffers.”

“Good.” He paused. “I’ll walk you up.”

Evelyn followed behind him, trying desperately to think of something witty to say, anything to give the appearance of normalcy, but she came up empty. All she could think about was the hand-off and convincing Denmark that everything was fine. She just needed to stick to her story: she’d been chased by sniffers and barely made it home, slept for a few hours and came straight here. Keep it simple.

Denmark stood by the far window when they entered. Valen ushered her in, closing the door behind them. She was glad he stayed.

“Evelyn.” Denmark spoke without turning, his back rigid. “Do you have it?”

Show time.

“I do. Though it would have been nice to know about the freaky lady living in the house you sent me to. I barely made it out.”

Beside her, Valen made a low sound in his throat, almost like a growl.

“Surely you knew it would be a challenge when I offered you triple your normal rate. That should have come as no surprise.” His tone was icy.

“Difficult, sure? Actually equipped with magical booby-traps and also presently occupied ? I should charge you ten times that fee and make you beg next time you want to hire me for a job.”

Denmark turned at that statement and laughed. Evelyn relaxed slightly. He seemed to be buying it.

“There she is. I was worried you’d be changed by the experience, but it would seem not.”

“No, but this one has a powerful magic, strongest I’ve ever felt, with what feels like some darkness lurking underneath. Do you have a box?”

He closed the gap between them, his excitement erasing at least twenty years from his tired knees. “Of course. Here.” He lifted a wood and glass box, about one foot wide and two feet tall, onto his desk. The glass was thick and yellowed, spotted here and there by a bubble. The wood looked old but strong, no signs of the damp sponginess that would allow the magic to seep around the edges and escape the case.

“Blessed or cursed?” Evelyn asked, as she began undoing the iron buckles on her satchel.

“Both,” he said, almost gleefully, “and lined with both iron and lead, as you’ve suggested before.”

Evelyn nodded. That should do it, depending on how strong the blesser and the curser were. Stronger still if they were the same person, but dual wielders had always been rare and had grown rarer still over time.

“Verified?” She was stalling, and she knew it. She had one chance at this. If Denmark realized she was presenting him with a dummy book, it was all over.

“Thrice, including by one of the vestments of the Lybbestre.”

She almost dropped it at the mention of the Lybbestre for the second time that morning. “You should be careful.” The gleam in his eye suggested he wouldn’t follow her advice. “That’s not a name to invoke lightly.”

“Ah, but I am amongst friends, am I not?”

She just nodded, not trusting her tongue with that word still hanging in the air, floating on his spent breath. She slipped on a pair of thin gloves, then gingerly pulled the trade book from its hiding place. She felt the fresh magic pulse at her touch, even through the gloves. The shine appeared strong. If not for the lack of deception, she might’ve thought she’d grabbed the wrong book.

Valen made that sound again.

She set the book gently on the small stand within the case, then closed the door while making a show of uttering words under her breath, as though adding her own insurance to what was already built in. It might not help. It might.

“Excellent. I knew you could do it. I never doubted you. Ask anyone.” Denmark’s face showed a mix of glee and something maniacal just beneath the surface. People didn’t come with magical deceptions the way objects did. Good thing, too. If she’d had any lingering doubts about whether the risk she was taking was worth it, Denmark’s expression put them completely to rest. He wasn’t a man to be trusted, she’d known that from the beginning of their arrangement, but watching him when he thought he’d acquired an object of devastating evil was chilling, nonetheless.

“I appreciate the vote of confidence,” Evelyn managed, fighting for civility. The worst of it was over. She just needed to extricate herself. “Once I have my fee, I’ll be on my way.” Valen stepped closer to her until she could feel his warmth just inches

from her back.

Something she couldn't quite read flashed across Denmark's face. Greed, maybe. "Of course, my fault entirely." He went back over to his desk and used a small key to unlock one of the large side drawers. He pulled out an envelope, thick with cash. "Here you go. Worth every penny, as always."

Evelyn took the envelope and left, closing the door to the study behind her. She stood still in the hallway. She'd done it. She'd really done it. It was likely he'd discover her trick at some point, but for now she was in the clear. Now all she had to do was figure out what to do with the real book. She fought the urge to jog down the stairs, reminding herself that Denmark likely had cameras everywhere, and even if Valen was the only one who watched the footage, she didn't want to invite speculation by behaving too far out of character.

The warm night air felt like a caress after the tense coldness inside the estate, but her relief was short-lived as a low howl sounded somewhere nearby, followed by another and another. Sniffers. They'd surrounded the estate by the sound of it. They would stay outside the property line—Valen had seen to that—but the moment she stepped outside that boundary, she was fair game. Fortunately, she'd parked Marge on Denmark's front lawn. Sniffers were primarily young wolves or jackals with questionable control when shifted. It meant they were fairly dumb but fast and stupid strong. She wouldn't be able to outrun them. She was going to have to piss a whole lot of people off instead.

Evelyn walked Marge over to the western property line where Denmark's yard connected with his closest neighbor's. Not everyone in New Orleans had wards or blessings in place to protect their homes, but a lot of people had sacred objects or juju totems that did the same thing—whether they realized it or not. Evelyn knew of at least two kitschy shops in the area that specialized in selling land blessings in the shape of the ever-popular fleur-de-lis. She was banking on enough houses between

Denmark's estate and her apartment having protections of some kind to help her outpace the sniffers. Land blessings wouldn't block your friendly neighborhood wolf from stopping by with a casserole when your husband left you, but they'd burn the hide off an adolescent wolf high on shine lust.

Evelyn put on her helmet, made sure her bag was safely tucked against her body, then hit Marge's start button. The engine roared to life, and she took off straight across the neighbor's yard.

Evelyn braced for impact as she rode up and over a short set of steps to squeeze between two houses. They were situated so close together that she had to keep her knees pinched close to Marge to avoid knocking them against the walls on either side. Yips and howls sounded behind her. These houses weren't blessed.

"Fuck." Glimpsing shine two houses down on the left, Evelyn took a sharp turn and sped through the protected property and into the next neighborhood. She focused on moving from blessed plot to blessed plot, ignored the deep tracks her tires were cutting into front lawns and back gardens. If the sniffers caught her, she was done for. Not only would they tear her apart to get to the book, but the last thing she needed was someone like Eduardo getting their paws on the book. That might be worse than turning it over to Denmark.

She'd managed to keep some distance between her and her pursuers, but it was only a matter of time before they caught up or managed to cut her off. It wasn't much further now—maybe three blocks before she'd hit the edge of Madame Leveaux's property. A low howl off to the left sent her careening to the right, cutting through an abandoned parking lot that split one neighborhood from the other.

Almost there.

She was less than a block from home when a large wolf lunged out of the bushes just

as she crossed out of a protected lawn and knocked her off her bike. Marge skidded away several feet before stopping. Evelyn landed hard on her side. Her black denim jacket took the worst of the road rash, but the rough asphalt ripped a hole in the knee of her jeans, shredding fabric and flesh at once. Initially stunned, she scrambled to her feet and grabbed for her bag that had landed nearby. The wolf howled and lunged for her again. Evelyn raised her arm to defend herself against the attack, but it never came. Another creature, this one much larger and with darker fur, hurled itself into the wolf, knocking it away from her.

She didn't wait to see what happened next. She slung her bag back across her body and yanked Marge upright, starting the engine and swinging her leg over the seat at once. She sped off down the street to sounds of a snarling, yowling fight behind her and didn't stop until she reached the safety of Madame Leveaux's secured property line.

The book was safely encased in the iron box once again.

Evelyn sat beside it on the floor, one arm draped over the top of it, her back against the wall. She took several slow breaths in an attempt to calm herself down. Her headache, briefly forgotten, returned with a vengeance. She needed food. And sleep. She leaned her head against the wall behind her and closed her eyes. She'd made it home. Denmark had believed her. The sniffers hadn't caught her. She was safe. Her eyes were heavy with lack of rest and fading adrenaline. She counted three deep breaths.

A knock at the door woke her from a dead sleep. She squinted in the bright light streaming through the window. Stifling a groan as she stood up, her body stiff and sore from her fall combined with sleeping propped against the wall. After shoving the iron box back in the closet to hide it, she pulled the ritual knife out of her bag and stepped quietly toward the door. The sisters mewed sleepily at her from their snuggle pile on the living room couch. She didn't have guests—she was opposed to it on

principle. There was no good reason for anyone to be at her door. Ever.

The peephole revealed Valen standing carefully on the landing outside her door as though he thought the whole thing might collapse under his weight. It was a reasonable fear. Why was he here? Had Denmark sent him?

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“Good morning to you, too. Can I come in?”

She unlocked the deadbolts, taking her sweet time to delay the fact that she was bringing a stranger—potentially an enemy—into her home. Her safe place. Her sanctuary. Her library . But if she refused him, it would look suspicious.

Evelyn opened the door, keeping the ritual knife hidden behind her back.

“Do you need an invitation?” she asked when he stopped just shy of the threshold.

“Not a vamp, but my mama did raise me with some manners.”

She nodded. “Come in. Consider yourself invited but under duress given the fact that you woke me up. Does that still count for the whole manners thing?”

“It’ll have to do.” His grin was lopsided, and she hated that she liked that. She needed to keep her guard up. Valen closed the door behind him and relocked the deadbolts before stepping aside so she should replace the wards.

“Nice place you have here.” A common compliment, but he spoke with such sincerity that she believed him.

“Thanks, it’s... mine.” Duh, Evelyn. It’s your apartment.

But he nodded as though he understood. The place was hers, only hers, and in a life that had seen very few things be hers, just hers, that really mattered. And it was a big part of why she'd never invited anyone back here. Not dates, not friends, and definitely absolutely not family. And now he was here.

“What are you doing here, Valen? Did Denmark send you?”

“No one sent me.” She wanted to believe him. “I came to make sure you were okay. I heard sniffers right after you left.”

Evelyn rubbed the back of her neck, the headache from last night yet another unwelcome guest. “It got pretty intense on the way home, but I made it back okay.” She held her arms out as though to demonstrate. “Safe and sound, see?”

“Good. The wards on this property are solid. Could be improved, but some of the best I’ve seen outside my own work.” Typical Valen, so humble. “You had the book here for almost a full day. That could easily have drawn attention without you being aware of it. You mind if I take a look around, make sure your place is still secure?”

“Go ahead. I’m going to make coffee.” She busied herself in the kitchen, keenly aware of every move he made in the small space, now even smaller for having someone so large taking up room.

Starting at the front door, he moved methodically along each wall, checking for she didn’t know what. He tugged on the windows, the sills long painted and swollen shut by careless handymen and the wet Louisiana air. He knocked on the glass, once and twice but never three times.

Curious but not concerned, the three furry sisters stretched lazily and untangled themselves to inspect the stranger. Decima, the more forward of the three, approached him confidently, her tail curled up in a question mark of friendliness.

There was nothing lopsided about his grin this time. “You have cats!” He dropped to his knees and held out one thick knuckle for Decima to sniff. She did so, daintily, then immediately bumped her head against his hand, inviting pets. Encouraged by their sister’s success, the other two approached more cautiously and from an angle, watching for any signs of danger. Once they got close enough to sniff him themselves, they both followed Decima’s example and bumped their heads under his outstretched palms before wrapping their soft little bodies around his legs and forearms—whatever they could reach.

She could hear their purrs all the way from the kitchen, the traitors.

“They’re beautiful,” he said, and she swore their purring went up a notch.

“Thanks. They’re adopted.”

He chuckled as he got back to his feet and continued his path around her apartment, this time with three feline helpers trailing along behind him. Once he’d cleared the kitchen, he moved down the hallway to her bedroom and bathroom. When he came to the library door, he stopped, looking back over his shoulder to where she was standing in the kitchen doorway watching him.

“Go on,” she said. “It’s just my reading room. Nothing exciting in there either.”

He eased the door open slowly, letting out a whistle of appreciation at the sight of all the books. “This is an impressive collection.”

She followed him in, uncomfortable being so close to him but more uncomfortable leaving him near the shine without supervision. His comment made her scoff. “You work for Denmark. We both know this is nothing compared to collections like his.”

“Eh, maybe not in number. But he just buys stuff because he can. You’ve kept all

these because they hold significance for you. It's different."

It was, but she wasn't about to agree with him out loud. She held her breath when he approached the window seat, but he followed the same routine he'd done with the other windows, tugging to see if it would open, checking the locks, knocking twice but never thrice. He braced himself with a hand against the shelves to the side of the window, but a book gave way, throwing him off-balance, and he caught himself with his other hand on the seat itself and froze.

She still wasn't breathing. He stayed like that, frozen in place for several seconds. Or hours. She couldn't be sure. Then he straightened, turning to face her as though nothing had happened.

"Everything seems secure. I can tell you keep this place carefully protected. That's good. You never know what might follow you home from one of your jobs."

"You're telling me." She moved out of the way to let him leave the room, not wanting him in the library alone even for a second. She was breathing again, thankfully, but the way her heart was pounding in her chest in tempo with her headache was very distracting. Why had he hesitated at the bench? He hadn't seemed to notice anything unusual until he put his hand on the wood of the seat—could he sense the magic? Surely not. Denmark loved to brag about how Valen—a mundane human with no magical abilities—could keep the estate safe from both sniffers and magic wielders. She was just being paranoid.

She found him sitting on the rug in the living room, all three cats vying for space on his lap. They'd really taken a liking to him, the bastards. She poured herself a cup of coffee. She needed the reinforcement for her nerves before she could interrogate him properly.

She stood in the kitchen and watched him pet and cuddle and coo at her cats while

she sipped the hot brew. He seemed so relaxed in her space, yet she was one giant ball of tension at the forced proximity of the situation.

“Tell me why,” she said, without thought.

He didn’t look up. “Why, what?”

“Why you’re really here. I’ve done plenty of jobs for Denmark before this one. All of them dangerous. You’ve never so much as texted me the next day to make sure I was okay. Now you’ve escalated to a house call. Why?”

“I was worried.” His voice was soft, softer than she’d ever heard it. He was usually more of a grunt and growl kind of guy.

“Why?”

“I was afraid you were going to do something stupid.” He still wasn’t looking at her, but his hands had grown still, much to the consternation of her love-hungry cats.

“Like what?”

“Like keep the real book for yourself.”

The rushing sound in her ears came back, and Evelyn steadied herself with one hand on the back of the nearby kitchen chair. Valen had resumed petting the sisters who were happily rubbing their furry little bodies all over him.

“What?” Playing dumb wasn’t really her style, but what else could she say?

He got up from the floor, his movements surprisingly graceful for a man of his size, and came to stand in front of her. His eyes bore straight into her soul, the very same soul she’d tried to scrub clean of dark shine the night before.

“I know it’s here, Evelyn.” Her name was a growl in his throat, and she shivered. “I need you to tell me why. Why did you keep it?”

Her throat felt dry when she swallowed, fear curling around her like her cats had curled around Valen just moments before. She was at a crossroads. Should she tell him her reasons? Would he understand or would he run straight back to Denmark and turn her in?

“Does Denmark know?”

“No. But he’ll figure it out eventually. You had to know that.”

“Yes,” she whispered. She returned his searching gaze, still undecided. She really didn’t want to let him in on the missing half of her plan the same way she hadn’t wanted to let him into her home, only the stakes were higher here. If she told him,

he'd know. If he knew, he would either betray her or become a target himself. Both options were tremendously undesirable.

"Tell me. Please." He took another step closer to her, not touching but near enough that she became hyper aware of the air sweeping between their bodies. His scent washed over her—he smelled like soap and skin and something else she couldn't quite place but that was warm and comforting. The weight of the last twenty-four hours sank heavily into her body. Her grip on the chair tightened. She wasn't in good shape. She was running on almost no sleep, less food, and the second half of her plan remained nonexistent. If she was going to survive this, she was going to need help. And if Valen was good at anything, it was keeping people, places, things... safe.

"I had to," she said. His expression darkened, and she pulled the chair out to sit down. He sat across from her, his eyes never leaving her face. "It's dangerous, Valen. It's the darkest object I've ever come across. I couldn't... I can't... I won't turn that over to Denmark or anyone else who might wield it for personal gain."

"That's a huge risk?—"

"I know. Trust me. But what else could I do? I have no idea what this book is or who made it—not yet—but it's bad. No one should have this book. It shouldn't exist. It's not safe."

"What are you going to do with it?"

Evelyn drained the last of her coffee. "Well, I hadn't quite made it that far."

Valen set his arms on the table, his hands flexing in contained frustration. "You don't have a plan?"

"I had half a plan, and that half went really well, thanks. It's just the other half that

I'm having difficulty with."

"Fuck." He looked like he meant it.

Evelyn offered him a wry smile. "Tell me about it."

"Shit." He took her mug and got up to pour her a fresh cup.

"Yeah." She nodded her thanks when he set it back in front of her, fighting back tears at the kind gesture. She really was only holding on by a thread. She pinched the bridge of her nose and took a deep breath. Now was not the time to lose her composure. She could fall apart later when the book was safely away from... well, everyone. "I have to get it out of the city."

She raised her eyebrows at Valen, surprised at her own statement. The revelation had caught her off guard, but it made sense. It was the only logical next step. If the people who most desperately wanted the book were here in New Orleans, then the safest place for both her and the book would be anywhere not here.

"Where will you go?"

"I'm working on that..." She wrapped her hands around the mug, focusing on the warm ceramic against her palms. "I might have a place. When I was a little girl, my great-grandmother told me stories about a convent deep in the hill country of Tennessee. All the locals stayed away because they thought it was a Catholic enclave, and the Protestant roots run deep out there. Only it wasn't Catholic nuns at all."

Valen leaned back in his chair. "It was witches."

"That's what she said. A closed coven, secluded so they could guard the old secrets. She described them like the witch equivalent of nuns—sacrificing their own worldly

desires for the greater good.”

“That sounds promising,” Valen said, running a hand over his jaw, “but it’s not a lot to go on. Are you sure you can even find the place?”

She wasn’t. Her memory was as faded as an old photograph, but she knew where she might be able to find out more information. When her great-grandmother died, all of her belongings had passed to her daughter, Evelyn’s grandmother. Later, when her grandmother also passed away, Evelyn had cleaned out her house and moved everything into a storage unit, telling herself she’d go through it someday. The memory of finding her great-grandmother’s journals and tucking them away in an old train chest was much newer than the Tennessee nuns stories and far more trustworthy. She could stop by the storage unit on her way through Mississippi to Tennessee. “I’m not sure, no, but it’s better than nothing,” she said. “It’s at least half a plan.”

Valen got up from the table. “We should leave as soon as possible. How long do you need to be ready?”

“We?”

He crossed his thick arms over his even thicker chest. “I can help you get out of the city. With something this powerful, sniffers are likely to find you even during the day. And if not sniffers, then the others.” He meant the Lybbestre, and she was grateful he didn’t speak their name in her house. “How soon can you be ready?”

“An hour.”

“Okay, I’ll be back by then. Don’t cross Leveaux’s property line until I get back.”

Evelyn mobilized as soon as he was gone. She could only take what she could comfortably carry on her bike, which wasn’t much. She threw a couple changes of

clothes and a few toiletries into a small duffel bag, then filled the rest of the space with things she would need more: black obsidian powder, a few books that might contain information that would help her stay cloaked enough to make it all the way to Tennessee without getting caught, and a small cannister of tea. She strung several amulets around her neck, filled her pockets with iron nails, and wrapped the ritual knife in a kitchen towel in lieu of a sheath. She would leave the book in the shielded box until the very last minute.

Once she was packed, she crossed the lawn to Madame Leveaux's back door and knocked. Mandie Lynn, her favorite of Madame's girls, opened the door.

"Well, hi," she said, her Southern drawl slow and catching. "How are you, Evelyn?"

"I'm okay, but I need to leave town unexpectedly, and I wondered if I could ask you look after the sisters for me?"

Mandie Lynn tilted her head to one side, her blonde curls bouncing with the movement. "Everything okay?"

"Not really, but hopefully it will be soon." Evelyn forced a smile. "I might be gone a week or two, so if that's too long, I'll see what else I can figure out."

"Oh, no need for all that. Of course, I'll look after your girls. I'm happy to do it. I just wanted to be sure you were alright, is all. Is there anything else I can do to help?"

"Not a thing but thank you. Really, thank you. I'll feel so much better knowing they're taken care of." Evelyn started to back away, then remembered one more thing. She cleared her throat. She might be a thief, but she wasn't much of a liar. "I almost forgot—if anyone comes looking for me, you can tell them I've gone to visit my dad out in California. He's getting married—again—and this one's an even bigger gold digger than the last one."

Mandie Lynn laughed lightly. “Family drama, huh? Why didn’t you say so? You can pay me back for cat sitting by sharing all the juicy details when you get back. Deal?”

“Deal.” Evelyn shook on it, Mandie Lynn’s hand soft in hers. “And thank you again. I owe you one—on top of the drama dump.”

By the time she made it back over to her apartment, Valen was there. She found him in her library pulling the iron box out of the closet.

“Sure, come right on in,” she said.

“The time for niceties has passed, Evelyn.”

“If you say so. What are you doing with that?”

“The book is in here, right?” He looked up long enough to see her nod, then returned his focus to the box. “It’s the safest place for it, but it’s too big to fit on the back of your little bike. I brought this.” He showed her a large canvas rucksack. “I can put the whole box in here until you’re safely out of the city. Once we’ve got some distance between you and whoever might want to get their hands on this thing, then you can transfer the book to your bag and go.”

Evelyn didn’t like the plan. It made sense—Valen was bigger than she was and so was his motorcycle. He could carry the box much more easily than she could. It was heavy, and she’d be worried about being pulled off balance while riding. But she really, really didn’t like the idea of the book being in anyone’s possession except her own. She briefly wondered whether that was due to an abundance of caution, a lack of trust, or the deep pull of the dark shine in the book itself.

“You’re sure you want to do this? You get caught with that thing and you’re just as deep in this shit as I am.”

“I’m sure.” His grin caught her off guard, and she almost smiled (fake ones didn’t count) for the first time in several days. “I like a little trouble.”

She was sure he did, but there was nothing little about the trouble she was in. She watched as he slid the iron box into the canvas bag and secured it, then she whispered a few extra protections over it before helping him hike it up onto his back.

They both paused to say goodbye to the girls. Morta mewed pitifully as though she knew Evelyn wouldn’t be back for a while. Evelyn scratched the base of her tail and kissed the top of her head.

“I’ll be back soon, my loves. Mandie Lynn will take good care of you. Don’t answer the door for strangers, and if anyone you don’t know comes in here, hide until they’re gone. Okay?” They mewed in what she chose to take as agreement. They would be okay, she assured herself. They had to be. They were all the family she had left.

Valen's ride was a vintage cruiser, and even standing a few feet away, Evelyn could feel the engine's deep rumbling vibrations through the soles of her boots. It was larger and louder than the sportier Marge but not nearly as nimble. She settled onto her bike and strapped on her helmet. If they got into any trouble on their way out of town, she'd need to stay aware of where he was to avoid getting separated. It was bad enough that he was carrying the box containing the book. The last thing she wanted was to lose sight of either of them.

The afternoon sun was intense. Sweat gathered at the base of her neck and trickled down her back as they left her neighborhood. The intense stress of the last twenty-four hours had been exhausting, and despite her current anxiety about getting the book out of New Orleans before they were caught... she was tired. Her arms and legs felt heavy, and the headache continued to ravage the back of her skull. Whatever had happened at Dominique's house had left her feeling utterly depleted. She needed sleep. Soon. Even her eyelids were starting to feel heavy.

Valen held out his arm to make sure she knew he was changing lanes, and she followed closely behind him, careful not to leave enough room for cars to cut in between them. At the next red light, she lifted up her visor to wipe the sweat from her face. Get out of town, then you can find yourself a big juicy steak and a nice soft bed. Her mind wandered to thoughts of air conditioning and hot showers, and she almost missed the next turn. Valen hadn't signaled, and he was speeding up. Was he trying to lose her in the traffic?

Then she heard it—howling. It was quiet, not yet directly on their trail, but it

explained why Valen had quite literally shifted gears. He must've heard them before she did. He cut to the left, and she followed. They were still miles from the city limits. He took them into City Park, staying off the interstate to use smaller roads instead. Evelyn appreciated the route—once they were on the interstate, they were basically trapped. Especially while crossing the water. The longer they could navigate via side streets, the better. A low howl turned her veins to ice. It was close. Valen tilted his head, telling her he'd heard it too. Not good.

Valen pointed off to the side emphatically, like he wanted her to veer away instead of sticking with him. Like hell she would. Another low howl, this one even closer than the last. She sped up to pull parallel with Valen.

“They’re getting closer!” She had to yell to be heard above the sound of their engines.

“I know! We should split up.”

“No!” she shouted. “We stay together!”

“Meet me at the Super 8. We’ll get on the interstate from there.”

“I said NO! No splitting up!”

The wind stole his reply, but she got the gist of it. He wasn’t happy with her refusal to separate. They crossed over a bridge, the wooden slats noisy under their tires. Valen suddenly stopped and started taking the bag off his back. Evelyn skidded to a stop beside him.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving you the damn book.” He opened the box and removed the book. He visibly shuddered, and Evelyn wondered what the extent of Valen’s magical ability actually

was. He clearly knew a lot about wards and blessings and other protective elements, but was that it? Or could he feel the evil crawling all over the book? Valen shoved it into her bag and sealed the iron buckles. He kept his hand on her bag and whispered a few words before looking into her eyes. “Be careful.”

She re-situated the bag to be more secure, then flashed him a grin she wished she felt. “Race you to the Super 8!”

Without having to pace herself to Valen and his larger bike, Evelyn felt like a horse that’d finally been given free rein. She leaned low and opened the throttle. Time to fly. Two wolves lunged out of the bushes to their right, and Valen turned to face them. “GO!”

Evelyn sped off but could see Valen fighting the wolves in her side mirror. A high-pitched howl raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

A jackal.

Though they were rarer than wolves, jackals made excellent sniffers. Like Marge, they were smaller and more compact than most of their shifter brethren—and faster. Before the wolf that knocked her off her bike the night before, the only sniffers who’d come close to running her down were jackals. More feral in their shifted form, they were known for being extremely aggressive in taking down their prey. Rumor had it their magic addictions were merely a cover for their violent tendencies. That it was blood lust, not magic lust, that drove them. Evelyn didn’t like to assume all jackals were murderous assholes, but she’d yet to meet one who wasn’t. Hazard of the job.

She needed to get out of City Park. The winding paths and dense copses of trees provided too much cover, which meant that one or more of her pursuers could get close before she realized it and catch her off guard. They would have to be more

careful in broad daylight and in more populated areas, but not here. The jackal howled again, and this time she could hear several other howls responding from different directions. They were trying to box her in. She wasn't far from the edge of the park, but to get there she had to ride past a longer stretch of trees. That was probably what they were counting on.

Evelyn dipped one hand into her pocket of black obsidian powder. On the open road, Marge was faster than these motherfuckers. She just needed to get past the trees. Flashes of golden brown fur and large ears told her there was at least one jackal trying to pace her in the trees to the right. She sped up and moved to the left lane to give herself more distance, hoping no cars or pedestrians would choose this particular path.

“C'mon, c'mon, c'mon!” There were two of them now, running together and pushing her pace. More howls sounded from up ahead. A loud crack from somewhere behind drew her attention—Valen?—and the sniffers took that opportunity to attack. Twin canines leapt from the tree line, aiming to knock her off her bike. Evelyn threw up her hand covered in black powder.

“Mihi molestus ne sis!”

The jackals yelped as their bodies slammed into an invisible wall, and they crumpled to the ground behind her as she sped away. Evelyn wiped her palm on her jeans. She was going to need more soon. Three ounces was normally enough to last her several months—her style was more stealth than direct confrontation. Or it used to be. She took a deep breath as she crossed another bridge to exit the park, leaving behind the sniffer-friendly nature for a concrete oasis.

It took her almost twenty minutes to make it to the Super 8 by Wyndham, but it was an uneventful ride. She eased off the main road into the parking lot, looking for some shade to park in. No sign of Valen. She pulled off her helmet and lifted up her hair to

let the breeze dry the sweat at the back of her neck. She couldn't wait long. It was already late afternoon, and it would probably take her another twenty minutes to cross Lake Pontchartrain and reach the north shore. Hitting beach on the other side would officially mark her exit from New Orleans.

Evelyn sent Valen a text, checking on his ETA. She didn't want to be stuck in the city after dark. He knew that. What was taking him so long? She paced around her bike impatiently for several minutes until her phone buzzed.

"On my way. Head to the bridge. I'll catch up."

Like hell he would. She'd be surprised if that old cruiser could still get above 60.

"Okay. Leaving the Super 8 now."

Evelyn merged back onto I-10, keeping close enough to the posted speed limits to avoid getting pulled over but not one mile per hour slower than was necessary. Late afternoon was shifting into early evening, and the clock was ticking. The ride to the bridges was quiet. No more howls to send her pulse racing. She felt herself relaxing again, her muscles softening now that the immediate threat was over. She was tired. So tired. Her eyelids started to droop, and she shook herself. She had to stay alert.

When she reached the exit for Route 11, she started checking behind her for Valen. No sign of him. The sun was beginning to dip—she couldn't wait. Evelyn signaled, then took the exit to Maestri Bridge. She smelled the saltwater just before the blue-green waters of Lake Pontchartrain came into view. She was almost there. She smiled to herself in relief. She was going to make it. Steak dinner, soft bed, then open road all the way to Tennessee. For the first time since she got skull-fucked by the dark magic attached to the book, Evelyn thought she might actually survive this mess.

Dirt and sand pocked with sparse vegetation lined the sides of the road as she

approached the bridge. The signature rumble of Valen's motorcycle alerted her to his arrival. Finally. She turned her head to see him pull up beside her just as her body slammed into an invisible barrier. She stopped moving but her bike didn't. Marge skidded several yards ahead, coming to a stop in the middle of the lane. Cars swerved around her, horns honking and drivers cursing, but she barely registered it.

Evelyn struggled to her feet, dazed. The rushing in her ears was deafening now. Valen pulled off onto the narrow shoulder and rushed to her side.

"Marge," she managed. Valen jogged ahead to retrieve her bike. Drivers continued to honk their disapproval, prompting Evelyn to move further onto the shoulder of the highway at the edge of the bridge. Valen parked her bike next to his.

"What happened?"

Evelyn shook her head then regretted it immediately as her vision swam. "I don't know. I hit something."

He looked around. "There's nothing here."

"Oh, there's something." Evelyn walked slowly forward toward the bridge, her hand held out in front of her, until she felt it. Her palm pressed against the barrier. Once she knew where it was, Evelyn could see the subtle shimmer in the dying light. She pushed against it. It extended along the coastline as far she could see in either direction. Looking up, she squinted to see it disappear into the clouds above. It was huge. A magical barrier of this magnitude was nearly unfathomable. Panic sped up her pulse as tendrils of cold coiled in her belly.

She was trapped.

Cars and trucks continued to pass through unbothered. A thought occurred to her, and

she slipped the bag from across her body and let it fall gently to the ground. She reached for the barrier again, but this time her hand passed through it. Shit, she thought.

“Fuck,” she said. Valen had come up to stand beside her. She handed him her bag containing the book, then guided his hand to the barrier without a word. His expression darkened from confusion to fear.

“This is bad.” He dropped the pack from his back and put the book back inside the iron box, sealing it away. Then, holding the straps of the pack in one hand, he tried again to pass through the barrier. No dice. “This is very bad.”

Evelyn looked around them. The sky was darkening. As soon as it was truly night, the sniffers would be out in full force. The book, even in the iron box, would be like a beacon to them. They had to make a decision.

“This isn’t going to work,” she said. “We have to go.”

Valen nodded and strapped the box to his back once again. “Follow me. I know somewhere we’ll be safe until we can come up with a new plan.”

Evelyn gave Marge a quick once over to make sure she was still street worthy. She was scuffed to hell but otherwise intact. “Where are we going?”

Valen glanced at her over his muscular shoulder. “Home.”

Evelyn followed Valen back the way they'd come, their return trip slower due to late rush hour traffic and the never-ending road construction that plagued sections of New Orleans year-round. They passed the Super 8 where she had waited for him after getting separated in City Park. They entered the residential neighborhood of Gentilly Terrace, one of the areas that had been hit the hardest by a historic hurricane years before. Due to the destruction and the subsequent rebuilding that happened, the houses in this part of Gentilly, and in the Ninth Ward to the south, were mostly newer compared to other areas of the city. For someone who specialized in magical security, it was an interesting choice. New houses were a double-edged sword when it came to controlling access to any unwanted visitors.

Just as the sun began dipping behind the trees, Valen pulled into a driveway. The house was a modest, two-story cottage with sea-foam green bricks and four thin white pillars holding up the covered porch. Three dormer windows extended from the sloped, dark gray roof. It looked charming and peaceful. And very unlike Valen.

He drove around to the back and parked his bike in a detached garage set several yards away from the house. Evelyn followed suit, then stood back while he closed the garage door.

"Let's get you inside." He led the way across the lawn and in through the back door. Neat rows of herbs grew in raised planters on the porch, protected from the intense sun by a canvas awning that looked like a more recent addition. Evelyn recognized mugwort and narrowed her eyes. Interesting.

The inside of the cottage smelled like sandalwood and vanilla shot through with the slightly stale smell of old coffee grounds. His decorating style was a further surprise. The hardwood floors, worn leather couches, and plentiful bookshelves made the space feel lived-in, but it was clean and uncluttered—like he wasn't here much. With the demands of working for someone like Denmark, he probably wasn't. He led her through a well-appointed kitchen with dark cherry cabinets and black marble counters and up a narrow set of stairs to the second floor, which featured a short hallway with three doors. He pointed to the one on the far left.

“That's the guest bedroom. Middle door is the bathroom.” He pointed to the door on the right. “That one's me. There are clean towels in the cupboard in the bathroom. Help yourself to a shower and anything else you need. I'm going to go touch base with Denmark. I'll pick up food on my way back.”

Evelyn gripped the banister tightly at the mention of Denmark. “What will you tell him?”

“I'm not sure yet. Not the truth.” Valen rubbed the back of his neck. He was really in this with her now. Unless he turned her in to Denmark right this minute, he was in deep shit.

“Are you sure? Seems to me that turning me in is the only way you get out of this unscathed.”

His grin was lopsided and devastating. “I don't mind a little scathing now and then.” He looked tired and there were bruises on his knuckles, an abrasion above his left eye near the hairline. His bottom lip was cut, nearly split. She wondered briefly what the sniffers looked like—if they were still alive.

“That's the thing. It won't be a little anything.”

He reached out and placed one heavy hand on her shoulder. “I know. And I’m choosing to be here.”

The gesture caught her off guard, and she felt betrayed by the tears that sprang into her eyes in response. She nodded, not trusting her voice not to betray her too.

“The warding here is stronger than what I utilize at Denmark’s estate.” He dropped his hand from her shoulder, and she shivered, missing its warmth. “You’ll be safe.” He set his pack with the iron box in it on the floor at the top of the stairs. “And so will this, at least for a while. You like Vietnamese food?”

“I love Vietnamese food.”

“Good. I know a place.”

She watched him jog down the stairs, then listened to the rumble of his motorcycle as it roared to life before slowly fading into the distance.

It felt weird to be alone in his house. It felt weird to be in his house at all. She dragged his heavy pack into the guest bedroom. The room was small but cozy. Most of the space was taken up by a huge four-poster bed and a small side table. A corner bookcase and a worn floor rug tied it all together. Way better than the futon she’d been expecting.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” she muttered. She put the iron box in the closet because it just felt better to have it close but out of sight. She chose not to examine why that would be. She set the now-empty pack by Valen’s bedroom door. The temptation to sneak a peek at his private space was intense, but she resisted. For now.

Evelyn sat on the edge of the bed in the guest bedroom for an uncertain amount of time. Logically, she knew she was in a safe place, yet the danger hadn’t really passed.

The longer she remained in the city, the worse it would become. She couldn't hide out in Valen's man cave indefinitely. She raked her fingers through her mess of dark wavy hair. Her body ached from the second tumble she'd taken off her bike in as many days. Road rash down on her left leg and arm itched and burned. She still smelled vaguely of sulfur from her desperate attempt at cleansing... was that really just last night?

She felt numb. The emotions were there—she'd nearly lost her composure when Valen put his hand on her shoulder—but she couldn't access them. She was shut off from herself, and that's a very dangerous thing for a witch. There was no one to call. No one to reach out to, not with Granny Lucy gone into hiding and her great-grandmother no longer living. A deep ache cut through the numb at the thought of her great-grandmother. She would have known what to do. She knew so much, saw so much, despite—or perhaps because of—her blindness later in life. Evelyn wrapped her fingers around her great-grandmother's moonstone amulet and willed the tears to come. She needed to feel. Numb was a slippery slope. She'd learned that the hard way when her Nana died.

Evelyn forced herself off the bed. She couldn't do anything about the book right now. She had to focus on taking care of her own needs so that she'd be ready to face whatever came next. She needed a hot shower, a warm meal, and a long sleep. She would sort the rest out later.

When Evelyn emerged from the shower a half hour later, the house remained quiet and empty. No Valen. She checked her phone to see if she'd missed a text. Nada. She decided to quell the rising panic in her chest by indulging her curiosity about his home. She wrapped herself in Valen's robe and padded barefoot down the stairs. He must have turned lights on before he left because cozy lamplight chased away the darkness in the living room and more lights beckoned from the kitchen.

She made her way slowly through the room, running her hand along the buttery

leather of the sofa as she passed, trailing her fingers along the spines of the books on the shelves in the hallway that led through to the breakfast nook. A few of the books had a modest amount of shine—nothing intentional, mind you—just the sort of ordinary magic that was infused into objects that were known and loved over a lifetime or two. These were heirlooms, but whose?

There was a note on the kitchen counter.

Evelyn,

I'll be back as soon as I can. I'll only stay long enough to avoid suspicion. Denmark is wary of everyone right now, including me. I'll bring food back but help yourself to anything you can find in the meantime.

Please don't leave.

Valen

The tears threatened again. He was putting himself at risk to help her, and for what? Meanness she could handle. But kindness? It cut straight to her core.

She pulled open the fridge door to find absolutely nothing of substance. Their refrigerators could be twins. A few beers awaited their turn on the bottom shelf. Butter, a few loose cheese sticks, and a half-empty carton of milk rounded out his supplies. Evelyn took one of the cheddar sticks—snacking cheese, her great-grandmother had called it—and chose an apple from a fruit basket on the counter. She found an old-fashioned tea kettle in one of the cabinets and filled it with filtered water before setting it on the stove and turning up the heat.

Between bites of apple and nibbles of cheese, she perused the rest of his cabinets looking for tea. She had her emergency stash upstairs, but she didn't want to dip into

it yet if at all possible. She finally found an almost-but-not-quite expired box of Earl Grey. Beggars couldn't be choosers. It would have to do. Once the kettle boiled, she took her mug of tea and what was left of her apple over to the kitchen table. One thing that was still bothering her was the sheer scope of the barrier she'd run into at the bridge. She'd had no idea such a thing was even possible. To seal off an entire area like that? Did it cover the entire city? The shimmering wall had extended as far as she could see in all directions, but maybe they'd only blocked the main exit points. Whoever "they" were.

Evelyn used her phone to pull up a map of New Orleans. It might mean going well out of her way, but if she could find a lesser-known path out of town—maybe even go off road—she might be able to slip through the net, so to speak.

The deep rumble of Valen's motorcycle announced his return. She checked the time. It was nearly ten o'clock. He'd been gone for over three hours. Had it taken that long to smooth things over with Denmark?

Valen froze when he saw her, his hands full of groceries and a bulging takeout bag. His eyes darkened with a hunger that wouldn't be satisfied by pho and a few spring rolls, and heat burned low in her belly in response. She forced herself to take a sip of tea. It tasted dusty, and she choked, breaking the spell between them. He set the bags on the counter and stalked over to grab her mug of tea. He sniffed it, then grimaced.

"Don't drink this. It's gone bad."

Evelyn crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, I know that now."

He went over to the bags of groceries and dug through one of the bags, then tossed something at her. "Here."

Evelyn caught it, then examined the small tin. It was strawberry rose black tea, one of

her favorites. She looked up at him quizzically.

“I thought I recognized the label. From your kitchen.” He avoided looking at her, focusing on putting the groceries away instead. “I got some bagels and orange juice—do you like orange juice?—I’m not here much so the cupboards are pretty bare.” Once everything was put away, he brought the takeout bag over to the kitchen table and handed Evelyn a bottle of beer. “To take the edge off.”

She didn’t argue. Watching him move around the kitchen had revealed yet another side to him. He was athletic, she realized. Almost graceful. She’d been so distracted by his sheer size before that she’d never really paid attention to the way he carried himself. She’d written him off as a sort of dumb jock who grew into a glorified security guard for a pompous rich dude. She stood by that perception of Denmark, but she was unsettled by how potentially wrong she’d been about Valen. His home, his thoughtfulness in looking out for her, his quick thinking when the sniffers had attacked them in City Park—clearly she’d underestimated him.

“Thanks,” she said, realizing she’d never responded when he’d handed her the drink.

“Hungry?”

“Starving.” His eyes flicked down to the collar of his robe she was wearing, and she smiled innocently. “Oh, can I borrow your robe? I didn’t bring pajamas.”

He growled something that resembled a yes and started unpacking the food. He handed her a container of shrimp spring rolls with hoisin peanut sauce, a bowl of pho with tender slices of medium rare beef, and a wax bag of deep-fried pork wontons.

Evelyn’s stomach growled painfully, and he glanced her direction. There was no way he heard that... right?

They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes. After her second bite of the perfectly salty pork wonton, Evelyn set down her beer. Her hunger had quieted enough for her curiosity to rise. “How did it go with Denmark?”

Valen grunted around a big bite of spring roll. “He’s still convinced he has the real book, and he’s extremely paranoid that someone is going to come take it from him.”

Evelyn helped herself to another wonton. The golden triangles were filled with seasoned ground pork and shrimp. She dipped it the sweet chili sauce. “What reason did you give him for why you weren’t there today?”

Valen drained the last of his beer and got up to get another one. “I told him I was being proactive about his security, scoping out the city, making sure nothing was brewing that we didn’t know about.”

That was smart. “Did he believe you?”

He set another bottle next to her food. “I think so. After I left, I drove out to the city limits in a few places, testing for magic.”

“Testing? How?”

He reached into his pocket and set a palm-sized stone on the table with a soft clack. It looked like a chunk of clear quartz. “It glows when it comes into contact with magic. I use it to test wards and to make sure no one sneaks magical objects onto Denmark’s estate without declaring them first.”

“Can I hold it?”

He grunted again and took another bite of spring roll with a beer chaser. Evelyn picked up the raw crystal and balanced it on her palm. There was a tiny bit of shine

glimmering deep in the core. She pulled her great-grandmother's amulet out from beneath the robe and held it close to the crystal. The clear quartz flamed to life, its depths suddenly a bright red—her great-grandmother's favorite color.

“It doesn't have much of a range on it, but it works.”

Satisfied, Evelyn set it back on the table. “And what did you find? Is there a gap in the barrier?”

“Not that I could find. Every place I tested yielded the same result—a dark purple swirling color, almost black.”

“What do the colors mean?”

“No idea,” he said with a shrug. “It didn't come with instructions.”

They said goodnight a few minutes later, Evelyn retreating to the guest bedroom and Valen heading for the shower. She lay in the darkness and listened to the water running, comforted by the sounds of another person in the house. Her eyes burned with a need for sleep. It felt wrong somehow to be so comfortable when there was still so much danger all around her. When the most powerful dark shine she'd ever seen lurked in an iron prison only a few feet away.

The water stopped and was replaced by the quiet hum of an electric toothbrush. Dental hygiene, the sexiest habit. She rolled onto her side and faced the door. She'd left it cracked to let the light from the hallway seep into the room and chase some of the shadows away. The humming stopped. There was a brief silence, then the toilet flushed, followed by the bathroom door opening. The floorboards creaked beneath his weight when he stepped out into the hallway. His shadow fell across the narrow opening into the guest bedroom, and she closed her eyes, feigning sleep. He whispered a few words, ones she recognized from when she was a little girl. A sleep

blessing.

Hot tears slipped out from beneath her eyelids as his footsteps moved away. The door to his bedroom opened and closed. Finally overcome, Evelyn buried her face in the pillow and cried herself to sleep.

9

Evelyn woke up the next day like she was rising from the dead. The late afternoon sun drew lines on the wall through the blinds, and the overhead fan hummed lazily. She rolled over onto her back and stared up at it, trying to orient herself. The ache in the back of her skull had dulled and her eyes felt swollen and puffy from all the crying, but she was alive. And, at least for the time being, safe.

A large glass of water sat on the bedside table, and she drained it in long swallows as she read the note Valen had left her.

Gone to check in with Denmark and try a few more exits out of the city.

I'll be back by sundown. There's coffee and leftovers in the kitchen.

Please don't leave.

V.

Evelyn stretched and forced herself to get up. A wave of sorrow hit her—she missed the sisters. They were always there when she woke up in the morning, full of purrs and sleepy mews. She hated being away from them even for a few days.

By the time she'd showered again and washed down a couple of leftover wontons with two cups of strong black coffee, the sun was setting. She peered through the front blinds. Where was Valen?

She pulled out her phone and sent him a text.

“ I got your note. It’s past sundown. Everything okay?”

As if in response, the sound of his motorcycle pulling into the neighborhood reached her ears. Intense relief washed over her. She was used to being alone, but she had to admit it was nice to have an ally right now. He came in through the back door a few minutes later, this time carrying a large takeout bag featuring a pig wearing a crown. She couldn’t tell if he looked disappointed or relieved that she was no longer wearing his robe.

“Sorry I’m late. The line was crazy.” He set the bag on the counter and started pulling out containers. “How’d you sleep?”

She climbed onto a stool next to the counter and started peeking into the food containers. “Like the dead. I’m half surprised I woke up at all.”

He grunted his agreement. “You look more alive, if that counts for anything.”

“Thanks. Any luck finding a way out of town?”

“None. At this point, I think it’s safe to assume the entire city limits are covered. I walked a half hour along the barrier to the north, far from any road, and it just kept going. You ever try a Texas Twinkie?”

She shook her head.

“Oh, you are about to come back to life for the second time today.” He opened one of the containers and handed her something vaguely cylindrical wrapped in bacon. “That right there is a Texas Twinkie. Big ass jalapeno stuffed with smoked cream cheese and brisket then wrapped in bacon.” He watched her expectantly until she relented

and took a big bite.

Evelyn fought back a moan. The bacon was crispy and salty, the jalapeno was tooth-tender and mellowed by the cooking. The cream cheese and brisket combo was savory and indulgent. It was delicious. She wanted twelve of them.

“Well?” he prompted.

“Life changed.”

“I knew it!” He grinned and took a bite out of one, finishing half of it in one go. “You want a beer?”

“Water, please. I think I’m going to need my wits about me tonight.”

He got up to get their drinks. “Fair enough. I’ll have water too.” He set two glasses of ice water down and rejoined her at the counter. “Denmark is continuing to spiral. He is quickly turning into a mad king just at the thought of owning that book. If I wasn’t already convinced that you did the right thing in making the swap, I am now. He’s going crazy with perceived power.”

Evelyn helped herself to a couple of smoked ribs and some potato salad. Valen’s fridge might have been disappointing, but the man had excellent taste in takeout. “That’s what I was afraid of. I don’t know what kind of influence this book might have after sustained contact, either. It’s... dark.”

“That reminds me. I have something for you. I left it in my saddle bags. Be right back.” He returned a few minutes later with what looked like a leather satchel. He held it out to her. “Merry Christmas.”

Evelyn wiped her fingers on a napkin before accepting the bag. The leather was soft

and pliable but sturdy and well-oiled. Fine iron buckles sealed the top flap into place. Subtle runes and wards were carved into the leather around seams and creases. The inside smelled of incense and was lined with a fabric unlike anything Evelyn had seen before. It glowed bright with an opalescent shine, clear and true. She traced her fingers along the surface and felt goosebumps race up her arms. “What is this lining? It looks like fabric, but it feels strange.”

Valen answered her around a bite of cornbread. “No idea. All they would tell me is that it was woven from strong magic—the kind that could counter the darkest curses imaginable.”

“Where did you get it?” It was wondrous, but if he’d revealed anything about the book and whoever he’d told couldn’t be trusted, her safety meter just dipped. A lot.

“Sorry, can’t tell you that either. My supplier likes to stay anonymous. I didn’t tell them anything specific, just said Denmark was dabbling in some dark shit, and I wanted a way to transport the goods that wouldn’t trigger every sniffer in the county.”

Evelyn relaxed a little. “As far as anyone knows, that’s true.”

“Exactly.” He polished off his cornbread muffin and reached for another savory Twinkie. “I thought maybe the satchel would allow us to pass through the barrier, but I think it’s too complex for that. Your whole body was blocked by the wall when the book was in the box. This satchel is comparable to the box, but I doubt it surpasses it. I mean, maybe, but I don’t think so.”

He was right. This satchel would make carrying the book on her person a lot easier. It was clearly stronger than her existing bag and far less cumbersome than the box. But if that box with all its layers of protection hadn’t been enough to elude the sniffers or the barrier, then there was no reason to suspect that this satchel could. Their eyes met

and Evelyn said what they were both thinking.

“I can’t just stay here indefinitely.”

He looked down at his plate. “You could.”

She put her hand on his forearm where it rested on the counter. “I can’t, Valen. You’re kind to offer, but you know the book won’t be safe here forever. Eventually Denmark will figure out that he doesn’t have the right book, and the first thing he’ll do is come looking for me. He has all kinds of connections in this city, and what he doesn’t already have, he’ll buy. Then, if he makes enough noise, people with real power will come sniffing around. Maybe they already are. Think about it—who do you think has enough power to maintain a barrier around the whole of New Orleans?”

“The Lybbestre.” He whispered the name reluctantly.

Evelyn cringed. It was what she’d meant, but it felt like blaming the boogeyman when something goes bump in the night. It made sense, sure—but was it likely? The Lybbestre were the oldest and most powerful coven in the city. Maybe the world. Would they involve themselves in something as mundane as a stolen book? If it were powerful enough, they would, she thought, answering her own question.

“Yeah,” she said aloud. “And if it is them, then my window of escape is so narrow I’m sure it even exists.”

Valen gathered up the empty containers and cleared all the trash away. “Where will you go?”

Evelyn hesitated. She’d been mulling it over ever since she woke up. If she couldn’t go through, around, or over the barrier, she would go under.

“The Dark City.”

The Dark City was the name given to the second New Orleans that existed beneath the one everyone else was familiar with. Scientifically impossible and magically maintained, the underground metropolis consisted of interconnected but independent districts that were maintained by various magic users. They were reached through a series of catacombs and tunnels. Some districts were relatively safe. Others were not. Evelyn had only ever been in the antechamber. Witches of her low caliber didn't enter the Dark City. Not if they liked being alive, which she very much did.

Valen didn't respond right away. He leaned his forearms on the counter and hung his head.

“I don't expect you to go with me.”

He laughed harshly without looking up. “Oh, I'm going with you.”

“Valen, it's one step above suicide.”

“I know, and I'm going.” He clenched his fists. “I'm trying to think of something, anything else.”

“I don't think there is anything else,” she said quietly. “Believe me, I wish there were. But if there isn't a way through the barrier, then?—”

“We have to try going under.” He groaned again.

“Yeah.”

“When do you want to leave?”

“Tonight. I need to stop by my apartment—there are things I’ll need down there that I didn’t think to bring with me when I thought I was going to ride out of town scot-free.”

“That’s risky.”

“I know.” Evelyn crossed her arms over her chest, frustrated. All of this was dangerous. Every last bit of it. There were no safe choices left on the table. Her only hope now was to take the right risks. She sounded terse when she continued, “Right now, entering the Dark City without the right supplies is riskier than going home. Tomorrow, that might not be true. But tonight, it is, so I’m going. We should leave before it gets any later. The witching hour is not our friend tonight.”

She came back downstairs a few minutes later to find Valen waiting in the living room, a small duffel bag strapped across his back. He had changed into a black t-shirt and dark jeans. A tactical belt was cinched around his hips, featuring several pouches of various sizes, a large knife sheath, and a gun holster. He looked both ready to go into battle and incredibly hot. Her pulse quickened, and she scolded her body for even considering such things right now. They had much larger concerns than Valen’s undeniable sex appeal.

“You sure you don’t just want to see your cats?” His tone was tinged with an apology in the shape of humor.

“You’re damn right I want to see my cats.”

Evelyn dropped to her knees the moment she stepped through the door into her apartment. Three furry felines writhed and wiggled their sleek bodies against her, vying for her touch. She scooped them up one by one and told them how much she loved them and how sorry she was to leave them. Tears spilled down her cheeks when Nona stretched up on her tippy paws to lick the tip of Evelyn's nose. It hurt to be separated from them no matter how little choice she had in the matter.

Eventually Evelyn got to her feet and gathered the things she'd need in the Dark City. She loaded a flashlight, a bag of carved rune stones, several ancient coins, and a book of witch's riddles into her canvas bag. She also grabbed a sampling of dried herbs and the last of her black obsidian powder. Finally, she rifled through her seed collection and selected four small packets. Many residents of the Dark City never visited New Orleans, so certain above-ground items were in particular demand, including seeds for plants that could be grown in near darkness.

She bid the sisters goodbye and left before she could lose her composure again. She needed to focus on the path ahead. Survival was going to require every ounce of wit she could muster. She couldn't afford to be distracted.

Valen stood next to their bikes, arms crossed over his broad chest. He nodded at her approach.

"The sisters send their regards," she said.

"They're very unusual cats."

“All cats are unusual.”

“Yeah,” he said with a grunt, “but yours are extra unusual.”

“Sometimes I think they can read. Especially Decima.”

“I wouldn’t put it past them.”

They were stalling, and they both knew it.

Evelyn stood next to her bike and fiddled with her helmet. “Last chance, Valen. You’ve been a friend, and I’m grateful. I’d be in a lot worse shape right now without you. But that doesn’t mean you have to follow me into the darkness. I’ll be okay on my own.” She looked into his eyes, unsure whether she was trying to convince him or herself. “I know a few Dark dwellers. If I can connect with one of them, then I’ll have a guide through the catacombs. I’ll be able to avoid the worst sections.”

“And if you don’t find someone you know?”

“I’ll figure it out. I’ll have to.” She looked back down at the helmet in her hands. “I’m in this mess because of choices I’ve already made. You can still make a different choice.”

He uncrossed his arms to shove his hands in his pockets. “That book needs to be kept out of the wrong hands, no matter what. I want to help make sure that happens. If bad people get that kind of power, everyone suffers. You know that. That’s why you took it.”

“Okay,” Evelyn said, resigned to his decision. A taxi pulled up at the curb and honked. “That’s our ride.”

“We’re not taking the bikes?”

“No. There’s nowhere safe to park them long term, and we don’t know how long we’ll be gone.” They stowed their bikes in Evelyn’s shed, then climbed into the cab.

“Evening,” the cab driver said, nodding his greeting in the rearview mirror. “Where to?”

“The French Quarter, please,” Evelyn said. “Chartres street.”

Evelyn had the cabbie drop them off a couple of blocks from their true destination. They traveled the rest of the way on foot. The sky was overcast with thick clouds blocking out the moon and simultaneously reflecting the lights from nearby Bourbon Street. A warm breeze carried scents and sounds from the French Market, and Evelyn felt a tug of affection for this city she had called home for several years. She hoped this wouldn’t be the last time she walked these streets.

They walked along a stretch of ivory stone wall until they reached a set of gray double doors sealing off a paved drive. Evelyn tossed her canvas bag up and over the gate.

“Can you boost me over?”

Valen lifted her easily, and she scrambled over the top of the wooden doors. She recovered her bag and hit the lever on the inside wall to open the gates and let Valen through. Once the doors were closed behind them, she led the way through a narrow alley between a side structure and the main church building. Valen hesitated as they stepped out into the courtyard in front of the main door. Low hedges had been cut into six triangles arranged in a rectangular formation with six points almost meeting in the middle.

Evelyn walked down the narrow path in between two of the triangles and stopped at the small clearing in the center where the points converged.

“What is this place?” Valen’s voice, barely above a whisper, echoed in the courtyard.

“It used to be a convent.” Evelyn knelt in the clearing and began to draw the password on the ground. “It’s a museum now, I think, but I’m not sure. I’ve never been here during the day.” She stood and admired her work. Any language would work, but she’d chosen Latin because it was the version she felt the most confident about. Confidence was very important when knocking on a magical door. Doubt was never to be trusted. She held out her hand to Valen. “Last chance to stay behind.”

He responded by taking her hand.

“Knock knock.”

The moment the words left her mouth, the old Ursuline convent disappeared, and they found themselves standing in the antechamber. It was dimly lit by flickering torches in wall sconces every few feet. Quiet music floated on the air. It was neither hot nor cold but exquisitely neutral in temperature. A few others stood waiting, stuck in limbo until they were either kicked out or granted access to the catacombs. A shrouded figure approached them from across the room.

Evelyn released Valen’s hand and stepped in front of him. The stranger stopped a few feet away and dropped her hood to reveal hazel green eyes over high cheekbones. A spiked horseshoe septum ring highlighted her delicate aquiline nose, the gold glinting in the torchlight. She reached for Evelyn and pulled her into a hug.

“Evelyn! What are you doing back down here? I thought you said, ‘never again’ after the last time?”

“And I meant it. But there are... extenuating circumstances. Kirat, this is Valen. Valen, Kirat. She is one of the Gatekeepers.”

“Hey, nice to meet you. Gatekeepers?”

Kirat tilted her head to the side as she sized up Valen. The dark kohl around her eyes masked their expression, but Evelyn knew her well enough to tell she was more curious than suspicious. For now.

“Yes. We control access to the catacombs and tunnels that lead to the Dark City.”

“Controlled access, huh? I always thought it was more like the Wild West down here.”

Kirat smirked. “More like Westworld . Once you’re in, anything goes. But that doesn’t mean any one goes. It only takes one or two bad eggs to ruin this for everyone.”

Evelyn nodded at the others in the room. “Quiet night?”

“Yes. Most of these people don’t even want to enter. They’re just here to drink wine and make small talk so that they can go back to work tomorrow and tell their friends they visited the Dark City.” Kirat sneered. “Little do they know how short their time would be if I actually let them through. So what brings you down here? Extenuating circumstances, you said?”

Evelyn lowered her voice to not be overheard. “I obtained something I shouldn’t have, and I need an alternate way out of the city.”

Kirat raised one eyebrow in question. “I told you it was going to come back to bite you one of these nights. Why can’t you leave by normal means?”

“There’s some sort of magical barrier around the city. I tried to leave via the bridge, but it was like hitting a glass door. Only I stopped and my bike kept going.”

“Is she okay?”

“Scuffed to hell but intact,” Evelyn said.

“And you?”

“About the same. Valen has tested other ways out of the city, including through the woods away from any roads, and it’s all blocked off.”

“So just return whatever it is you acquired and move on.”

Evelyn shook her head. She didn’t have time for this. She knew why Kirat was asking these questions, and she was absolutely right to do so, but the clock was fucking ticking.

“Kirat, I can’t. And I can’t explain why, not right now. The less you know, the better. Please believe me, if there were any other way, I wouldn’t be here. This is life or death for me. I need to enter the Dark City so that I can leave New Orleans, and I was hoping you’d know which way I should go.”

Kirat put her hand on Evelyn’s arm. “Okay. No more questions for now. If you say this is your only option, I believe you. I just hope you know what you’re getting yourself into. The Dark City isn’t kind to strangers.”

“I understand.”

Kirat looked up at Valen, then back at Evelyn. “You’ll need a guide. My relief is due to arrive in five minutes, then I’m off duty. I’ll find you a map, and I can take you

part of the way myself. No one goes all the way to the far edge of the Dark City. You know that, right?"

"I know."

"Okay." Kirat raised her hood back into place. "I'll be back in five. Don't talk to anyone."

Evelyn had first met Kirat while running from a pack of sniffers soon after she'd moved to New Orleans. No one had thought to warn the new girl that there were shine-addicted shifters prowling the streets at night looking for their next hit, so she'd gotten herself trapped near the bank of the Mississippi River not far from the convent. Kirat happened by on her way to work and took pity on Evelyn. They'd become fast friends, though they operated in entirely separate social circles. As in, Kirat's social life was thriving and expansive, and Evelyn didn't have one at all. They'd eventually settled into the kind of friends who didn't talk or see each other very often but who shared a genuine understanding and appreciation for each other. It allowed them to pick up where they left off whenever they did find time together. Evelyn loathed the idea of bringing Kirat into her mess, no matter how desperate the circumstances. She owed her so much already.

"Ready?" Kirat had returned, and she held a rolled-up map that she tucked into a small pack on her back.

Evelyn's stomach was in knots. She'd never gone any deeper than the antechamber, and she'd never wanted to. Whatever nightmares lie beyond the chamber doors were mysteries she'd rather leave unsolved.

"Ready," Valen said.

"Okay. Keep in mind that nothing works the way you expect it to down there. Your

watch, your phone, a compass—nothing. Normal rules don't apply, so stay close to me at all times. If I tell you to do something, do it. If I tell you to stop, you stop, If I tell you to shut the fuck, you shut the fuck up. We clear?"

"Clear." Evelyn adjusted the strap of her new satchel, settling it across her chest more securely.

"You have it on you, don't you. What you obtained but shouldn't have?" It wasn't really a question. Evelyn remained quiet. "Shit. Okay. Let's go."

Kirat led the way to the opposite side of the antechamber where a set of ornate gold doors awaited them. She held her hand up and whispered something Evelyn didn't quite catch, and the doors swung open with a heavy creak. The scent of wet earth filled Evelyn's nostrils as she followed Kirat out of the antechamber and into the first of the catacombs. She really hoped this journey was something she would live long enough to regret.

According to legend—which is to say, the witches’ rumor mill—the catacombs had initially been built underneath the convent as a way to give witches who’d been denied burial in church cemeteries a final resting place. Alcoves shaped like arched windows held urns and plaques with names of witches going back hundreds of years. Here, as in the antechamber, their path was lit by flickering torches in wall sconces dotted along the length of the tunnel. Evelyn had half-expected the walls to be lined with skulls like the images she’d seen of the Paris catacombs rather than tidy alcoves with polished name plates and a few small trinkets or offerings.

Kirat turned her head to speak to them as they walked. “Don’t let this first stretch fool you. This is an extension of the antechamber and was created intentionally to be palatable to the public, just in case. We have yet to enter the first zone.”

“You mentioned zones before.” Valen ducked his head to pass through the next archway. “What does that mean? I thought we were going to an underground city.”

Kirat hesitated, and Evelyn could sense her concern. She was likely wondering why Evelyn had brought someone so little versed in the lore of the underground.

“The Dark City is the name given to the entirety of the underground world, but it isn’t like a typical city like you’d see up top,” Kirat said. “It’s more like a web of interconnected areas—or zones—that have been built and are sustained by independent magic users. There are no rules or regulations down here, so people let their imaginations run wild. These zones are limited only by the power level and... inclinations of whoever created them. There are encampments here and there,

including at least one large one near the center of the web, but again, nothing like the city you're used to."

"What do we need to know about the first zone?" Valen asked.

"I don't know a lot. The map mentions predators but doesn't specify what kind or how many, so we'll want to move quickly and quietly through to the other side. It's hard to gauge time and distance down here, so we'll need to stick together and stay focused so as not to stray off course. If we get lost within a zone, we're done for."

"How do you know where a zone begins or ends?" Evelyn could feel fear starting to curl its icy fingers around her stomach at the thought of getting lost within one of these strange places.

"I'll show you when we get to the edge of this first zone. There will always be a runic marker at each entrance or exit. They differ by door, so it's important to make note of where you enter and exit so that you can retrace your steps later." Kirat paused. "Well, it normally is, but you're buying a one-way ticket, aren't you."

"Do you know of any doors that open beyond New Orleans city limits?" Evelyn should have asked sooner, and she knew it. The cold knot in her stomach tightened again, and the throb in the back of her head threatened to return in full force.

"Just the one. The outskirts of the Dark City are the least known and most maps don't go all the way to the edge, but this map," she tapped the top of the rolled map with her fingers, "shows a door that opens on the other side of Lake Pontchartrain. It's your best bet."

They walked in silence for a few minutes until Kirat raised her hand for them to stop, then pointed out a rune carved into the wall. "We're entering the first zone. Remember, quiet and fast and stay together."

Kirat pulled out a knife with a wickedly curved blade and an open loop in the handle. She slipped her thumb into the opening and held the knife with the blade curving down toward her elbow. Evelyn wished she'd thought to get the ritual knife out of her bag before they'd passed the rune marking the entrance. She didn't dare do it now for fear of drawing attention. Instead, she pulled the moonstone amulet from beneath her shirt and let the pale glow light their path through the darkness. She heard Valen unsheathe his knife behind her.

A snarl from somewhere outside her amulet's glow sent shivers down her spine. It didn't sound like any animal sound she'd ever heard before. It sounded—for lack of a better word—wet. As far as snarls went, it was a squelchy one. Bile rose in the back of her throat as a foul stench hit her nose. Whatever it was, it smelled wet too. And sour. Like vomit and wet laundry that had been forgotten in the washer had a baby. Behind her, Valen exhaled forcefully like he was trying to clear the stench from his nose.

“What is that?” he hissed.

“I don't know,” she hissed back.

Kirat hushed them from her place at the head of the line.

Minutes passed like hours as they crept along in the dark. After what felt like days, they reached a matching rune etched on a wall on the opposite side of the zone. Kirat passed her hand over it, and a door slid open for them to pass through.

“They don't have a name.” Kirat doubled over, hands on her knees as she recovered from their nerve-wracking passage through Zone 1. “At least not one that's known.”

Evelyn shuddered. “Have you ever seen one?”

“No.” Kirat straightened and. “Nor do I want to, thanks. The stench is bad enough.”

“What’s next?” Valen asked.

Kirat stepped closer to Evelyn and leaned in close to whisper in her ear. “Do I speak freely in front of him?”

Evelyn nodded.

“The people responsible for putting up the barrier that’s keeping you from leaving New Orleans. Do you think it’s them ?” Kirat didn’t have to say the name for Evelyn to know who she meant.

“I think it’s possible,” Evelyn admitted, reluctantly. “It’s either them or someone unknown with power that rivals theirs.”

“That’s what I thought. I chose this map because the zones are labeled by alliance. Many are completely independent, but more and more are aligning themselves with the powers that be. All zones belonging to or affiliated with them are marked like this.” Kirat held her map up to a nearby torch and pointed to a tiny cursive L with a circle around it. Evelyn’s heart sank. There were so many. Kirat continued, “I think I’ve worked out a path that gets us where you need to go without entering any of those zones, but it comes at a price.”

“What price?” Evelyn asked.

“The non-affiliated zones are different. They’re independent, unfiltered. Sometimes utterly beautiful, but more commonly fully unhinged. And some of them haven’t been mapped at all because those who enter don’t make it back out. You’re sure you want to do this?”

Evelyn wasn't sure at all. "I have to."

"Okay, then. Next up is Zone 3 South." Kirat's expression was grim as she began leading the way down the next tunnel. "You ever read Dante's Inferno ? Well, whoever built Zone 3 is a big fan. Huge."

"What does that mean?" Valen was confused. Evelyn envied his lack of understanding because she was bracing herself for the literal literary hell they were about to experience. Her plan was looking worse and worse.

"You'll see." Kirat approached the next rune. "As long as you stay alert, the only thing endangered in this zone is your sanity. Keep your eyes on the floor and follow me. Do not interact. Do not engage. Do not look around. Trust me."

"Which circle of hell is it?" Evelyn asked.

"All of them."

With a wave of her hand, the passageway opened to reveal a wide cavern lit by fires burning in large metal barrels scattered around the space. It was so expansive that Evelyn couldn't see the walls on either side or ahead. Even the ceiling above them was out of sight, hidden in shadow. As soon as they crossed the threshold, the sound of men's voices raised in argument echoed around them.

Following Kirat's instructions, Evelyn kept her head down as they crossed the cavern. She refused to look when they passed what sounded like a group of self-important wannabe philosophers "well actually-ing" each other endlessly.

"Have we not free will? If not, how can we be punished?"

"How do you know we are being punished? Perhaps this is the height of paradise!"

“It is not.”

“That is your perception.”

“And hence my reality.”

“Is reality purely relative?”

Yes, perhaps this was indeed hell. Evelyn stepped over a deep groove carved in the stone floor. It extended as far as she could see in either direction. Sensuous moans filled the air. The pleased cries grew louder as they walked, accompanied by the unmistakable sounds of enthusiastic lovemaking. Evelyn kept her eyes on her boots. Voices called out to them in invitation to join whatever act they were currently engaged in. She felt Valen’s hand grip the back of her jacket as though he didn’t want to be separated. Good, she didn’t want that either.

She was relieved when they stepped over the next groove. Snow crunched under Evelyn’s boots, and Kirat pulled up the hood of her cloak as cold wind buffeted their faces. Bile rose in Evelyn’s throat again as the stench of death and feces was shoved in her face by the wind. All the circles indeed. Dogs barked in the distance. On they marched, heads down.

The cold wind eventually gave way to thick, sticky mud and wails of agony and suffering. They reached the edge of a swampy river. A small boat with two wooden oars was tied to a stake so it wouldn’t float away. Nearby, a rickety wooden bridge swayed over the sludgy water.

“The boat is a trap,” Kirat said. “We’ll take the bridge one by one.”

Kirat crossed first, then shouted for Evelyn to follow. The bridge rocked precariously when she stepped on the first plank. She gripped the side ropes tight enough to turn

her knuckles white and reached for the next plank with her foot.

“Help me! Please!”

A woman was sinking into the thick river sludge a few feet from the bridge. Her wet hair was plastered to her face. Hands reached up out of the muck to pull her down, dragging her beneath the surface. Evelyn kept her head down and continued across the bridge, step by slow step. She took Kirat’s hand on the other side and leapt the last couple of feet to shore. Kirat called over for Valen to start, warning him to go slowly. Evelyn peered into the gloom, worried about the bridge holding Valen’s weight. Several minutes later, a pale and shaken Valen stepped onto the shore beside her.

“That was awful. The voices—did you hear them?”

Kirat put her hand on Valen’s thick forearm. “They aren’t real. None of this is real. It’s all an elaborate illusion, okay? It’s not real.”

The sticky mud gave way to stone floor once again. It grew dark, and a dense white fog settled around them. Evelyn pulled out her moonstone, but the light was little help. They were essentially blind. They stayed close together, stumbling into one another in an effort to not get lost. A horrible smell that Evelyn couldn’t (and honestly didn’t want to) identify assaulted their sense.

They passed through a dark forest, crossed a stretch of desert with hot sands underfoot, then squelched their way through sticky pools of congealed blood. Screams and cries punctuated the darkness just out of sight. Eventually, it grew colder again until Evelyn could see her breath in puffs of white as they walked. Ice crunched underfoot. That’s when she heard it—the unmistakable sound of heavy wings beating the air. Icy winds grew stronger the closer they drew closer to the sound. Evelyn knew what it was—or what it should be, given the theme of this place.

They were approaching the devil himself.

“Do not look,” Kirat ground out the words through gritted teeth. “Keep moving.”

Evelyn felt Valen’s hand slip from her jacket, and she turned to find him gone.

Evelyn whirled around looking for Valen, Kirat’s admonition completely forgotten. Panic tightened her throat. Where was he? After several terrifying seconds, she spotted him a few yards away. He was walking directly toward the giant demon-looking creature trapped in the ice.

“Valen! Come back!”

“What is it?” Kirat had returned to her side.

“It’s Valen. Look!” Evelyn pointed to where Valen continued to make his way toward what looked like Dante’s Lucifer.

“Shit! We have to stop him! That’s the owner of this zone. FUCK!”

Kirat took off at a sprint, and Evelyn followed, her boots slipping and sliding on the ice as she ran. She nearly tackled Valen to the ice when she reached him. She grabbed onto his arm to stop herself from falling.

“Valen! What are you doing? We have to go.”

“He’s trapped.” His voice sounded strange. Dull. Compelled.

“He’s not. Not really,” Kirat explained. “He is in control of this place. He’s playing a game you don’t want to play. We need to go.”

Evelyn looked up at the massive creature with multiple sets of heavy, leathery wings beating the air slowly. Many of the details matched the descriptions she remembered from Dante's *Inferno*, except this version of the Devil had only one face, and a very human one at that. His head turned slowly toward them, and Evelyn forced herself to look away, to focus on their feet once again. She pulled at Valen.

"Please, let's just go. He's not trapped. This is all from an old book. It's just a story. Please."

Evelyn was afraid they'd have to leave Valen there. She and Kirat weren't strong enough to force him to leave if he wanted to stay. But to her relief he finally turned and faced her, breaking his focus on the creature.

"Sorry. I thought he needed help."

"It's okay." She gripped his arm in relief. "It's okay, but we've got to go now. Let's stay close together."

Their exit out of the cavern took equally as long as their journey in, and they passed back through the rest of the circles of hell. At one point, Evelyn lost her footing and nearly slipped into a deep pit filled with writing bodies, but Kirat caught her shoulder and pulled her back to safety. Soon the ice melted away, and they were once again squishing their way across congealed blood, then hot sands, then putrid rain and finally strong winds filled with moans. By the time they'd passed even more philosophy bros arguing about the meaning of the word "table," Evelyn was exhausted and eager to be free from this literal hell hole.

Kirat activated the rune and ushered them out of the cavern and into another tunnel. The passageway slid closed behind them, and they all collapsed on the floor in relief.

"Please tell me that was the worst of it." Evelyn pulled a water bottle out of her bag

and took a swig before offering it to Kirat, who waved her off and took out her own drink.

“I wish I could. It’s one of the largest zones, but many of them are terrible in their own ways. There is no real danger in that zone, not as long as you mind your business and don’t dance with the devil. I can’t say that about some others that still lie ahead.”

Valen took Evelyn’s hand. “Maybe we can find another way.”

“You don’t believe that.”

He grimaced. “No, I don’t.”

“On we go, then.” Kirat got back to her feet and took a torch from one of the wall sconces. Evelyn and Valen followed suit, then followed her down the tunnel.

It took a while to reach the next zone, a boon that Evelyn refused to take for granted. She focused on gratitude and on her reasons for being down here in the first place. Self-preservation played a role in this journey—she couldn’t deny that—but she also believed that keeping this book out of the wrong hands was important for the safety and well-being of a hell of a lot more people than just her and Valen.

The tunnel abruptly narrowed, and they were forced to go more slowly as Valen struggled to squeeze through. Tendrils of panic reawakened in Evelyn’s chest. She wasn’t normally prone to claustrophobia but the thought of getting stuck down here was scary enough on its own. They all breathed easier when the tunnel widened again, only to then slope downward so severely that they were forced to sit and slide down for about a quarter of a mile before it evened out.

Kirat stopped when they reached a crossroads with three tunnels branching out in various directions. She handed Evelyn her torch, then held her map up to the light to

examine it more closely. She swore under her breath and folded up the map to return it to her pack.

“Okay, decision time. There are two options to get you roughly where you need to go. The first option is this middle tunnel here.” She pointed at it. “It leads to Zone 5, which is maintained by one of the expelled you-know-who. She’s very powerful and very angry. I’ve only peeked in the door once, and that was enough for me. If we can avoid going that way, I’d recommend it.”

“Sold.” Valen crossed his arms over his chest. “What’s the second option?”

Kirat sighed. “Zone 8. I’ve never been there, and the map is blank. It could be much safer and easier than Zone 5, or...”

“Or it could be worse,” Evelyn finished for her.

“Precisely. I know the general rule is to prefer the evil you know, but that’s not always true in the Dark City. Down here, there is such a blend of experiences... the unknown could be perfectly mundane and not evil at all.”

“What’s down the third tunnel?” Valen held up his torch to peer into the darkness.

“It leads deeper into their territory. Whether they created that barrier or not, the last thing you want it is to draw their attention right now. Right?”

“Right,” Evelyn agreed. “If you were alone, would you choose Zone 8?”

Kirat nodded. “I would. I never want to go near Zone 5 ever again.”

Valen grunted. “Then Zone 8 it is. Lead the way.”

Evelyn checked her watch. It felt like they'd been traveling for hours, maybe even the better part of a day. If her watch could be trusted, it was almost 9:00 a.m.—the New Orleans above would be bustling with activity like it was any other Saturday, but not in the land beneath.

“This way.” Kirat led the way down the left branch of the tunnel.

Evelyn followed, wrapping her hand around the moonstone amulet and reaching for her great-grandmother's presence as she went.

Evelyn blinked in the bright lights of Zone 8. Kirat had just activated the rune, allowing them to step through the passageway into what looked like a massive ball room. Gone were the stone walls and dirt floors of the tunnel outside. The brown and white tiled floor gleamed beneath dozens of chandeliers laden with tall taper candles. Clear crystals dangling from the chandeliers cast sparkling lights into every corner. The walls were papered in robin's egg blue with inlaid pillars of cream and gold every few feet.

A huge ceiling painting depicted the Olympian heaven, complete with old, bearded men in robes and frolicking nymphs worshipping their goddess. Lavish gold gilded stuccowork framed the fresco mural. Evelyn felt as though she'd stepped into eighteenth-century Bavaria. A Viennese waltz was being played by a small group of musicians off to the far left. Evelyn couldn't quite identify their instruments at this distance, but the music itself was enchanting.

At least twenty couples waltzed around the ballroom, their faces obscured by masks. Some wore old-fashioned garb that fit in with the overall theme of the room, but others were wearing more contemporary outfits, as though they'd stepped out of modern New Orleans and into another time and place. Evelyn looked closer. They likely had done just that. The masks made it impossible to tell whether they were enjoying themselves or under duress, but the fact that no one had responded to the newcomers' presence suggested they weren't entirely in control of themselves. Or they were illusions, like in the previous zone.

"Have you met our king?" All the dancers spoke in unison without missing a step.

“Our king is great and wise.” They danced a few more steps. “Come forth and greet our king.”

The dancers stopped abruptly and turned as one to point toward the opposite end of the room. Evelyn looked at Kirat and Valen. Kirat shrugged and headed where they pointed. Evelyn followed with Valen at her side. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him unsnap the guard on his holster, ready to draw his gun. She wondered if bullets would have any effect on whatever was going on here. How much of this was real and how much was illusion? She couldn't tell. A thin veil of shine covered every surface, including the dancers, but they were in a magically sustained cavern far underground. The presence of shine meant different things down here.

Evelyn glanced back to see the dancers were still standing frozen in place, pointing. Even the musicians had stopped playing. The ballroom was so quiet she could hear the candles flickering in the chandeliers overhead. Valen reached for her hand, and she gripped his in response. This was somehow more unnerving than all the circles of hell combined.

“Welcome!” A male voice echoed through the room, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere. “Approach!”

The ballroom stretched out ahead of them, impossibly large. More dancers stood perfectly still, all pointing in the same direction. After walking for several minutes, they finally approached an elevated platform on which a masked man sat on a throne. An elaborate crown adorned his head, but he wore a pair of ratty gray sweatpants and a faded sweatshirt with “The X-Files” emblazoned across the chest. His feet were bare, the nails overgrown and discolored. He tapped a long, greenish-gray fingernail on the arm of the throne. When he smiled, his teeth were brown and rotten in his mouth.

“Welcome to my kingdom,” he said, clearly proud of himself. His smile faded. “Will

you not bow before me? Will you not greet me with the respect I deserve as your sovereign? Do you dare defy me in my own throne room?"

Kirat and Valen bowed low on either of Evelyn, who remained standing straight. Her friend tugged at the hem of her jacket.

"Bow, Evelyn," Kirat whispered. "Hurry."

Instead, Evelyn raised her chin and faced the so-called king. The varying clothes of the dancers suggested they too were wayward travelers who found their unfortunate way into this zone. Into but not out of. She wagered that most of them were likely to bow when commanded to do so, under the assumption that obedience would earn them their freedom. But to a mad king, obedience made you his slave.

"I will not bow down."

The king shifted in his throne and tilted his head to peer at her through the holes in his mask.

"You will," he said.

"I will not. Have you no respect? I shall forgive your lack of manners once, but not again." Evelyn's heart pounded in her chest. She was taking a huge risk—calculated, but still terrifying. The design of the ballroom screamed eighteenth century Bavaria. She would bet her left boot it was modeled after the Great Hall at Nymphenburg Palace. If she was right, then this magic-wielding lunatic fancied himself Maximilian III, elector of Bavaria. Powerful, yes. But not ultimately so.

He leaned forward, the crown tilting precariously above his mask. "Who are you?"

Evelyn stepped closer to the platform. "I am Maria Theresa, Archduchess of Austria,

Queen of Hungary and Bohemia, and Holy Roman Empress. And you, dear nephew, are in grave danger of giving offense.”

Moments ticked by without a response. Evelyn felt sweat gather at her temples. Had she gotten it wrong?

His sudden laughter boomed across the hall, and Evelyn fought not to flinch.

“Auntie Maria! Of course! I didn’t recognize you without your mask. Perhaps you would care to wear one?” He snapped his fingers, and two men stepped forward carrying trays of masks in varying styles.

“I would not. I only came to bestow my blessing upon your realm on my way through this land.” He stopped smiling, and Evelyn mentally scrambled to come up with something else. “And to give you this small token of my familial affection.” She reached into her bag and pulled out three of the seed packets she’d brought with her. “Seeds from the greatest natural philosophers in the Empire. These plants will grow even in the total absence of sunlight, making them extremely rare and highly valuable. A gift fit for a king.”

One of the men approached her so that she could place the packets on his tray, which he then took over to the king. The mad man examined the packets with interest. “Fascinating. I had heard rumors of such seeds, but I never dreamed of seeing them myself. A blessing upon this kingdom, indeed.” He leaned back in his throne, seemingly appeased. “And where do your travels take you, auntie ?”

“Home.” Evelyn hesitated, then added. “To my husband.”

“Ah, yes. Your husband. Uncle...”

He was testing her. “Francis.”

“I see. Do give my regards to the Emperor and thank him for allowing me this visit with my beloved aunt.”

Evelyn bowed her head slightly in acknowledgement. She had no idea where the exit was unless he showed her, and they both knew it. She stood there in silence, waiting. Anything she said now could only weaken her position. He had affirmed her claimed identity and accepted her gift. Now he had to let her go, however reluctant he might be to lose his new toy. She had played by his rules and won.

Finally, he smiled again. “Do come back soon.” Then he waved his hand. One of the manservants stepped up on the elevated platform and pulled a cord to draw back the heavy velvet curtain behind the throne. The exit rune.

Evelyn motioned for Kirat and Valen to rise and follow her. She held her breath when she approached the king on his throne, fully aware that he could change his mind on a whim. She met his eyes through the mask as she passed. Red and watery with pale irises bordering on white, they held a sharpness that belied his otherwise bedraggled appearance. A mad king indeed.

Evelyn held it together until they’d reached the safety of the tunnels beyond Zone 8. As soon as the immediate threat was over, the adrenaline rush faded, and she leaned one shoulder against the wall because her knees felt like they might give out. She ran a shaky hand through her hair.

“I need just a minute.” She took a few deep breaths, willing her pulse to slow, reminding herself that she was okay.

Valen rubbed her back with one large, warm hand. “That was unbelievable. How did you know what to say?”

Kirat pulled out her map and stepped a few feet away to examine it.

Evelyn closed her eyes. “I thought I recognized the room he’d created. Or recreated. I figured if I could play his game as an equal partner, I might win safe passage.”

“But how did you know all that?”

She smiled, relaxing a little. “I read a lot of books, Valen.”

He chuckled and kept rubbing her back. The warm pressure was comforting.

Kirat spoke up from her spot by one of the tunnel torches. “The dancers... do you think they’re trapped there?”

Evelyn looked over at her. “I do. I think they became his pawns the moment they entered his zone and bowed down to him as their king.”

“That’s why you didn’t bow?” Kirat raised an eyebrow. “I thought you were just being stubborn.”

“I was, a little. But I also figured if we acted like he had authority over us, it would become reality. I wasn’t sure—it was a gamble.”

“That was quick thinking. I’ll report his zone when I return to the antechamber.”

“I thought there were no rules down here. That the magic users have essentially free rein within their zones.” Valen stopped rubbing but kept his hand on her back.

“There aren’t many rules down here, that’s true.” Kirat folded her map and returned it to her pack. “But it’s generally frowned upon to trap people indefinitely. The Dark City thrives in darkness and secrecy. If too many people go missing, that draws attention. Not from regular folk, but no one wants the full power of the old witches levied against them because they imprisoned the wrong person’s great-great-nephew.

That's why so many of the zones have allied themselves with the coven." She gave Evelyn a quick once over. "You good to move on?"

Evelyn felt Valen's hand fall from her back, and she straightened from her position leaning against the cool wall of the tunnel. She was mentally and physically drained but determined. "I'm good. What's next?"

"We're almost there. One more zone to pass through, and I think you're actually going to like this one." Kirat grinned, one gold tooth glinting in the firelight. "Imagine if Alice's wonderland and Wonka's chocolate factory were owned and operated by Glinda the Good Witch. That's Zone 17. Come on."

The next section of tunnel was unremarkable, but after about half a mile, Kirat led them to a metal ladder set into a shallow half-circle carved into the stone wall. "Up we go," she said, then disappeared up the ladder.

Evelyn gave her a head start, then followed. The legs of the ladder were nice and wide, so it was almost like climbing a very steep set of stairs. The half circle became a fully round tunnel once she passed the ceiling of the tunnel they'd left, and there was enough room that Valen shouldn't struggle to fit but not so much space that Evelyn worried about falling backwards. When she got tired, she could lean her back against the opposite wall and rest. Valen waited patiently below her, patting her boot to remind her he was there.

After what felt like a mile-high climb, Evelyn emerged into a tunnel that looked exactly like the one they'd left down below, except for the bubblegum pink rune glowing faintly on the wall nearby.

Kirat passed her hand over it. "Welcome to Zone 17."

An artificial sun shone brightly in a clear blue sky dotted here and there with

perfectly fluffy white clouds. The air smelled like flowers, and the grass under their feet felt springy and fresh. Giant pink and purple and blue toadstools towered over their heads. A sparkly white ant the size of a rottweiler trotted by, a diamond-crusted collar around its neck.

“Wow.” Evelyn turned in a circle trying to take it all in. An impossibly large ladybug approached them.

“Hello,” he said, his voice deep and lightly accented. Italian, maybe. “Welcome to paradise. Would you like a tour?”

“Thank you, but we’re just passing through this time,” Kirat said. “Maybe on our way back?”

“Of course. You are always welcome here, Kirat. Can I offer you a ride, at least?”

“A ride would be great.”

He opened his wings to reveal an intricate leather saddle with four seats tucked against his body. “All aboard.”

Kirat climbed up without hesitation. “Come on, it’s safe. This zone is massive. It’ll take us hours to cross it on foot. Besides, Javier is an excellent driver.”

“Thank you,” said Javier with a little wiggle of his antennae.

Evelyn looked at Valen and mouthed “what the fuck?” He just shrugged and helped her climb up next to Kirat.

“Please remain seated. Despite all appearances, normal physics do apply here. If you fall, you are likely to be damaged beyond even my mistress’s power to restore you.”

Javier hopped once, twice, then fluttered into flight, rising up and over the toadstools and into the clear blue sky above.

The sudden height was dizzying, especially after navigating narrow, enclosed spaces for so long. Evelyn looped her arm through Kirat's and tried not to look down. The floral-scented air whipped through her hair, wilding her waves and turning what little order she'd had into full disarray. Javier hummed to himself as he flew.

"How many times have you been here?" Evelyn shouted to be heard above the wind.

"Just the once before. They were very welcoming then, too."

"And Javier?"

"He works for the owner of Zone 17. Her name is Millie."

"Is he... real?" Javier stopped humming, and Kirat looked slightly concerned. Evelyn rushed to clarify. "I mean, of course he's real, but has he always been a ladybug? I've never met one that could talk before."

Javier answered before Kirat could. "I am technically a construct. A blend of magical and mechanical life. I am real in the sense that I exist. If by real, you meant 'natural,' then the answer is, of course, no. Ladybugs of my size and intelligence do not exist in nature. Nor do they have the required physical structures to converse as I do now."

"Thank you for explaining, Javier. I meant no offense!"

"I took none. Curiosity is natural for humans."

They passed the remainder of the flight in silence, broken only by Valen's guttural gasp when Javier started his abrupt descent toward a pink and purple castle straight out of a cotton candy fairy tale. Javier landed on the perfectly manicured front lawn, and Valen stumbled down from the saddle to vomit on the grass.

"Distasteful, but not uncommon," said Javier. "Some humans have little tolerance for the majesty of flight. Mistress Millie will be out soon. Good day."

Valen heaved again. Evelyn pulled his water bottle from his pack and handed it to him. The castle reminded her of a certain video game princess's castle, complete with triangle-shaped flags flying from the turrets. Evelyn understood Kirat's reference to Glenda the moment Millie appeared at the entrance. She wore a sparkly pink ball gown with puffed sleeves and a tall silver crown on her head.

"Kirat!" she called out as she rushed across the courtyard to greet them. "My dear friend. You have returned!" She pulled Kirat into a hug before turning to Evelyn and Valen, who was swaying slightly but upright. "And who have you brought with you?"

Kirat cleared her throat, a tinge of pink in her cheeks. "These are my friends, Evelyn and Valen."

"Welcome, Evelyn and Valen!" Millie hugged them each in turn. She smelled like a sugared rose. "What brings you to paradise?"

"Evelyn is experiencing some difficulty exiting New Orleans, and we're trying to secure her safe passage out of the area through the Dark City."

Millie frowned delicately. "Difficulty leaving the city? What do you mean?"

Valen stepped up. "Someone doesn't want her to leave. We don't know who. But

they put up a magical barrier that's keeping her from crossing city limits."

"How unfortunate. Poor you! Magic wielders can be very disrespectful of personal boundaries, I'm afraid. Just because they can doesn't mean they should, as you know. How can I help? Though I must warn you, I have limited knowledge outside of paradise."

"I am taking her to Second Mother."

Evelyn looked from Kirat to Millie in surprise. This was news to her. Kirat hadn't explained where they were going, just that it might provide a way out. In retrospect, maybe she should have asked more questions.

"Ah, yes. Of course! She has been here the longest. If anyone knows of a way out, it would be her. Very clever thinking, Kirat."

Kirat's cheeks flushed pink again, and she looked down at the grass near her boots. "Thank you, Millie. I hope it'll work."

"And so brave of you to come all this way. You do not come often to the Dark City, if I recall correctly? You certainly do not visit me often enough."

Valen choked on his water and fell into a coughing fit. Evelyn patted his back.

"I'm sorry, Millie," Kirat said. "Once I see them safely to Second Mother, maybe I could come back here for a while."

"I would love that," Millie said, beaming. "Javier will be beside himself. You are his favorite, you know."

Kirat appeared at a loss for words, so Evelyn spoke up. "I thought you were taking us

to a way out?”

“I am. Second Mother is the only being down here who is powerful enough to break that magical barrier or tell you how to get through it. Like Millie, she functions outside of the coven’s jurisdiction. And she might know a better way out than the door I’m taking you to.”

“This Second Mother—what is she like?” Evelyn asked.

Millie’s cheery expression clouded over briefly. “She is very old.” She hesitated, looking over her shoulder as though someone was watching. “Primordial. She was here long before the rest of us came. Her zone is just... hers. There is no number, no rune locking the door. If she wants you to enter, she will let you. If she doesn’t, you won’t.”

Interesting. “Does she have a name?”

Millie’s forehead creased again. “I’m sure she does, but I don’t know it. Old as she is, I don’t imagine anyone still living has that knowledge.”

“It would be too much power over her,” Kirat managed, her cheeks still flushed.

“Right.” Evelyn thought for a moment. “Do you think she’ll help me?”

“No idea!” Millie’s bubbly personality returned in full force. “If she wants to, she will. You’re an interesting sort of witchling, you know?” (Was she imagining things or did Millie just look at her satchel?) “Interesting is good when meeting the Second Mother. Interesting is everything.”

“We should go.” Valen had recovered from his coughing fit.

“Oh, of course! Let me refill your water supply.” She blinked, and it was done. “And of course, point you to the nearest rune.” She gestured beyond the castle. “It’s just over that hill. Kirat remembers the way... don’t you?”

“I remember.” Kirat bowed awkwardly. “Thank you for your help, Millie.”

“My pleasure! Don’t forget to come back!”

After they’d said their goodbyes, Kirat led them around the castle and over a mossy green hill to what looked like the foot of a mountain. She waved her hand over a small outcropping, and a passageway appeared.

As soon as they exited Zone 17, the tunnel walls around them started to shake with a deep rumble that vibrated up through the soles of Evelyn’s boots. Kirat’s eyes widened.

“She knows we’re coming.”

Just as Millie had described, the entrance to the Second Mother’s lair was marked only by a thin outline of an arched doorway. There was no rune, no automatic entry.

“How do we get in?” Evelyn asked. Kirat shrugged.

“Leave it to me.” Valen cracked his neck and shook out his arms. “I’ll open the door.

Evelyn brushed past him to move closer to where the door should be, closed her hand around her great-grandmother’s moonstone, and mentally reached through the wall into whatever lay beyond it. She let her mind search the murky void, seeking without direction, waiting to be found. She barely brushed the edge of something and suddenly a door appeared in the stone wall of the tunnel. The same size and shape as the outline, it was actually a set of double doors, arched to a point where they met in

the very middle. The wood was dark and old and covered with flaking purple paint. Its brass door handles were worn smooth with time. Evelyn reached out to touch one, but the doors creaked open a few inches on their own.

“Enter, child.”

Chills raced down her spine, and the hair rose on the back of her neck. The voice... had she heard it aloud or had it spoken in her head? One glance at Kirat and Valen told her they’d heard it, too. Evelyn grabbed one of the brass door handles and pulled open the door. She was past being timid. Time was running short, and if Second Mother could help her escape, then Evelyn had to speak with her. There were no alternatives left to choose from.

She stepped through the door to find herself in another large cavern. It was so dark that at first she couldn’t see her own hand in front of her face. Water streamed down the walls to pool across the floor. Steady drops fell from the ceiling of the cavern to plop audibly in the puddles below. It smelled damp and surprisingly earthy but there was no stench of rot or death.

“Over here, witchling.”

She heard Kirat and Valen move in behind her, slow and cautious in their movements. Evelyn followed the direction of the voice. Their torches did little to dispel the deep gloom. The darkness was so thick it fell over the air like velvet, dampening noise and making her ears pulse with her own heartbeat.

“Come closer.”

Fresh chills prickled down her back at the proximity of the unfamiliar voice. Her moonstone glowed warm in her clasped hand. The floor under her boots changed from wet stone to spongy wood. She stepped up three steps to stand on a narrow

porch of a thatch-roofed cottage. The walls appeared to be the same time-softened wood of the steps and porch.

“Enter. I have been waiting.”

Evelyn pushed aside the hanging curtain that served as a door and ducked through the opening. Inside, a fire glowed warmly and beside it sat an old woman clad entirely in ragged black robes. She rocked slowly in her chair, long nails clacking against each other as she twisted and braided a length of silver cord. It coiled around the legs of her chair and across the room to disappear in the shadows.

“Sit.”

Evelyn sat gingerly on the edge of the second rocking chair, teetering on the verge of a fight-or-flight response. Mostly flight. Terror was an icy river in her veins, and she shivered despite the warmth from the fire.

“Will you not speak to me?” The old woman’s eyes were closed as she worked. Blood trickled from beneath her eyelids to trace rivulets down her weathered cheeks. More red dripped from her ears, coating the sides of her neck and creating slick, wet clumps in her long, matted hair. She had red half-moons of scabbed skin where her cuticles should be, and her long nails were torn and jagged.

“I... I’m sorry,” Evelyn managed. “Are you hurt? Do you need help?”

She laughed, a gravelly, disused sound in the small hut. “No, child. I am as I was created and as I will always be.”

“But you’re bleeding.”

“As I was created and as I will always be.”

“Oh.” Evelyn took a steadying breath. “My name is Evelyn, and I?—”

“I know who you are, witchling. And I know why you have come.”

“You do?”

Second Mother grinned, toothless. “I do.” Her nails stopped clacking. “It has been years beyond counting since I felt that power. Nasty one. Old to you, though young to me.”

Evelyn’s hands gripped the strap of the bag strung across her chest. “Do you know what it is?”

“The book. Yes. And you want me to tell you, though you fear the answer.” When Evelyn didn’t respond, she continued. “He craved power more than most men. And most men crave it deeply, darkly, and without limit. He decided the ultimate power is that over life itself. He believed that by controlling death, he controlled life. He was a fool.” She opened her eyes, revealing irises so black they blended into her pupils and so large only thin slivers of white were visible around the edges of her lids. “But I am not a fool and neither are you, yet you bring this delicious sip of power into a den filled with power-drunk magic wielders.”

“The brave and the foolish look alike to the undiscerning.”

“Hmm.” Second Mother’s eye’s narrowed, but her nails resumed their clicking as she weaved. “Why, then, are you being brave?”

Evelyn debated internally for half a breath, then chose the truth. “I’m trying to keep this object out of the wrong hands.”

“Whose hands are wrong, witchling? And how do you know?”

“Anyone who would use it, wield it, for its intended purpose.”

“Whose hands are right? Yours?”

“No. I have no desire to keep it.”

“There is your first lie.” Second Mother seemed to grow in size, expanding to fill the small cottage. Her face was so much closer to Evelyn’s now. She could smell her breath like damp earth. “I will not forgive a second one. Try again.”

“I feel a pull, like it sings to me, but I will not keep it. I don’t want it, not at my true self. It sings, it calls, yes. But I just want to keep others safe from it. I will not use it.”

Second Mother was small again, rocking. “Its song is beautiful like only death can be. I believe you want to resist it. I do not know if you will succeed.”

“I will. I just need to get it out of the city.”

“I see.” She blinked her black eyes slowly. When she spoke, her voice sounded younger, sweeter. “You could leave it with me.”

“I won’t.”

“And if I take it?”

“You won’t.”

Second Mother hissed. “I could.”

“Yes. I have no doubt you could. But you won’t.”

“Why not?” She tilted her head to side, curious, dark eyes boring into Evelyn’s soul. “Why will I not take that delicious morsel for my own?”

Evelyn sat back in her chair to gain a few more inches of breathing room and broke eye contact to gaze into the fire licking at her boots. “Because you don’t need it, and to give in to the desire of it would be to succumb to the power of a weak, foolish man.”

She hissed again, and Evelyn flinched. It dissolved into a hoarse laugh. “Tell me your true name, witchling.”

“I won’t. I know the power of names. I’ll keep mine, thank you.”

“No fool indeed. I have no name to be used against me, you know. It is an irony that has defined my existence from nearly the beginning of time. It is why I am still here after all of forever.”

“If you have no name, why do they call you Second Mother?”

“It is when and what I was created, but not what I became.” Evelyn looked into her eyes and saw suffering. “Lilit was first. Strong. Defiant. Equal. Too much, too much. Cast out into the harsh wilderness. I came next. Created to be lesser. Safer. To produce. But desired ? Never. I was cast out, too. I looked for Lilit, but she went far from all that was known. I stayed close to watch as a third was made. Beautiful, compliant, easily manipulated. My own name was taken and given to her, the new ‘source of life.’ I became nameless, nothing, no more. Yet, funny trick—what has not lived cannot die. I never was so I could not stop being. And so I am because I am not.” Second Mother watched, apparently fascinated, as two tears traced a path down Evelyn’s cheeks. “Do you cry for me?”

Evelyn’s voice cracked when she spoke. “I do.”

“Is it pity?” There was danger in her voice.

“No,” Evelyn answered, truthful. “Empathy. I feel for you, but I do not pity you.”

“The others you brought with you—they draw closer.”

“My friends. They’ll be concerned for my safety, but they mean you no harm.”

“Does not matter whether they mean it or not.” Second Mother’s eyes flicked to the doorway, and the cottage disappeared. The fireplace, the rocking chairs, the thatched roof—all gone in a blink.

Evelyn had tumbled to the floor when her chair vanished. She got to her feet and looked up at Second Mother, now huge, towering above her in the cavern. Flames burned bright in large brass bowls arranged in a circle around them. Beyond the circle, Evelyn could see Valen and Kirat shouting at her, but no sound reached her ears.

“Please,” she said. “They don’t want to hurt you.”

“He does,” she hissed and flicked one finger in Valen’s direction. He flew backward through the open doors into the tunnel they’d entered from. The moment he was out of sight, the doors closed. Kirat watched what happened to Valen, then ran toward Evelyn. “This one only fears for you. She can stay.” Second Mother’s finger twitched again, and Kirat became frozen in place, her face locked in a mask of fierce concern.

“Now, where were we?”

“ I need your help to find a way out of New Orleans. There is a magical barrier blocking this object from leaving the city. My friend, the one you tossed out of here, he’s been trying to help me escape. We’ve tried the bridges, main roads, even exits only accessible on foot. Nothing. Every possible exit is blocked for me.”

“Why must you leave?” Second Mother’s hulking form loomed over Evelyn.

“To get this dark magic as far from the people who are looking for it as possible.”

“Why must it be you?”

Evelyn sighed, exasperated. “Because I won’t give in to it. We went over this already. I will not say yes. I feel the pull, I hear the song, but I will not surrender to it. I can’t trust the same about anybody else.”

“Ah, there. There it is.” She cackled, throwing her head back. “You do not trust anyone else. Not even your friends?”

“Not even them.” Evelyn forced herself to step closer to the towering Second Mother. “Please. I know you don’t have to help me. But I think you understand why this object needs to leave New Orleans, and why it has to be me.”

“My aid will not be free.”

“I know.” Evelyn’s mouth twitched into an almost-smile. “Nothing ever is.”

“Tell me, witchling. What can you offer me?” Second Mother paced the inner perimeter of the fire circle. Evelyn shifted with her to maintain some distance.

“I have these.” She pulled out the bag of runestones carved from rose quartz.

“No.”

“Okay.” Next, Evelyn offered the ancient coins, some blessed while others were mildly cursed. “What about these?”

“No. What use do I have for human currency?”

“Fair enough. What about seeds? You could start a garden.”

Second Mother crouched down and dragged her jagged fingernails across the damp floor. Fresh earth appeared, followed by plants, flowers, herbs. The scent of lavender wafted in the air.

“Okay, no seeds needed.” Panic was setting in for Evelyn. What could she possibly offer an ancient being with near limitless power? “Do you like riddles?”

“Enough!” Second Mother’s voice echoed off the cavern walls. “Take your friends and go. You have nothing that interests me.”

“I can’t do that. I can’t leave. There’s nowhere else for me to go.” Evelyn took another reluctant step closer to the monstrous woman. “I don’t ask for favors. I offer you a trade.” Second Mother didn’t immediately reject the idea, so Evelyn continued. “Knowledge for knowledge. Secret for secret.”

“What is it you think you know?”

“Something no other living soul knows or will ever know. This secret was given to me by my great-grandmother, and she has long since passed on.”

“You offer this to me in exchange for what?”

“How to get past the barrier.”

“What makes you so sure I have this knowledge to trade.”

“Do you?”

“Yes,” she hissed. “But you did not ask.”

“I didn’t have to. If anyone in the Dark City knows what I need to know, it’s you. Many of the magic-wielders here are in prisons of their own design. But not you. This is no prison. This is your home. You are here by choice. Otherwise, you wouldn’t stay.” A thought occurred to Evelyn. “Will you show me what it really looks like? Will you show me your home?”

Kirat was suddenly lifted into the air and flung backward toward the closed doors. They opened to receive her, and Evelyn watched her body strike the waiting Valen, sending them both tumbling back into the tunnel and out of sight. The doors closed again. When Evelyn turned back to where Second Mother had been standing, she found herself in a forest.

Tall trees rose all around her, warm sunlight filtering through their branches and leaves to dapple the earth under her feet. The air was cold enough to reveal her breath, but just barely. Birds sang nearby. A squirrel skittered across the path ahead and disappeared into the underbrush.

Evelyn followed the winding path through the trees until she came to a clearing. The

cottage was there, but it looked new. Gone were the spongy, rotting steps and the moldy thatched roof. It looked clean and welcoming. A woman, neither old nor young, stepped out onto the porch. Her hair fell in long, dark waves. Her cloak was a deep purple bordering on black. There was no blood on her face or neck, and her fingernails were short and unmarred by discoloration or scabbed cuticles.

“Welcome,” she said, “to my home.”

Evelyn stopped at the bottom of the porch steps. “Thank you for having me.”

Second Mother smiled. Her eyes were still black, but she had sharp white teeth where there’d been only gums before. “Come inside. Secrets are best told in comfort.”

Inside, the cottage looked much the same as it had before. Two rocking chairs sat facing a fireplace in the main room. A small table with two chairs was positioned off to the side near a simple kitchen.

“Tea?”

Evelyn nodded and followed Second Mother over to the table to sit down. Sunlight filtered in through sheer white curtains on the windows. It was comfortably warm inside compared to the chilly outdoors. The simple mundanity of it all was somehow more unsettling than the creepy cottage version had been.

Second Mother set a cup of steaming hot tea in front of Evelyn and flashed her sharp white teeth again.

“Why did you show me the other version of this place when I first arrived?”

Second Mother shrugged. “You learn more about someone when they are faced with ugliness than with beauty. You showed empathy for an old woman living in a

decrepit hut. In my experience, that is extremely rare. That is why I let you live after the second lie.”

“I didn’t?—”

“You did. You told me your friends wished me no harm. But the moment you were cut off from them, the large one came for me with murder in his heart.”

“I didn’t know.”

Second Mother brushed away the thought. “Perhaps not, but it did not make your statement any more true.”

“That’s not fair.”

She bared her teeth again in a sneering smile. “Life is not.”

“Fine. I had no intention to deceive, but what I said was ultimately untrue. I appreciate that you didn’t kill me for that.”

“You are welcome. Now, secrets. You said you have one for me.”

“I do.” Evelyn cupped her hands around the mug of tea to warm them. “It is something known only to me and no other living soul.”

“Is it... significant?”

“If you mean, would others want to know it? Then, yes. In the wrong hands, this information could do nearly as much harm as this cursed object.” Evelyn patted the bag on her hip.

“Yet you would trade it for the knowledge you seek?”

“You are not the wrong hands.”

“How delightful. I agree to the trade on one condition. You must swear a blood oath that this secret will remain known only to you and to me. If anyone else ever learns of it, I will exact payment from you and your entire bloodline.”

“I will never tell anyone else, but I can’t accept blame if someone else learns about it some other way, without my knowledge or ability to stop it.”

“You learn quickly. Good.” Second Mother grabbed Evelyn’s hand and jerked it toward her. She lengthened one pale nail into a point and used it to slash open a vein on Evelyn’s wrist. She held the open vein over her mug and watched as several drops of blood fell into it. She did the same to her own wrist, then drank the tea blended with their blood. “The oath is sealed. Now tell me.”

Evelyn took a moment to acknowledge the gravity of the situation. She was essentially trading one nuke for another. Only this one was far more personal than the other and would hit far closer to home. It would forever stand unspoken between her and anyone she ever became close to, a barrier in their intimacy. A limit to being fully known.

She thought of Valen waiting for her in the tunnel outside, and the sacrifice felt... significant.

“Tell me.”

There was nothing else to be done. Evelyn looked into the eyes of the ancient being sitting across from her and told her the secret that no one else knew or could ever know.

Second Mother hissed, but this time with glee. “That is a delicious secret indeed. Prove it to me.”

The next hour passed in a blur as Second Mother peppered Evelyn with a multitude of questions—some trickier than others—all designed to prove the veracity of her claimed secret. In the end, Second Mother believed her and made good on her half of the bargain.

“There is no singular way to dismantle a barrier like the one you describe, but I can make you and the object you carry invisible to it. I know a sigil, long lost to human knowledge, that will allow you pass through without a trace.” She took Evelyn’s hand again and traced a design into the tender skin of her inner wrist. The searing pain made her wince and the smell of burning flesh was nauseating, but Evelyn didn’t move. “Commit it to memory,” Second Mother said. “But should you ever need it, you can summon it from here.” She tapped Evelyn’s wrist. “You will know you have successfully brought forth the spell when it glows red like blood. See?”

Evelyn watched as the strange shape glowed bright red then faded into her skin like it was never there.

“You try.”

Evelyn concentrated on that spot, willing the sigil to reappear. It glowed more faintly for her, but it was there.

“Good. I will add the same mark to the lining between the layers of your satchel. Unseen but effective. It will allow the object to pass through the barrier as long as it remains in your bag. It works for other things, too. If you ever need to remain undetected by friend or foe, summon the sigil.”

“Thank you.”

“No, witchling.” Second Mother grinned at her, her eyes feral in the afternoon light.
“Thank you.”

Second Mother walked her back out of the clearing and down the dirt path to a section of cavern wall. She reopened the doors, and Valen tumbled to the ground at their feet. His hands were bloodied from where he’d been beating on the stone wall. He lunged to his feet and made a movement like he would charge Second Mother. Evelyn stopped him with a hand to his chest.

“I’m okay. She helped me. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay.” Kirat pulled her into a hug, but she was shaking in fear. She looked up at Second Mother. “Someone or something is coming. We’re in danger. Can you close this door and open another for us? Please?”

“You’re sure you’re okay?” Valen was searching Evelyn’s face, concern clearly etched on his. He cupped her cheek in his hand, rubbing softly with his thumb.

“I am.”

“Then I’ll stay behind.” He dropped his hand from her face. “Try to slow them down. Lead them away from here.”

“No!” Evelyn reached for his arm. “Come with us. We should stay together.”

Valen shook his head. “Not this time, book witch.” He stepped back through the doorway. “I’ll find you. I promise.”

The doors closed. Second Mother turned, and they were on the other side of the woods. The path, the clearing, the cottage—all lost in the trees. Second Mother opened a new passageway and ushered them through it. Evelyn turned back.

“Will he be okay?”

Second Mother shrugged. “I know not.”

“Will you help him?”

“That is his question to ask. Not yours. Follow the tunnel. You will find what you seek.”

And then she was gone. The wall of the tunnel was solid once more, and Evelyn and Kirat were left in total darkness. Their torches were gone, and the walls were bare. No sconces with lit torches to light their way here.

“I think we’re off-map,” Kirat whispered. “I don’t know where we are or where we should go.”

Evelyn pulled her cell phone out of her pocket but found it was dead.

“They don’t work down here,” Kirat reminded her.

“Right.” Evelyn dug through her bag to find the small flashlight she’d brought along, just in case. It wouldn’t last forever, but if they used it sparingly, it was better than nothing. She flicked it on to check their surroundings. The tunnel stretched out directly ahead of them. There were no other openings visible. Evelyn looked at Kirat, then placed her hand on the right-side wall.

“We’ll have to do without the light as much as we can. The battery won’t last forever.”

Kirat agreed, and Evelyn switched off the flashlight but kept it in her left hand, just in case. She pulled her great-grandmother’s moonstone from underneath her shirt. Its

pale glow did little to dispel the inky darkness. Kirat held onto her left wrist, and Evelyn was reminded of the sigil that lay hidden there. They moved slowly, whispering to each other as they went. Kirat kept her hand on the left tunnel wall, and the only sound was the soft brushing of their palms against stone as they walked. Every few minutes, Evelyn used the flashlight to look ahead and behind. Nothing. Time passed. Minutes. Maybe hours. Slowly, their bodies grew too tired to continue, and they collapsed to the ground. Evelyn drew an arrow in the dirt floor to ensure they would know which way to go if they got turned around in their sleep.

They sat with their backs against the cool stone and held hands in the darkness. Evelyn listened to Kirat's breathing change when she dozed off. Sleep was tugging at her eyes, as well, but she fought it. The danger hadn't passed. Not really. It was just too dark to see it.

She had gotten what she came for, but it would all be for nothing if they were lost in unmapped tunnels deep within the Dark City.

She slept.

15

Evelyn woke to Kirat's hand over her mouth and her lips pressed close to her ear, whispering.

"Something is close. I can't tell what it is, but we need to be ready to run."

They got to their feet slowly, carefully. Evelyn strained to listen for whatever sound had alerted Kirat that they weren't alone anymore.

"I don't hear it now," Kirat whispered. "But I know it was there. I know it was close."

Evelyn reached one hand into her pocket for black obsidian powder, then turned on the flashlight.

She looked behind them. Nothing.

She looked ahead of them. Nothing.

The arrow remained etched into the dirt, pointing the way. She turned off the flashlight and reached for the right-hand wall again. They might as well keep going. Staying here was getting them nothing but spooked.

Kirat took her wrist again and soon Evelyn could hear her friend's palm brushing against the far wall as they walked.

“What did it sound like?” Evelyn asked after they’d gone a few minutes with no disturbances.

“I don’t know... movement, I guess? I couldn’t even tell you if it was human or animal. It just... made noise that wasn’t us.”

Evelyn nodded before remembering Kirat probably couldn’t see the movement in the moonstone’s limited light. “Okay. You said it sounded close?”

“I thought so, but everything is so weird in the dark. It’s so quiet down here. I guess it could’ve fooled my ear.”

“Maybe. Let’s keep listening, just in case.”

They continued in silence after that, the quiet disturbed only by the sound of their palms on the walls. Evelyn started counting her steps to try to get some sense of distance if not time. After nearly two miles by her estimation, they heard it.

A rumbling growl and the sound of feet striking the dirt floor. Something big was coming, and fast.

They started to run. It was still pitch black, and Evelyn didn’t dare turn on the flashlight on the off chance whatever was coming didn’t yet know they were there. Her hand dragged roughly against the wall, tearing at the skin on her palm and nicking her fingertips. She grit her teeth against the pain. Then it stopped. She waved her arm around, feeling for the wall.

“Kirat!” she whispered as loudly as she dared. “This way!” Evelyn stepped into the side tunnel and clicked on her flashlight long enough to see that it extended for some distance ahead. “This way. Quiet!”

They moved stealthily down the side tunnel as the sound of running feet grew closer. Evelyn focused her attention on the sigil burned into her wrist. Unseen, undetected, she repeated the words in her head. Unheard, unknown. The sigil glowed red in the darkness, and she covered it with her free hand. The growling grew louder until it sounded like it was almost on top of them. She could hear the heavy panting between growls, punctuating by the heavy footfalls. In a breath, it passed the opening to the tunnel they'd just left and kept going. Kirat squeezed her hand in the darkness, and they moved deeper into the side tunnel.

Miles passed as Evelyn counted their steps. Her feet and knees ached, and her palm was tender where the skin was scraped and torn. She couldn't tell what direction they were going or even whether they were descending deeper underground or climbing toward the surface. It was getting colder, but that made no sense either way. She pulled her thieving gloves out of her bag and slipped them on, grateful for the warmth and the protection from the rough stone wall.

Her great-grandmother used to warn her about touching things that didn't belong to you. Not only in the way any maternal figure might—that's not yours, you might break it, we're not buying that—but also in a manner that was much higher stakes. "You never know when an object might hurt or harm you," she'd said. "If you touch something that is cursed or that houses a dark magic, it'll touch you back, leaving its mark on you one way or another. And it won't stop there." Years later, long after her Nana had passed away and Evelyn was trying to make sense of her world, she began to read books on philosophy, history, anything to give her the perspective she hungered for. Instead, she'd learned there was so much she didn't know, maybe could never learn, and that her great-grandmother hadn't been alone in thinking that darkness was a two-way street. By taking the book, she'd touched darkness—literally—and through her it was touching her friends, too.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. It had been hours since they'd heard the growling beast behind them but speaking in normal tones felt wrong after so much time spent in

silence.

Kirat squeezed her hand again. “For what?”

“For bringing you into this.”

“Oh, stop. I knew what I was getting into better than you did. I work down here, remember? I knew what it would take to go around the coven’s strongholds, the dangers of visiting Second Mother. Of going off-map. I knew the risks.”

“But why?”

Kirat chuckled softly. “Because I like you, Evelyn. You’re good people, despite your tendency to acquire things that don’t belong to you. I spend most of my time surrounded by egomaniacs and sycophants. As scary as this journey has been, it’s been a nice break from that.”

“And you got to see Millie again.”

Kirat made a strangled sound that sounded like a cross between a gasp and a cough.

Evelyn laughed and squeezed her hand. “She is very pretty.”

“She really is.”

They stopped to rest again not long after that. Evelyn once again carved an arrow into the dirt so they wouldn’t lose their sense of direction completely. They sat shoulder to shoulder with their backs pressed against the wall and drank water. Evelyn pulled out the little food she had left—half-crumbled granola bars, mostly—and traded some for a handful of Kirat’s beef jerky and a few pieces of chocolate candy.

“Do you think it’s the coven that’s after you?”

Evelyn sipped her water before answering. “I don’t know. Like you said before, it makes the most sense when you consider the amount of power required to put up a barrier like that. But being down here and seeing the way other magic-wielders have constructed entire worlds of their own... maybe that was an incorrect leap of logic on my part. Maybe it’s just the woman I stole it from. She was definitely freaky enough to do something like this.”

“Can you tell me about her?”

Evelyn did. She told Kirat the whole story, from taking the job from Denmark to escaping the scary vamp lady’s house. She left out what she’d learned about the book from Second Mother. That knowledge felt too dangerous to share.

“Do you think she was an actual vampire?”

“Maybe? It’s so hard to tell in New Orleans.”

Kirat laughed, and it felt good to almost relax. It was impossible to completely forget the trouble they were in, but the load felt lighter for a few minutes. Eventually, they both fell asleep.

Evelyn didn’t know what woke her up or how long she’d been asleep. Her hip and shoulder ached where she’d slid down the wall to lie curled on her side next to Kirat. She eased herself back to a sitting position and listened. Kirat breathed steadily beside her, undisturbed. Evelyn strained to hear something, anything else. The silence filled her ears like white noise, and for a moment she imagined she was lying on the beach on a moonless night, listening to the waves. But she wasn’t. She was sitting on a cold cave floor deep in the Dark City and absolutely no one (except maybe Valen) was looking for her. No one she wanted to be found by, anyway.

Kirat groaned and sat up. “I want to ask what time it is, but at this point I don’t even know what day it is.”

“I would settle for knowing which direction we’re headed in.” Evelyn turned on the flashlight to locate the arrow to reorient herself. They drank more water, then took turns retracing their steps around twenty feet to relieve themselves.

Not even three thousand steps in, Evelyn started to feel like she was being watched. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and she turned on the flashlight to look around them. Nothing. Beside her, Kirat held up her hand to shield her eyes from the bright light.

“Sorry,” Evelyn said, lowering the flashlight. “I thought something was there.”

“What was it?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

They continued on, the only sounds being their hands on the tunnel walls and their soft footsteps in the dirt. The creeping sensation returned, but Evelyn fought the urge to look around again. It was nothing last time. She was just being paranoid—her imagination playing tricks on her after so many hours underground. Kirat wasn’t feeling anything, so it had to be all in her own head. No need to waste more flashlight battery on her own overactive imagination.

Small, cold fingers tickled the back of her neck, and she spun around with a gasp, turning on the flashlight. Nothing.

“What now?”

“I thought I felt something touch the back of my neck.” Evelyn rubbed one gloved

hand on the back of her neck to chase away the memory of what she'd felt. Or thought she felt.

"The mind can play tricks on you down here."

"Yeah."

More walking, footsteps, hands brushing against the cave walls. Five hundred steps, six hundred, seven. A cold hand fisted in Evelyn's hair and yanked her backward. She screamed as she lost her footing and the flashlight clattered to the ground. Her boots dragged in the dirt as she was pulled back down the tunnel the way they'd come. She clawed at the hand in her hair, trying to free herself, and something bit her thumb—hard. Then it was gone. Kirat jogged back to where she'd stopped, the flashlight bobbing in her haste.

"Are you okay?" She crouched beside Evelyn and picked up a pile of loose hair that had been ripped from Evelyn's scalp. "So much for it being all in your head."

"What was that?" She took the flashlight from Kirat and shone it down the tunnel, checking the walls and ceiling for signs of something. Anything. She used it to check her hand and found a few tiny beads of blood where it had bitten her thumb. Its teeth had pierced her thumbnail.

"I don't know." Kirat pulled a small adhesive bandage from her bag and applied it to the bite wound. "We're way beyond my knowledge at this point."

The flashlight flickered, and Evelyn felt panic tighten in her chest. They were lost. They weren't alone. And their primary source of light was dying.

They moved quickly down the tunnel, Kirat forging ahead in the dark while Evelyn watched behind them, flashlight in one hand, a fistful of black obsidian powder in the

other. She turned on the light periodically, looking for whatever had attacked her. Her imagination was in overdrive, filling the inky blackness with visions of horrible ghosts and ghouls and monsters both real and created. She half-dreaded and half-hoped to see something every time the flashlight flickered to life. At this point, a monster to fight would be preferable to the terror of the unknown. She shuddered at the memory of cold hands on her neck, in her hair. Sharp teeth piercing her skin.

Kirat cried out, and Evelyn turned to shine the flashlight on her friend who was ruefully rubbing her forehead.

“I ran into the wall,” she said.

Evelyn shined her light on the wall in front of them. The tunnel they’d been traveling for hours—days?—ended in a T formation. New tunnels extended in both directions.

“Which way do we go?” Evelyn checked behind them again, just in case. No cold-handed creature. Yet.

“Which way are we going?” Kirat kicked the wall. “I don’t know if it matters at this point. We’re lost.”

“Here.” Evelyn handed her the flashlight, then took off one of her gloves and wrapped her hand around the moonstone. “Wait for me.”

Evelyn closed her eyes and reached again for her great-grandmother’s strength. Which way, Nana? Please help me. Which way do I go? She walked a few feet down the right tunnel, listening. Nothing. She returned to Kirat and passed her to go down the other tunnel. She froze when she heard it.

drip

drip

drip

The air smelled wet. The moonstone felt warm in her palm.

“This way!” she called back to Kirat. “I hear water!”

Kirat quickly joined her, shining the light for a few seconds before turning it off to preserve the batteries. “I hear it. Like dripping, right?”

“I smell it, too. It smells salty like the ocean.”

“Or the lake.”

They resumed their previous formation—Evelyn watching their backs, black powder at the ready, while Kirat forged ahead blindly.

The dripping sounds grew louder, the smell stronger. They were closer to the source... whatever it might be.

Evelyn eventually returned the black powder to her pocket and brushed the remnants off on her pants leg.

“Whatever it was, I think it’s gone,” she said. “It’s been a while since anything happened. I don’t feel like I’m being watched anymore.”

“Okay, great. Can you shine the light ahead? I don’t want to run into another wall.”

Evelyn turned and clicked on the flashlight. It flickered weakly, so she slapped it against her palm a few times until it brightened. The tunnel ahead looked the same as

it had for miles except for a thin trickle of water down the center of the floor, making the dirt muddy under their boots.

“I think I see another turn,” Kirat said, pointing.

They rushed forward, following the trickle of water and hoping for something new around the corner. They reached the opening just as a large form loomed in the darkness, holding a torch. Evelyn tried to stop, but she registered the presence too late, and she collided with it.

“Evelyn!” Valen pulled her against his chest with his free arm and bent his head to press a kiss into her hair. “Oh, my god. I found you. Kirat, are you okay?”

“Yeah. We’re okay. Where did you come from?”

Evelyn relaxed into his embrace for a moment, relief flooding her body, his warm touch chasing away the last remnants of the cold fingers.

“After she dealt with whatever was following us, Second Mother sent me after you. I thought she’d put me in the same tunnel, but I couldn’t catch up to you no matter how fast I went.”

Evelyn finally stepped back to look at him in the torchlight. His shirt was torn and bloodied, a cut over his eye looked fresh, and his hands were bruised and scabbed like he’d been in a fight. “Second Mother dealt with them?”

“She did. She sent me out again, with this.” He held up a bag that was filled to overflowing with supplies.

“She couldn’t have given us the same thing?” Kirat grumbled.

“What’s back that way? Anything?” Evelyn pointed back the way he’d come.

“Nothing. Just darkness and empty tunnels.”

“Okay, then I say we forge on ahead, follow the water.”

With Valen’s torch to guide them, they moved more quickly and eventually they reached an open cavern with a well in the center. Several tunnels branched off in different directions. Fires burning in standing braziers filled the space with warm light.

“I know where we are!” Kirat dug in her bag excitedly. She pulled out the map. “We’re back on the map. We’re not lost anymore!”

The center well was built from natural stones of different colors and textures. Ladles of various sizes and shapes were hung on hooks along the outer lip. A rope hung from a metal bar over the center of the well. Evelyn turned the crank and watched the rope coil around the bar to raise the bucket filled with water from far below. Her arm grew tired before the bucket appeared, and she was grateful when Valen reached down and grabbed it for her, pulling it the rest of the way up and out of the well.

They took turns dipping into the bucket with their ladles. Evelyn drank deep, relishing the feeling of cool water filling her stomach. She was hungry, too, but her thirst felt urgent. Once she was sated, she filled her water bottle and retreated to sit against one of the walls. Valen joined her and unpacked some of the supplies he’d gotten from Second Mother. He built a small fire to warm them while they rested. Kirat accepted a bedroll from Valen and stretched out on the opposite side of the fire. She was snoring quietly within minutes.

Valen eased down next to Evelyn. She leaned her shoulder against his, enjoying his warmth after so many days of chill. He pulled the other bedroll out of the bag and

spread it over them like a blanket.

“Here.” He lifted his arm so she could cuddle up against his chest.

Evelyn felt warm for the first time since they’d entered the Dark City. She listened to his heart beating beneath her cheek and some of the tension eased from her body. How long had she been afraid? It felt like weeks. Months. In some ways, her entire life. The fear grew quiet in Valen’s arms, and that felt like a gift.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “For being here.”

She felt his lips press against her hair again. She lifted her head to look up at him and shivered when his hand cupped her face. She held her breath, waiting, hoping. The touch of his lips against hers sent a thrill through every inch of her exhausted body. She wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tight as he deepened the kiss before pulling back to press another kiss against her temple.

“Always,” he said quietly, his arms pulling her even closer against his body.

Evelyn tucked her head under his chin and let herself drift into sleep.

Evelyn blinked, waking slowly. Valen was gone from her side, and Kirat was no longer curled up on the bedroll across the now-dying fire. She sat up and looked around, finally spotting them standing heads together next to one of the taller braziers, examining Kirat's map.

"Any luck?" she called out.

"I think so." Kirat came back to where she was sitting. "Sorry, we didn't want to wake you. You haven't slept that well for days now."

"I appreciate it. You said you know where we are... is there a safe way from here to the door you mentioned before?"

"I think so," Kirat repeated. "I think I can get us to the central zone from here. From that point, there's a pretty straight shot to that far door."

"How many zones between here and the central zone?" Evelyn accepted the bag of trail mix Valen handed her and shoved a handful unceremoniously into her mouth.

"Just one. Zone 42. It wraps around the central zone like a donut. Everyone passes through it to get there, so it's pretty well mapped and considered safe."

"What's it like?" Valen asked, wary.

"How do you feel about Vikings?"

Evelyn shrugged. “Neutral teetering on positive?”

Once they’d packed up their makeshift camp and refilled their water bottles one more time, Kirat led them down one of the side tunnels. After about two thousand steps—Evelyn couldn’t stop counting now—they reached another rune. Kirat activated it with a swipe of her hand, and they stepped through the passageway onto a beach.

Evelyn shielded her eyes from the bright sun overhead, squinting in the overwhelming brightness. The beach stretched out as far as she could see in either direction. There was no sign of a dock or boats of any kind.

“What do we do now?” Valen asked.

“We wait. It shouldn’t be long. The routes run every half hour.” Kirat settled down onto the sand to wait.

The sails came into view first, large and square and white against the blue sky. Then three Viking longships were visible, narrow hulls cutting through the water with remarkable speed. They stopped about thirty feet from the shore. Kirat sprang to her feet.

“Hope you can swim!” She ran into the water as far as she could, then swam the remaining distance. A knotted length of thick rope was lowered for her to climb up the side of the ship.

“Ready?” Valen looked down at her.

Evelyn tightened her bag and the satchel containing the book against her body, double-checking that they were fastened securely. The enchantments would keep the contents dry, but they wouldn’t prevent items from getting knocked loose in the

waves and floating away. “Ready.”

They ran into the water together, Evelyn switching to swimming sooner than Valen did. When they reached the rope, he boosted her up so that she only had to climb a short distance before helping hands pulled her aboard.

The Vikings themselves looked like something out of a history book. Their clothes were made of cloth, thick and durable. The men were mostly bearded, with hair of varying lengths and colors. The women wore their hair long and tied back from their faces. Some sported the intricate braiding styles common in popular culture, while others wore their hair more simply. They were all on the tall side and appeared strong with little visible difference between the men and women aside from the facial hair.

Evelyn thanked the two who had helped her aboard, but Kirat warned her, “They don’t speak. They’re just here to help us cross the zone. Think of it like riding a ferry.”

“Manned by Vikings.”

“Exactly.”

The inside of the ship was simply constructed, with sixteen oars on either side. Thirty-two Vikings sat on small wooden chests. As soon as Valen was aboard, they reversed their course and headed back across the water, rowing in unison without a sound.

“Why don’t they speak?” Evelyn walked down the middle of the ship.

“I don’t know. Because they don’t need to, I guess.”

“Are they real?”

“They are real in the sense that they exist,” Kirat said, echoing Javier’s answer to Evelyn’s earlier question.

“Are they constructs, like Javier?”

“No idea. I’ve never thought to ask.”

The longboat cut through the water with ease and in what felt like no time at all, they’d reached an identical beach on the opposite side of the ocean.

“Thank you for the ride,” Evelyn called out as she climbed down the rope. Just in case.

Valen helped her ease into the water, steadying her until she found her rhythm in the waves. Kirat beat them to the shore and was already activating the exit rune by the time they stepped dripping onto the sand. Evelyn turned back to wave but found that the ships were already nearly out of sight.

Stepping through the passageway into the central zone was like climbing through the wardrobe from Narnia and back into the real world. There were guards stationed just inside the entrance. They greeted Kirat warmly and waved Evelyn and Valen through with her. The guard station stood at very edge of a massive, multilevel cavern. Evelyn stopped to take it all in. Electric lights illuminated the space like a modern city. A massive spiral staircase occupied the center of the space with seven bridges branching out like tire spokes to connect to each floor. A huge elevator moved up and down within the spiral.

“The central zone is sort of like an open-source program. It’s sustained by a community of independent magic-wielders, none of whom claim ownership or make profit from this space. It is maintained for the good of all. It’s meant to be a safe haven for those who need it, but because those who seek safety are not always safe

themselves, it does get a little rough sometimes. Watch your back like you would in any major city, and you'll be fine."

"Kirat!" A small woman with bright blue eyes and deep smile wrinkles emerged from a nearby food stall and embraced Kirat. She kissed both her cheeks in turn, then stepped back to look at her, hands on her hips like a scolding mother. "You've been gone too long! You need to eat, come. Bring your friends. Come, come." She ushered all three of them to a picnic table next to her stall and began showering them with dishes. They feasted on squares of flaky spanakopita, tender cubes of meat on skewers, and slices of sticky baklava, all washed down with bubbly pink soda that tasted like lemonade.

Being surrounded by all the smells and sounds of so many people was jarring after spending so long in the dark silence of the tunnels, but it was a relief, too. Music played somewhere in the distance, children laughed as they dashed between the stalls and tables, and a group of old men yelled at the television in the next stall. Valen squeezed her hand under the table, and she was once again grateful for his presence. Everything felt easier when he was with her.

"This," Kirat said once she'd managed to grab their host's hand in passing. "Is Mama Maria, the best cook in all of the central zone and mama to all those who need one... and maybe even some that don't."

Maria swatted at Kirat's hand. "Everyone needs a mama, child. Especially you."

Kirat scowled playfully at the older woman, who swatted her again. When they'd eaten their fill, they hid cash under their plates to pay despite Maria's protests and headed across the nearest bridge to the spiral staircase.

"We can take the elevator if you want to, but it's usually very slow since it stops at every level," Kirat said.

“Stairs are fine. What’s a little more walking at this point?”

“I can’t feel my legs anymore anyway,” Valen joked.

“I want to take you down to the fifth floor. It’s where the refugees and anyone else who doesn’t have a permanent residence here usually stay. We should be able to rent rooms for the night, shower, maybe even wash our clothes. It’ll depend on what’s available.”

The thought of a hot shower dominated Evelyn’s mind for the rest of their descent. Even a cold shower would be welcome at this point. Anything to feel clean, to wash the last few days from her hair, her skin, her mind. Now that the immediate danger had passed, Evelyn realized how tired she was. Days of sleeping on the hard tunnel floor had left her muscles stiff and sore. Yes, a shower and somewhere soft to sleep was what she needed. She could face everything else tomorrow.

They’d entered the central zone at level 37, and the climb down to level 5 took over half an hour. The crowds thinned as they descended until they were alone on the stairs for the last few spirals.

If Evelyn had thought level 37 was crowded with the food stalls, shops, and living areas all squished together, level 5 was something else entirely. It reminded her of a massive camp site—rows and rows of canvas tents extended as far as she could see, each one with its own little square of earth and a cooking pit. It all looked very uniform and clean. It was hard to believe anyone lived there.

Kirat stepped up to a guard station similar to the one they’d entered through.

“Hey, we need accommodations for three.”

“Kirat! Welcome back.” The dark-haired woman smiled, revealing deep dimples in

both cheeks. “Three together or separate tents?”

Kirat glanced over at Evelyn before answering. “Three separate, but close together, if you’d got it.”

“Sure, sure.” The guard typed for a few moments, then handed Kirat three stone tablets about the size of a deck of playing cards. Each tablet had a series of numbers and letters on it, separated by a dash. A loop of bright yellow rope was tied through a hole at the top. “This is the best I could do. Not neighbors, exactly, but within shouting distance.”

“Thanks, Falima. Let’s catch up sometime soon, yeah?”

“You know where to find me!”

Kirat led them through the entrance and down one of the rows of tents. “Let’s find our beds first, then we can scope out the shower situation. It shouldn’t be a problem since they had enough tents that we don’t have to share.”

“Does it actually get full down here?” Evelyn asked, looking around at the seemingly endless rows of tents.

“Oh, all the time. You’d be surprised how many people wind up in the central zone.” She stopped in front of a tent. A small sign indicated it was tent FF-14. Kirat handed Valen the matching tablet. “This is you, big guy.”

“Where will you two be staying?” He looked reluctant to be separated.

“Our tents are a little further down. We can stick together if you want to, that way I can show you the bath house before we part ways for the night.”

“Sounds good.” Valen tucked the tablet into one of his pockets.

Sure enough, after another twenty tents, Kirat handed Evelyn the tablet with FF-34 written on it. “Here you go, And I’ll be just three tents down.” She pointed. “There.”

“I’m glad we’re close,” Evelyn said. Like Valen, she was loath to be too far from her companions in this strange place. Kirat was at ease and clearly amongst friends, but not so for Evelyn and Valen. “So about that shower?”

Kirat chuckled. “Next stop on our tour of the central zone is the level five bath house and community showers. Follow me.”

She continued down the line of tents until they reached a wide aisle marking a new section. Evelyn noted that the next tents started with FG. Kirat led them down the aisle to a larger square building with FD-FG written over the door.

“They’ve built these every few sections. You can technically use any bath house you want—nobody is going to check your tent registration or anything—but I usually use whichever one is closest to my tent.”

The inside of the building reminded Evelyn of the showers at the public pool when she was a girl, minus the overwhelming scent of chlorine. There were rows of toilet stalls and sinks on one side and a series of showers on the other. Evelyn peeked inside one of the showers. Clean white tiles glistened brightly. There was a small wooden bench against the back of the stall. Fluffy white towels and bottles of various cleansers sat neatly on top. A waxed canvas curtain provided a semblance of privacy. There were three heavy-duty hooks near the curtain to keep bags and clothes out of the way.

Evelyn flinched as a group of noisy teenagers screeched with laughter on their way out of the building. She wondered how long it would take her to feel re-acclimated to

being around people again. It had only been a few days lost in the darkness with Kirat. Her mind needed to catch up to reality already.

“See you on the other side!” Kirat disappeared into one of the showers, and Evelyn heard the shower start.

A glance at Valen told her he was following her lead, so Evelyn moved down a few stalls. She felt safer being further from the door.

“I’ll be right here,” Valen said, pointing at the shower next to the one she’d chosen. “Yell if you need anything.”

Evelyn hung her bags on two of the hooks, followed by her clothes. She set her boots on the floor underneath. The water pressure was perfection, which she supposed was to be expected from a magically maintained shower system. She washed her hair twice and scrubbed her body with a soapy washcloth until it glowed pink. She raked conditioner through her hair, trying to untangle her twisted waves with her fingers. Steam filled the shower stall and her mind wandered. She imagined Valen’s strong hands gripping her hips, pushing her up against the wall. His mouth crushed against hers in a forceful kiss that stole her breath and sent heat pooling low in her belly. His hand slid down to pull her knee up so she could wrap one leg around his waist. She felt his body press against her, and she tilted her head back with a moan. Yes.

A soft sound ripped her from the fantasy and drew her attention to the canvas shower curtain shielding her from the rest of the bath house. It sounded like someone was walking quietly on purpose, sneaking around. Her heart pounded in her chest. The book. She checked to be sure her belongings were all where she’d left them, and after a moment’s thought, she took the satchel containing the book and stashed it on the wooden bench with the towels, just to be safe. Everything else she had on her could be replaced, but losing the book after everything they’d just gone through was unfathomable.

“You okay in there?”

Evelyn jumped at the sound of Valen’s voice just outside. “Yeah, almost done. Um,” she stepped closer to the curtain so that she could lower her voice and still be heard, “could you stand guard until I’m finished? I’m still a little jumpy.”

“I’ll be right here. Take your time.”

Evelyn finished rinsing her hair, then finger-combed a few drops of rose oil through it before gently scrunching her loose curls with the towel until it was still quite wet but had stopped dripping. She dressed quickly, breathing a sigh of relief once the satchel was safely strung across her body once more, then stepped out of the stall.

Valen stood guard, as promised. “Feeling human again?”

“Something like that.” Evelyn looked up at him and felt her cheeks flush as her mind flashed back to her shower fantasy. Hopefully he would blame the hot shower. “Did you see anyone else out here when you finished showering?”

“No, why?”

“It was probably nothing—but I thought I heard someone sneaking around out here.”

“I didn’t see anyone.”

Evelyn nodded. “It was probably my imagination. Like I said, still jumpy.”

“Ready?” Kirat’s hair hung in dripping ringlets around her shoulders, darkening the fabric of her shirt.

They made their way back to their tents. Evelyn kept looking around, still unsure of

what she'd heard in the showers. The last time she'd dismissed something as purely in her head, she'd gotten dragged twenty feet down a dark tunnel. It could be her nerves, but it could also be something very real.

"We can meet up in the morning for breakfast and make a plan for next steps," Kirat said. "I'll need to secure a new map, and I have a contact up on level seventeen who might have used the door we're looking for. I'll plan to go see him tomorrow, see what he can tell us."

Evelyn hugged her briefly. "Thank you."

Kirat looked at Valen. "You think you can find your way back to your tent okay?"

"I'm good."

"Okay. So this area is pretty safe, but I would still recommend warding your tent and keeping all your possessions inside with you while you sleep. No need to tempt the wild youths running around."

Maybe that was what she'd heard—one of the teenagers snooping, curious about the newcomers.

They said their goodnights and parted ways. Evelyn ducked inside her tent. It was a good size, roughly eight by eight, with a fluffy mattress and an assortment of pillows. The thick canvas blocked out the lights from outside, but a small electric lantern provided enough light to function comfortably. Evelyn quickly warded the tent, adding a few words for extra security, then snuggled into the mattress. She tucked the satchel behind her back with the strap still secured around her torso. Whatever she'd heard in the shower still spooked her. Besides, there was no such thing as overkill, not with the magical equivalent of a nuclear bomb tucked in her bag.

They got breakfast from a food stall two floors up from the camp. It was busy, but the line moved fast, and soon Evelyn, Kirat, and Valen were carrying breakfast burritos and cups of coffee over to a nearby bench to sit and eat. Although she'd slept deeply, Evelyn felt slow and tired, and she blinked blearily at the people passing by as she sipped her coffee. Goddess, bless these magic beans .

Her burrito was Tex-Mex perfection filled with pan-fried potatoes, black beans, corn, shredded birria beef, cheese, sour cream, salsa verde, and chunks of avocado. She chewed slowly, fighting the urge to wolf it down. She'd been so afraid in the tunnels that she'd barely registered how little they'd had to eat. Now that she was relatively safe, her body was demanding penance in the form of calories. She took another sip of coffee and almost choked when she saw a familiar figure exiting the elevator.

"Granny Lucy!" Evelyn handed her half-eaten burrito to Valen and set her coffee on the ground by his boot before running over to her friend. "I was so worried about you when I went to your shop and you were gone," she managed, panting. "Are you okay?"

Granny Lucy took Evelyn's hands in both of hers. "Yes, I'm alright—but we should talk. Where are you staying?"

"I have a tent down on level five."

"Good. Let's go there as soon as I get some coffee. My old brain needs lubricating for this conversation."

Evelyn retrieved her coffee and burrito while Granny Lucy went over to the food stall to order. “I need to speak with her alone for a few minutes. Kirat, you mentioned seeking out a contact this morning?”

“Yes. I can go do that while you talk to Granny. Valen, you want to tag along?”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll explore for a while. I can meet you two back at the tents in a couple of hours.”

Evelyn agreed to the plan, and the small party split once again. Granny Lucy made her way over to Evelyn’s bench shortly after, coffee in hand.

“I think I can manage two levels on the stairs,” she said. “The elevator takes too long.”

They didn’t talk much on the way down to level five—it’s difficult to make small talk when big talk is looming. Evelyn held open the door to her assigned tent so Granny Lucy could duck inside. They settled on opposite sides of the mattress, and Evelyn warded the door. Granny added a few words, unfamiliar to Evelyn.

“To discourage listening ears,” she explained. “Now, I think you should start by telling me why you’ve got a cursed book in your bag. It’s about as subtle as a clown at a funeral.”

Evelyn frowned. “I… what do you mean?”

Granny Lucy scoffed. “Don’t play dumb with me, child. You’re no good at it. You’ve got a cursed book on you. Death magic, if I had to guess. You’ve tried to hide it behind all kinds of protections, I’ll give you that, but it’s not enough. Not to fool me.”

Evelyn felt a mix of concern and relief. Concern that all the protections they’d

applied weren't enough and relief that she didn't have to decide whether to tell Granny Lucy the truth because she already knew. She told Granny Lucy what she'd told Kirat—about the job, the strange library, her decision not to deliver the book to Denmark, and her failed efforts to get out of the city.

Granny Lucy patted her hand kindly. “You did the right thing keeping it away from that man. I don't condone the thieving, but if it hadn't been you, it would've been somebody else. And that somebody else likely would've chosen a payday.”

“Thank you.” Evelyn blinked back tears, clearing her throat to hide her emotion. “What happened before you disappeared? Lady Plumeria said something about an emissary from the Lybbestre snooping around your shop after you left.”

Granny Lucy's expression darkened. “‘Emissary’ is too nice a term for the uppity git who interrogated me. In my own shop, mind you. No respect.” She shifted on the mattress. “I had just come downstairs from my apartment to open for the day when someone knocked at the back door. I didn't think anything of it at first—the delivery man often parks back there when the street is busy. I thought maybe it was him. Instead, it was a rude woman from the Lybbestre.”

“How did you know she was from the coven?”

“She bore the mark, here.” Granny Lucy pointed to a spot below her left ear. “They all have it—a small circle with a cursive L inside it. It's easily hidden by a shirt collar or adhesive bandage, and subtle enough to be missed or dismissed by nearly everyone. But once you know to look for it, it's a dead giveaway.”

Evelyn searched her memory for anyone she'd seen in the past week who bore such a mark but came up empty. “What did she want?”

“She started off on my bad side, forcing her way inside without waiting for an

invitation. Then she asked me all kind of things—about my shop, my permits, my profit margins—but what she really wanted to know about was you.”

“Me?”

“That’s right. She said you were a ‘person of interest’ like she was conducting some kind of investigation. I told her I hadn’t seen you since you stopped by the shop previously. She didn’t believe me.”

“But that was true.”

“She wouldn’t hear it. Once it became clear to me that she wasn’t looking for the truth—at least not the truth I had to tell—I told her I was done speaking with her and that she needed to leave. At first, she acted like she wouldn’t, but when I threatened to name and shame her to everyone in the street outside, she left. They don’t like too much attention, you know.”

“I don’t know much about them,” Evelyn admitted. “Mostly just rumors.”

“The rumors are usually true enough. The Coven functions a lot like the mafia. They keep their own secrets and follow their own agendas, by force if necessary. Only the lower-level emissaries bear the mark. A witch with any actual authority within the coven will be marked only by a terrifying degree of power and questionable fashion sense.”

“I’m just so glad you’re okay. I’ve heard bad things about people who’ve come in contact with them before.”

“I’m glad I’m okay too.” Granny Lucy shook her head ruefully. “It’s never a good thing to be noticed—not by them—so I started packing the moment she was gone and left for the Dark City that same day. I’d been here before and knew if I could reach

the central zone, I'd have a chance at avoiding notice for a while."

"Have you dealt with the Lybbestre before?" It was awkward saying the name so much. There was a certain discomfort in it, like discussing the tooth fairy with a dentist. For so long, the Lybbestre had been a boogeyman, more legend than reality, but they were becoming more real to her with each passing hour.

"Here and there," Granny Lucy said. "They keep to their own. Nobody really knows much about the inner workings. I've never met a witch who joined them. They're a closed coven, yet their numbers never seem to dwindle. Their reach, neither. It's like they're immortal."

"But they can't be... right? Immortal witches aren't a thing."

"Not that we know of, but who knows. If anyone was going to discover the secret to eternal life, it might just be an ancient group of bitter old women."

Evelyn chuckled at that, and Granny Lucy looked pleased to have lightened her mood. She patted Evelyn's hand again. "You shouldn't feel bad, you know."

Evelyn felt the smile fade from her face. "How can I not? You, Valen, Kirat... you've all been pulled into this mess because of me. You're all in danger because of my choices. When I decided to keep the book and try to get it out of the city, I was only thinking about the risk it posed to me. I never stopped to think about anyone else who might be impacted."

"Ah, but not for lack of caring, child. It wasn't selfishness that blinded you, but the opposite. You thought you could do it alone, and you planned to, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," Evelyn admitted.

“Except nobody ever does anything alone. Not really. There’s always been help at some point in the journey, whether they like to admit it or not. The older you get, the more you realize how precious your community is and how much you need it.”

Evelyn took a deep breath. She knew Granny Lucy was right, but it didn’t make her feel any less responsible for the danger they were all in. If not for her, Granny would be puttering around her shop right now. Kirat would be sleeping the day away in her apartment in preparation for her night shift in the Antechamber. Valen would be stalking the grounds of Denmark’s estate, keeping it safe and secure. Instead, they were all here, hiding from some of the most powerful witches in existence.

“Knock knock!” Kirat’s voice sounded muffled through the nearly soundproof barrier Granny Lucy had constructed around the tent. They stepped out to find Kirat and Valen looking worried and pissed, respectively.

“What’s going on?” Evelyn asked.

“There’s trouble.” Valen’s hand strayed to the gun on his belt. “They found us.”

“What? Who?”

Kirat huffed in frustration. “They haven’t found us, not yet. But they’re close. My friend in the entry guards left a message for me at the level five guard post. Several witches from the coven entered the central zone this morning, including at least one high-ranking member.”

Granny Lucy uttered a string of profanities under her breath.

“We can’t stay here,” Valen said, his hand suddenly warm on Evelyn’s back.

She looked up at him. “I don’t disagree, but do we know where we’re going? Kirat,

were you able to reach your contact in the upper levels?”

“Yeah. He knows the door we’re looking for, just like I thought. He said he’ll take us there, but he needed to get some supplies together first. He’ll meet us at the level twenty-seven exit in thirty minutes.”

Evelyn turned to Granny Lucy. “I think you should come with us. The only reason you came out of that initial interrogation unscathed is because you genuinely knew nothing about what was going on. Now you know everything. If they have any insight at all, they’ll know immediately, and that puts you in so much more danger.”

“I’ll need my things. I’m staying with a friend on level twenty.”

Evelyn was relieved she didn’t argue. She wasn’t above kidnapping an old woman, but it wasn’t something she actively wanted to add to her criminal resume.

“Okay, Valen and I can go with Granny. We’ll meet you and your friend on level twenty-seven as soon as we can.”

“Hurry. The longer we’re here, the more people the witches will question, and the more the noose will tighten,” Kirat warned.

The elevator took forever to arrive, but they’d decided fifteen floors would take too long to go via the spiral staircase, especially given Granny Lucy’s relative frailty and unwillingness for Valen to carry her. It was too undignified to be tolerated, she said.

By the time they reached the place Granny Lucy was staying, it was nearly time to meet up with Kirat’s contact. Evelyn helped her pack while Granny wrote a note for her friend to explain her sudden absence. After some negotiations, Granny agreed to let Valen carry her bags and assist her up the stairs rather than waiting for the elevator again. He looped one strong arm around her back to hold her firmly yet gently under

her ribcage. She in turn gripped him tightly around the waist. He supported most of her weight, but she kept both feet on the ground, one of her requirements for maintaining her dignity.

Together, they made good time up the final seven levels to find Kirat waiting for them, an unfamiliar man by her side.

“Hello, I’m Armand.”

The man smiled widely. He was a little shorter than Evelyn and handsome, with broad shoulders and a lean, sinewy build. His hand, when he reached out to shake hers, was surprisingly large with pronounced veins winding up into his forearm. He looked like a man who worked with his hands. “I am glad to meet any friend of Kirat.”

Evelyn shook his hand. “Thank you for helping us.”

His brown eyes twinkled. “Of course. I like adventure, and I’m very good at the sneaky-sneaky, which Kirat,” he looked at her with clear admiration, “tells me will be needed.”

“Yes, lots of the sneaky-sneaky.” Evelyn returned his smile. He was impossible not to like. Kirat had so far proven herself to be an excellent judge of people—every ally she’d introduced them to had been great. “Are we ready?”

Together, they made their way out of the central zone via the level twenty-seven exit. At first it seemed like there might be an issue, but Kirat spoke quietly to one of the guards, and he waved them through.

“What was that?” Evelyn whispered when they were a safe distance from the guard post.

Kirat shook her head. “The coven had put a hold on people leaving the central zone. They’re trying to fence us in.”

“Why did they let us through?” Evelyn asked.

“A friend made an exception.”

“You seem to have a lot of friendly connections down here.”

A ghost of a smile flitted across Kirat’s otherwise stern face. “I am lucky.”

Armand and Valen led the way, their low voices echoing off the tunnel walls as they conversed. Granny Lucy followed behind them with Kirat and Evelyn staying close and ready to help her if needed. The first leg of their journey was well lit by the now-familiar torches in iron wall sconces, but after a couple of hours, they took a side tunnel that didn’t have any. Although this tunnel was just as dark and isolated as the one Evelyn and Kirat had wandered in for days, the presence of the others and their torches made it feel much safer.

Armand stopped next to dim entry rune. “This zone is unfinished but largely stable. It is nicknamed ‘the midnight forest.’ Be prepared—it will be very dark, and you might hear noises that will frighten you.”

“Like we’ve done before, stay close and stay quiet. As long as we stay on the path, we should be fine,” Kirat added.

“Should be?” Valen’s hand strayed to the weapon on his belt.

“Yes,” Armand said. “There are no guarantees down here. That goes double for an unfinished zone. Please stay on your guard and stick together. These are the most important things, yes?”

“Understood.” Evelyn pulled the ritual knife from her bag and stepped up beside Granny Lucy. They would need to change their formation when crossing the zone. “I’ll stay with Granny. Valen, can you watch our backs?”

He nodded and moved into position behind her. Kirat moved a few steps ahead to stand beside Armand.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Ready,” Evelyn confirmed.

“If someone needs to be eaten, don’t y’all be thinking I volunteer just because I’m old,” Granny Lucy quipped. “Valen would take the longest to eat. Let’s all remember that.”

The passageway opened with a whoosh, and a cold wind rushed out to meet them. They stepped through into a wooded area. The ground was packed dirt and covered with pine needles. Tall trees rose high all around them. A purple-black sky could be glimpsed through the branches, dotted with bright stars and an oversized full moon. A wolf’s eerie howl in the distance sent fresh chills down Evelyn’s spine. There are no actual sniffers down here , she told herself. It’s all a construct. The product of a someone’s imagination.

She focused on the sigil imbedded in her wrist and watched it glow red as it activated. Better safe than sorry. She thought she saw Granny Lucy eyeing the sigil but when she turned to look at her the old woman’s gaze was fixed straight ahead.

The cold settled into her bones within minutes, her breath coming out in white clouds. They moved along the worn path in silence. Evelyn checked over her shoulder to make sure Valen was still there, and he winked at her. No more wandering off, big guy , she thought. Once was enough.

A twig cracked off to her left, and she turned her head, listening. Another howl, this one closer than the first, came from the right. Her pulse quickened. Were they being hunted? Their torches suddenly felt like beacons of light announcing the presence of prey in the dark forest. Evelyn checked the sigil on her wrist. Still red. Still active. Granny Lucy was slowing down, more affected by the cold in her frail state. Her expression was grim.

More twigs cracked off to the left and out of sight in the trees. A low growl sent Evelyn's heart racing, and she tightened her grip on the ritual knife. A glance at Valen told her he'd heard it too. He'd drawn his firearm and was holding it low, watching. We're too focused on the left side. What if it's a distraction? The thought seemed to hit Valen at the same time, and they both turned back to the right just in time to see a massive wolf leap out of the tree line. Valen fired off several rounds, hitting the wolf midair. It struck Kirat and knocked her to the ground.

Evelyn rushed forward and shoved the wolf off her friend. There was blood everywhere and for several tense seconds Evelyn couldn't tell whose it was. The wolf wasn't moving.

"I'm okay," Kirat whispered. The blood soaking the front of her clothes wasn't hers. "But we should run now."

Valen holstered his weapon and wrapped his arm around Granny Lucy like he'd done before. She accepted his help without a word. Evelyn fell back to watch the rear. They rushed through the woods, all hope of a stealthy exit lost now due the loud gunfire. Valen's quick action had likely saved Kirat's life, but it had also announced to any and all interested parties that there were strangers in this zone. Tasty strangers.

There were half a dozen of them now, maybe more. Evelyn could hear them growling and panting just outside the flickering torchlight. She walked backward, watching directly behind them as well as on either side of the path. Why had the wolf gone for

Kirat instead of Granny Lucy? Wouldn't the instinct be to target the most vulnerable member of the party? Every nature show she'd ever watched had shown predators picking off the old, the sick, and the very young first. Kirat was none of those things.

It's not a real wolf, she reminded herself. Maybe the normal rules don't apply.

"I see the exit sigil," Armand called back. "We're almost there."

Evelyn kept her eyes on the path behind them. She heard the passageway open and continued to back up. Three wolves stepped onto the path, heads low, snarling growls revealing sharp white teeth. Evelyn felt a strong arm wrap around her and pulled her straight back through the passageway. It slid shut before the wolves reached her, leaving them in a dark tunnel once again. Valen set her down gently.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I am. Thanks for the help." Evelyn went to kneel by Granny Lucy who was sitting slumped against the wall. The old woman waved her off.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. I just need a minute to catch my breath. It's been a few decades since I was last manhandled like that." She scowled playfully up at Valen. "I still think we should feed him to the wolves."

"Maybe next time," he said.

Armand and Kirat stood together a few feet away, Armand holding his torch up to illuminate the map Kirat was holding.

"Good news, friends!" Armand announced. "We are nearly halfway there, and the brilliant Kirat has discovered a path that will avoid all remaining zones. It will take a little longer, but I think we all agree that it will be worth it."

Granny Lucy struggled to her feet with Evelyn's help. "Yes, I'm done with zones. Mad houses, the whole lot of them. Lead the way, Armand. I'm ready to see daylight again."

“ Did you hear that?” Kirat raised her torch higher and peered into the darkness behind them.

They’d been walking for 1,572 steps since exiting the last zone. Kirat had been walking ahead with Armand while Valen and Evelyn took turns helping Granny Lucy navigate the subterranean terrain. For the last 780 steps, they’d been on an incline with shallow stairs carved into the floor at uneven intervals. Those stairs were more of a stumbling block than a help, and they’d slowed down to make sure no one twisted an ankle.

“I didn’t hear anything.” Valen helped Granny Lucy over a particularly awkward step. “What did it sound like?”

“Voices. They were faint, but I could’ve sworn I heard them.”

“I’ll fall back and listen,” Evelyn offered. “It’ll be easier to tell without our noise on top of it.”

Evelyn let the others move ahead, and her heart was warmed by watching Valen’s gentle attention to Granny. He’d really grown on her. Time and again he’d proven his willingness to put himself in harm’s way to help her. He looked back at her as though sensing her thoughts, and she waved. Soon the light from their torches faded along with their voices, and Evelyn was left alone in the dark again.

That’s when she heard it. There were people coming up behind them. Several, by the

sound of it. Kirat had been right. They were getting closer. Evelyn extinguished her torch and listened.

“...not far ahead.”

“Good. We need to... her before...”

“...the witch.”

Evelyn had heard enough. She ran back to her friends.

“Kirat was right. There are people behind us, and they’re moving faster than we are.”

“How many are there?” Valen asked.

“I couldn’t tell. At least three. One of them said something about a witch. I think they’re looking for us.”

“Lybbestre?” Granny Lucy looked afraid, which did nothing good for Evelyn’s rising panic.

“I don’t know, but we should hurry. How much further is it?”

Armand fumbled with the map. “I don’t know for sure. It’s hard to tell down here. We could be close, but... I’m not certain.”

Evelyn reached for Granny Lucy’s bag to lighten her load.

“There is no need to run, witchling.”

Evelyn froze. A woman’s voice. It was... familiar. “We need to go! Now!”

Armand and Kirat pushed ahead at a jog. Valen was already helping Granny Lucy, so Evelyn got on her opposite side to provide extra support. Between them, they practically carried her up the incline.

“You won’t escape us. We are everywhere.”

There was a sizzling sound and then a bolt of electricity arced over Evelyn’s shoulder and struck Armand. He cried out and slumped to the ground, his body spasming uncontrollably. His torch skittered along the floor for several feet before stopping.

“Armand!” Kirat knelt beside him and tried to stabilize his head. He stopped moving. “Can you hear me?”

Another sizzling bolt arced through the group, narrowly missing Granny Lucy.

“What the hell is that?” Evelyn asked.

Kirat looked grim. “Magic. Here, take this.” She shoved the map at Evelyn. “You have to go ahead. You have to get out.”

Evelyn shook her head. “You’re coming with me.”

“No. I’m staying with Armand. You’re the one they want, anyway. Take the danger with you, okay? We’ll be alright.” With Valen’s help, Kirat dragged Armand’s lifeless form down a side tunnel. Without a lit torch to reveal their hiding place, they were nearly invisible. “Go! Now!”

“I’m staying with them.” Granny Lucy joined them in the side tunnel. “I can’t run. And like she said—you can take the danger with you. We’ll be fine.”

Tears filled Evelyn’s eyes, but she couldn’t argue with their logic. She grabbed

Armand's lit torch and ran up the incline at a full sprint. Valen kept pace behind her. Farther back, she could hear more running footsteps as whoever was pursuing them matched their speed. The tunnel suddenly opened out into a larger room with multiple tunnels branching off it.

Evelyn opened the map and tried to figure out which tunnel was the right one, but she had no idea what she was looking at. She should have left the map with Kirat. It was useless to her.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know which way to go." The tears in her eyes blurred her vision, and she blinked them away. They'd come so far. She grabbed her great-grandmother's amulet and begged. Please, Nana. It grew warm in her hand, and she chose second to the left. Just as she darted into the narrower tunnel, another bolt of lightning arced toward them, this time striking her right shoulder. Her arm went limp, and she grabbed it with her left hand to keep it close to her body as she ran. She smelled something burning and realized in horror that the strap to the satchel was burning. She let go of her arm to reach for it, but she was too late. The strap broke apart, and the bag slid from her body to clatter to the floor.

"I've got it! Keep going!" Valen scooped up the satchel without breaking stride and urged her forward.

Evelyn kept running, hoping she'd chosen the right tunnel, hoping her arm wasn't permanently paralyzed, hoping they would make it out somehow.

She rounded a corner to see the door ahead across another open cavern, and relief flooded her body, pumping new life into her legs. She dashed into the room. They'd made it. She was going to get out. Escape New Orleans. Get the book to safety. She wondered what the weather was like in the hills of Tennessee, what the nuns would

think of her story.

“Hello, Evelyn.”

That voice. She recognized it now. Evelyn immediately retreated into the labyrinth in her mind, constructing new twists and turns and false walls.

A woman stepped out of the shadows, her flowing gray gown moving with a mind of its own. “No need for that, witchling. I kept my word about your privacy before, did I not?”

Evelyn tried to reach for her obsidian powder, but it was in her right pocket and that arm still wasn’t working. “What do you want?”

She laughed, her white hair practically glowing in the low light. “I want what is mine.”

“I don’t have it. I lost it.” Technically true.

She felt Valen step up behind her, and she was glad he was there. Maybe between the two of them, they could get past her.

“It’s here.” Valen brushed past Evelyn and handed the satchel to the woman before taking up position beside her.

No . Evelyn’s mind couldn’t process what was happening. Impossible.

Valen met her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

It couldn’t be.

“I don’t understand.” Evelyn felt like the floor was tilting beneath her feet. After everything they’d gone through together... she was going to be sick. She squeezed her limp arm with her good hand. There was still a chance she could make it out of this, but she needed her arm to wake up. She wasn’t ready to deal with Valen, so she focused on the woman. “Who are you?”

She smiled, her pointed teeth menacing in the torchlight. “I am Lynorra, Sage of the Lybbestre Coven. And, as luck would have it, the rightful owner of the book you stole.”

Valen looked uncomfortable, as well he fucking should. He stood with his hands clasped behind him and his head down. Coward.

Sorrow washed over her like a wave, but what she needed was rage. “No one should own that book.”

The woman laughed. “Except for you?”

“No! Not me. No one.”

She stepped forward, and Evelyn fought the urge to retreat. Instead, she stood her ground. Her arm was starting to wake up—and so was her anger.

“Tell me something, witchling. Why does an untrained, uncoven, daughter of darkness spend her nights stealing magical books?”

“Daughter of darkness?” Something released in Evelyn’s chest.

“Ah, I see.” Lynorra placed one pale hand on Valen’s shoulder. “You have much to learn. I assumed as much. But I remain curious about you, little witchling.” She pulled the book from its hiding place, and Evelyn felt the full strength of its dark pull

once again.

It whispered to her, humming under her skin, begging to be read. Its false-bright shine was nearly blinding in the low light. Evelyn turned her head away. Feeling was slowly returning to her arm. She wiggled her fingers. Just a little longer and she'd be able to reach for the black obsidian powder. All she had to do was stun them both long enough to grab the book and escape through the door.

"Don't try anything." Valen's voice sounded strained. "Please, Evelyn."

Rage simmered in her veins. Almost there. "Why not?"

"I don't want you to get hurt."

"Oh, fuck you very much." Evelyn forced her tingling hand into a fist. Closer. "Why didn't you just take it from me? You could've overpowered me at any point. Why pretend to be my friend? Pretend to care? What was the point?"

"I..." Valen started to answer, but the Sage cut him off.

"Valen was doing as he was told, nothing more." She ignored the resulting growl from her sidekick.

"Whatever you say." Evelyn needed a distraction, something to draw their attention so she could reach for the powder.

"Oh, darling. I admire your gumption, but it won't work." She was smiling again. "Not this time."

Before Evelyn could respond, Lynorra snapped her fingers and the back of Evelyn's head exploded in pain as though she'd been struck by a brick. She wobbled on her

feet as black spots filled her vision. She blinked slowly, stunned. She had to protect herself. She retreated into her mind again, taking refuge deep in the labyrinth she'd constructed before. Hiding in the hedges. Her knees started to buckle. Her body went limp, and she felt herself begin to fall to the ground.

Valen rushed forward and scooped her into his arms. She vaguely registered his breath on her hair.

"Forgive me," he murmured so only she could hear.

"No," she managed weakly. "Fuck you."

She wasn't in the Dark City anymore. Her nose told her before her eyes could. The smell of torches burning had been replaced by wet, mold, mildew. Even the pillow and thin blanket on the cot she was lying on were damp. The stone blocks making up the walls were dripping with moisture, the tracks forming a myriad of colors—copper, blue, red.

A raw bulb overhead illuminated the space with a yellow glow.

Her canvas bag was gone, as was her jacket. She put her hand to her neck. The crystals were gone, too. She checked her other pockets, her boots, but everything that could have helped her had been taken. They'd known what to look for. Normal humans would have let her keep her jewelry.

The Sage of the Lybbestre Coven.

What did that mean?

Evelyn forced herself to stand, her muscles screaming with the effort. The pain in her head made her dizzy, and she braced herself with a hand on the wall, sucking in deep breaths.

She was going to kill him. She generally wasn't prone to murderous fantasies, but Valen deserved every bad thing she could come up with. Tears threatened to spill down her cheeks at the memory of their last night together, her head on his chest, his lips pressed against her hair. She'd felt so sure of something that night. So sure of

him. It hurt and embarrassed her to realize she'd let her guard down—reluctantly, she reminded herself—only to be betrayed in the end. She didn't want to believe he was capable of that kind of deceit, but she'd witnessed it with her own eyes.

The door swung open heavily, the metal bars scraping against the stone floor with a screech that set Evelyn's teeth on edge.

A young girl stood in the doorway, bare feet peeking out beneath a simple gray dress similar in color to Lynorra's. Her red hair curled around her head in a frizzy halo. Bright green eyes regarded Evelyn with curiosity.

"The Sage would like to speak with you. Will you come?"

It was worded like an invitation, but it felt like a summons. Evelyn nodded reluctantly. As tempting as it might be to wallow in her own misery for a while, she wasn't going to find a way out of this mess by staying in the dungeon.

"Follow me." The girl turned and walked away, clearly expecting her to do as she was told.

The stone floor eventually gave way to stone steps and then smooth stone floor that had been polished to a velvety appearance. Evelyn almost wished she was barefoot too just to feel it against her skin. As they emerged from the lower level, she took in her surroundings. It looked like a medieval castle.

Just like the house where she'd stolen the book previously, it didn't appear to be old and restored but actually freshly built. Up here, the stonework was unmarred by time or the typical damage that came with living beings moving around. No chips in the walls or grooves in the floor. Just fresh, precisely hewn perfection.

Evelyn took a deep breath, searching for the scent of books to tell her that she wasn't

in Oz after all. No such luck.

“This way.” The red-headed girl turned right, leading her through some kind of food storage area, like an ancient storehouse, and down a few more steps into a meeting room. A massive table filled the space. It appeared to be one solid slab of wood, no signs of seams or blending. Carvings cut deep into the side and featured birds, cats, flowers. High-backed chairs lined all four sides. At the far end of the room was a small platform with what looked like a throne. It probably was a throne, Evelyn reasoned. Seeing as this looked like a castle throne room.

Not that she’d ever been in one before, but she’d read about them. In books both shiny and dull.

“Wait here.”

Her guide left as abruptly as she’d arrived, leaving Evelyn alone in the room. Banners hung from the ceiling and draped from wall to wall, but the words written on them weren’t in any language she was familiar with. She didn’t even recognize the alphabet.

“I hope you will forgive the unusual nature of your invitation.” Lynorra had entered behind her soundlessly.

“Invitation? Abduction, more like.”

She made a sound that might have passed as a laugh had there been even a hint of mirth in it. “We do not abduct people, witchling.”

“Oh, no?”

Lynorra made the almost-laugh sound again. “Of course not. Why would we?” She

gestured to the room around them as though it were self-explanatory.

Evelyn snorted. “I don’t know, maybe revenge for what happened in your house? Look, you have your book back. I didn’t even touch anything else. Let me go, and I won’t tell anyone about this whole ‘invitation’ situation. I’m no lawyer, but I’m pretty sure abduction is worse than stealing.”

“Breaking and entering.”

“I entered, yes. But I didn’t break anything. The door was unlocked and...” Evelyn hesitated, hedging her bets. “And the wards were down. But then you knew that.”

She bared her teeth in the almost-smile. “I did, yes. And I find it interesting that you were so certain they were down. How did you know?”

Evelyn kept her mouth shut. She didn’t like to talk about what she could and couldn’t do, magically speaking. She’d learned long ago that most people didn’t believe in magic at all, and those that did—well, they only believed in it according to their own rules and understanding. Evelyn didn’t fit neatly into any of that. Never had. Telling a scary witch about her ability to see magic wasn’t on her Sunday night bingo card.

When Evelyn didn’t answer, Lynorra waved off the question. “It does not matter. The important thing is that you were correct. And now here we are. Do you know where you are?”

“Your evil headquarters?”

More mirthless laughter sounds. “Close enough. Some might call it Castle Lybbestre. We prefer Lybbestre Keep. Would you like to know why?”

“Not really.”

Her black eyes flashed at that, her patience thinning to match her translucent skin, the dark veins even more visible in the brightly lit room. “You would do well to watch that tongue, witchling. I am extending you a great deal of kindness in this moment. You would be wise accept it. With gratitude .”

“Kindness?”

“Have you never heard of Lybbestre Keep, witchling? Or those who reside here?”

Evelyn shook her head. Almost nothing was known about the Lybbestre from the outside. They were ghosts.

The Sage glided over to the throne and sat, slinking one long thin leg over the other, the slit of her dress riding up to reveal more dark-veined, translucent skin. “The words written above your head. Do you recognize those?”

Evelyn shook her head again.

“Interesting. We have been known by many different names over the years. Perhaps if you gave me access to that fascinating little mind of yours again, I could find the answer we both seek.”

Evelyn blinked. She hadn’t realized the labyrinth was still in place. She immediately ran through the barricades in her mind, looking for chinks in the mental armor, confirming that her true mind remained well hidden behind layers of deception and false mirrors. The rage was still there, too. Maybe it was time to let it out to play.

“Perhaps not. Disappointing.”

Evelyn tilted her head to the side. “You know, I can’t decide.”

Lynorra straightened, tensing like a predator ready to pounce. “Go on.”

“Whether you really are as important as you are making yourself out to be or whether this is all some very elaborate charade.”

“Shall I help you decide?”

Evelyn flinched. Lynorra was no longer seated on the throne but standing directly behind her left shoulder, practically whispering in her ear. How did she...?

“Or shall I just tell you?”

The voice came from the right side this time. Then Lynorra said it. The word was a whisper, but it echoed through the room, bouncing off the walls and hitting her ears over and over again. The most dangerous word Evelyn had ever heard spoken aloud. A word of death and curses. A word few lived long after hearing.

The game had changed. Again.

Evelyn turned and looked directly into the black pupilless eyes.

“I’m listening.”

“I see by the change in your demeanor that you know this word.”

“I do.” Evelyn stumbled over her words, fear coursing through her veins like rivers of ice. “And I’m listening.”

“I am glad you understand now. Have a seat at the table.”

There it was again, the order couched as an invitation. Evelyn hesitated. She didn’t

know a lot about the Lybbestre, but what she did know was terrifying. Lynorra had just proven that by uttering one of the unspeakable words. Even after everything she'd experienced in the Dark City, this felt like the gravest threat Evelyn had ever faced.

As one of the oldest covens in the known world, the Lybbestre's true origins were impossible to trace—though Evelyn had been careful in even reading about them for fear of drawing attention. Over the years they'd been known as witches, sorceresses, heathen priestesses. Always among the most proficient of magic users, they were said to continue the old ways, utilizing magical arts, charms, and herb-chants long lost to the rest of civilization. Whether they had taken the name, or it had been forced upon them was unknown, but the root of it lies in poison, drugs, charms—tying them forever to the infamous female poisoners of every age.

There were five unspeakable words that were generally accepted among magic-wielders. The fact that Lynorra just spoke an unspeakable word without hesitation did not leave them on very comfortable footing.

Granted, she had also given Evelyn her name. Well, a name. There was no certainty that Lynorra was her true name or that it held any power over her. But if it did, and the Lybbestre Sage surrendered it without qualms, that suggested her power went beyond knocks and whispers, above wards and deceptions. Name magic was nearly as old as blood magic, and twice as costly.

Evelyn didn't sit. She didn't dare. Disobeying an order (or an invitation, in this case) was risky, but not as risky as signaling an agreement by taking a seat at the table.

“What is the agreement?” she asked instead.

The almost-smile returned. “As I said before—clever girl. You do know something of our ways, then. Very good. The agreement is a simple one. You agree to use your

skills to benefit our coven, and we agree to let you live.” She walked around Evelyn, looking her up and down. “Not a particularly original idea, I admit, but a convenience to us both. We benefit from a mysterious stranger with a very particular set of skills, and you get to remain alive. It is, as they say, a win-win.”

“For how long?”

“You know how long.” The almost-smile shifted to near-sneer.

“I want to hear you say it.”

“This life and every one after it.”

Evelyn wanted to refuse. With every fiber of her being she wanted to scream no and run from the room. But the Sage knew the unspeakable words and had spoken one aloud without flinching. She would find her. And she—or one of her countless minions—would kill her. Or worse. There were so many things that would be worse than a swift death, and the Lybbestre had been accused of all of them.

“I request time to consider your offer.”

She arched one perfectly white eyebrow. “Time to consider?”

“Yes.”

“You do understand the extreme generosity I am now displaying?”

“Yes.”

“I could end your life in many different ways.” Lynorra trailed her fingers over Evelyn’s collarbone, the touch both intimate and chilling.

“Yes.”

“Yet I am offering you another option.”

“At the price of my freedom.” Evelyn fought to keep her composure. She wanted to lash out, to defend herself, to get rid of the creepy feeling where Lynorra had touched her.

“You would choose freedom in death over servitude in life?”

“Maybe. I haven’t decided that yet. I need time to think.”

The sound that wasn’t laughter made Evelyn shiver. “Fine. I am in a good mood. I will grant you this temporary leave to consider your fate. I hope you make the right choice.”

“Thank you.”

“But on one condition, witchling.” She stopped at the doorway and looked back over one bony shoulder. “You must submit to a sentinel.”

“A what?” Evelyn asked.

“A sentinel. He will watch over you.

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Then do not behave like a child. These are the terms, do you agree to them?”

One breath. Two breaths. She could only choose between two yeses. The only no on the table led to death. Or worse.

“I agree to a sentinel.”

“Excellent. I know just the one. Follow.”

She glided out of the room, her free-flowing gown waving behind her. Evelyn hastened to catch up, then almost bumped into her when she realized who was standing just outside the door.

His large frame blocked her view of the rest of the hallway and any possible escape routes. The dark blue cotton shirt pulled taught around his thick arms, hugging his chest before falling to his hips. Dark blue jeans and heavy black boots. She’d seldom seen him in any other uniform, yet it was like seeing him for the first time. He scratched one side of his short beard and met her eyes, the expression in his pleading. For what, she wasn’t sure and didn’t care.

“You.” The word came out more breathlessly than she’d hoped, but then breathing was taking more effort these days. What with the betrayal and all.

“Sage.” He bowed his head respectfully.

“Valen. I hereby assign you as Evelyn’s sentinel. You are to remain by her side until she either agrees to our most generous offer or willingly submits herself to the punishment she has clearly earned. Do you understand?”

“I do. Leave her with me.”

“You are so capable.” She traced one sharp fingernail down his bicep, raising gooseflesh down his arm. “So strong. You know I value you highly, do you not?”

He nodded with a barely concealed grimace, his eyes never leaving Evelyn’s face.

“I will await your decision, witchling. And I would be remiss if I didn’t remind you that it is not only your fate to be considered here. You had help in the Dark City, and I know who. They are safe—for now. I imagine you would like for them to stay that way.”

Evelyn and Valen stood silently staring at each other—sorrow in his eyes, fury in hers—as Lynorra brushed past him to continue down the hallway outside the throne room. The red-haired girl appeared momentarily, her arms full of Evelyn’s possessions.

“Thanks.” Evelyn slipped on her jacket and slung her worn canvas bag across her body without ever taking her eyes off Valen. The pit in her stomach was cold and heavy, but the rage in her blood burned hot. He’d betrayed her. Worse, he’d befriended her and then betrayed her. He was the reason she was facing a lifetime of servitude or death. Why her friends—whose only crimes were trying to help her survive—were being threatened.

“Does Denmark know you work for her?” She ground out the question between clenched teeth.

Valen shook his head. “No. As far as he knows, I work only for him.”

“So you’re just lying to everybody.”

He scowled and started to reach for her arm, but she pulled back reflexively. He let his hand drop with a shrug. “I never lied to you.”

“Oh, my bad. You just set me up.”

“I didn’t...”

“You did. And she said you have to watch me. She didn’t say I have to do what you say. So do your best to follow orders, I guess. Watch me walk away.”

Valen stayed a step behind her the entire way out of the unfamiliar house, then blindfolded her, apologetically, before seating her in front of him on his motorcycle. When she asked why she couldn't ride on the back like a normal passenger, he explained that he had to be sure she remained blindfolded until it was "safe." Whatever that meant. She fantasized about forcing him to crash the bike just to spite him, but the look of concern or fear or whatever it was she'd seen when Lynorra gave him his orders gave her the slightest bit of pause.

She needed a chance to interrogate him, to see if there was any possible way she could wriggle out of this because dead didn't sound so good but a life of servitude to the big bad of the witch world didn't sound much better. Not to mention that Lynorra was in possession of the death book once again. Who knew what she planned to do with it.

Valen removed the blindfold once they reached her apartment, and she dismounted without a word, immediately heading up the stairs to her door. She removed the wards but left the deadbolts in place to turn and look down at where he'd stopped halfway up the soggy wooden steps.

"I think you've come far enough," she said, her tone more civil than she felt.

"I have to come inside."

"Do you though?" She tilted her head to the side and squinted at him doubtfully. "Because the lady mother definitely didn't specify."

“I do.”

“Give me one good reason, Valen.”

“I can’t see you from out here.”

There it was. The simple reasoning she’d grown to know and sort of like about the big guy. Too bad he’d turned out to be a total untrustworthy asshole.

“That’s it? That’s the argument.”

He shrugged. “That’s it. I’m your sentinel. I have to... watch over you.”

Under different circumstances she’d have had a cleverly inappropriate joke to make about that one, but the pit in her stomach let it slide by.

The three sisters came running out of the back bedroom, loudly announcing their displeasure at her extended absence. Evelyn’s heart tore open at the sight, and she slid to the floor to greet them without bothering with the door. Valen closed, locked, and warded it for her. The sisters continued their chastising mews, stretching up her body to bump her chin with their heads, rubbing their soft bodies all over her with a desperate intensity. Tears ran down her cheeks as her last remaining wall of composure finally crumbled. Unless she could find a way to convince the Lybbestre to let her go, this little life she’d built, the one filled with shiny books, cups of tea, and the irreplaceable sisters—it was over.

“I’ll be in the bedroom.” Valen left her alone with her cats and her grief.

Her sorrow came out in gasping sobs. She was exhausted in every possible way. Images from the last week flashed through her mind—Valen’s house, eating takeout, Kirat’s brave smile in the flickering torchlight, Millie’s technicolor paradise,

breakfast burritos, Granny Lucy sitting on a mattress in her tent—it was too much. She didn't know what had happened to her companions after Lynorra found them, and after her parting jabs about their safety, Evelyn was worried. Fear stalled her tears, and she pulled out her phone. The battery was long dead, and she didn't have any of their numbers, anyway. Disconnected connections. Her specialty.

“Valen!”

He stuck his head out of the bedroom door. “Yeah?”

“Kirat, Granny Lucy, Armand—do you know what happened to them?”

“They're alive. I don't know where they are, but I know they're unharmed.”

It wasn't much, but it was something. Assuming he wasn't simply lying again so she'd comply, do as she was told. “Why did you do it?”

His expression was grim. “I can't explain it to you yet, but I promise I will as soon as I can.”

Bullshit, she thought.

“Bullshit,” she said.

Evelyn returned her focus to the sisters. She'd had enough of his empty words to last her a lifetime. Ultimately, it didn't matter why. The end result was undeniable. Her life as she knew it was over, and it was his fault.

Evelyn lay curled up on the couch, three purring friends piled on top of her in a line from hip to shoulder. Nona bumped her head against Evelyn's hand, then started chewing at an edge of the bandage that had lifted from her skin. She'd forgotten all

about that.

She carefully extricated herself from the cuddle pile and went to her bathroom for the first aid kit. Valen was stretched out on her bed, hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling. Watching her. Right. So vigilant.

She peeled the bandage off her thumb, careful not to further damage the skin underneath it. Stupid fucking tunnel-dwelling monsters with their cold hands and needle teeth. There were several small puncture wounds on the pad of her thumb, and one distinct hole in her thumbnail where a tooth had pierced all the way through to damage the skin beneath it. Dark purple bruising bloomed out from each tooth mark.

“Let me see.” Valen stood in the bathroom door, seemingly summoned by her suffering. He probably wanted to be sure he didn’t miss any of it, the bastard.

“I’m fine.” She tossed the bandage in the trash with her other hand and reached for the bottle of rubbing alcohol. “I just need to clean it and put a fresh bandage on. No need for official sentinel oversight.”

He grabbed her wrist and pulled it up closer to his face and the bathroom lights. “How did you get this?”

“Let me go.” She tugged at her wrist, but he didn’t budge. She didn’t want his help. “Valen, let me go.”

“Not until you explain.”

She sighed. “I don’t know what it was. When Kirat and I were wandering in the tunnels after Second Mother, something was following us. Well, me. It grabbed me by the hair and pulled me away down the tunnel. I reached back to try to free myself, and the fucking thing bit me.”

“You didn’t get a look at it?”

“No. Now will you let me go? I want to clean the wound.”

He released her wrist but didn’t move to leave the bathroom. Ignoring him as best she could in the small space, Evelyn washed her thumb gently with soap and water. It looked pretty gnarly but didn’t really hurt. She poured the alcohol over the torn skin, bracing herself for the burn. When it didn’t come, she frowned.

“What?”

“Nothing. It just didn’t hurt to pour alcohol on it, that’s all. Just felt cold, if anything.”

Before she could stop him, Valen snagged her wrist again, this time pressing on the wound. Evelyn shrugged. It didn’t hurt.

“Evelyn.” His voice was quiet, barely above a whisper. “There’s deception.”

“What?” She successfully snatched her wrist from his grasp. “Why would there be deception on my thumb?”

She made a show of pressing it with her other hand like Valen had done, but she was actually peering closely at it, trying to see through any false veneer. It wavered, and she looked harder. In a blink, the bite marks were gone. Her thumb appeared completely unharmed.

As soon as the deception fell, cold chills ran up her arm, spreading like icy fire across her chest and down her other arm. So cold. Darkness began to cloud in at the edges of her vision and her head swam. She didn’t realize she was keening to the side until her head rested against Valen’s broad shoulder.

“Fuck.” She wasn’t sure who swore, her or Valen, but they were both right—and something was very, very wrong. She squinted at his face as it swam in and out of focus. What was going on?

Her knees gave next, and she sank further into Valen’s arms, spurring him into action. As her vision clouded over completely, she heard a strange growling sound, then felt him pull her against his chest, hairier than she’d expected considering he was wearing a shirt last time she’d checked. Her world sank into darkness. She barely registered it when they left the apartment, then wind was pulling at her hair as he ran, bumpily, toward she didn’t know what. He smelled different now, earthier, familiar but she couldn’t quite think of why.

And then there was only the dark nothing.

She awoke to sun streaming in a window near her head, the light too bright to bear, her head threatening to split in two from the worst migraine she'd ever have. She groaned, pulling the covers up over her head. Soft snoring shook out the last remaining cobwebs of sleep, and she threw the covers back down, squinting in the bright light to see Valen sound asleep in a chair next to her bed, arms crossed over his chest, feet propped on the mattress next to her legs.

She was in an unfamiliar place again. Another Lybbestre stronghold? The room was sparsely decorated but comfortable, the bed deliciously soft with just the right number of pillows. She struggled to sit up as the events of the night before came flooding back—arguing with Valen, cuddling her cats, standing in the bathroom together, deception, the darkness.

She pulled back the sleeve of the oversized robe she was wearing to look at her right hand. It looked normal except for the tiny pinprick of black slightly off-center on the thumbnail. She didn't remember that being there before. She scraped at it with her thumb, but it didn't budge. The snoring had stopped. Valen was awake.

He sat watching her, the look in his eyes unreadable. Purposefully blank, she'd learned.

“How are you feeling?” His voice was hoarse with sleep.

“Better. What happened? Where are we?”

He dropped his feet to the floor and took her right hand in his, examining the dark spot on her nail. "I'm not sure what happened. Something bad when you dispelled the deception. I've never seen that before. You were overcome by something. It seemed to leave you during the night, but you still bear this mark. I don't know what it means."

She let him hold her hand until he released it on his own, a small kindness for the way he'd gotten her out of there and brought her somewhere safe.

Kindness, not forgiveness.

"Where are we?" she asked again.

"Lybbestre Keep. Well, one of them. I didn't know where else to take you."

"I understand. I would've done the same thing. Where else to seek help for a magical problem than the home base of the most magical group we know, right?"

He seemed relieved that she wasn't acting angry at him. He hadn't liked that before. She stiffened, putting her emotional barriers back up. She didn't care what he liked or didn't like, she reminded herself. He wasn't her friend anymore. She had to remember that he was the reason she was in this predicament to begin with. He'd sold her out.

Lynorra entered the room without a knock, her flowing gray dress doing that mesmerizing underwater dance thing again. Her smooth skin appeared even more translucent in the direct sunlight, the dark veins disturbingly stark in contrast.

"You are awake. Excellent." She approached the bed and took Evelyn's hand from where Valen was still holding it. The look she gave him was possessive. Interesting. She pulled Evelyn's hand up so that she could inspect the spot. "As I feared. He did right to bring you here. Necromagic is almost impossible to eradicate once it has

taken hold.”

“Necromagic?” Evelyn pulled her hand free from the witch’s grasp, scooting back so she could sit with her back against the headrest. She’d never come across necromagic before. She’d read about it, but very rarely. It wasn’t something that was mentioned anywhere after the Dark Ages concluded. It was basically a myth. Only not, because of her black spot.

Lynorra tilted her head to the side and regarded Evelyn thoughtfully. “What do you know of necromagic, witchling?”

“Not much. I’ve come across the term, but I didn’t know it was still being practiced.”

“It isn’t. Officially, it has been wiped from the face of the earth.”

“Unofficially?”

“Diseases are never truly destroyed, are they? They simply... mutate.” She sneered when she spoke the last word, her top lip lifting delicately to reveal one sharp incisor. She wasn’t a vampire—at least as far as Evelyn could tell—but she would make the alley vamps jealous if they saw her. She had everything they wanted and then some. “We have worked tirelessly to rid it from our ranks, to prevent new witches from learning it. But free will makes that difficult, to say the least. Inconvenient.”

“Free will?”

“Yes.” She showed no signs of regret about her statement. “If I could force it to be forgotten, removed, no longer a threat, I would. It would be for the best of everyone.”

“Even if it meant the loss of free will.”

Her ebony eyes narrowed. “Even if. This is your first brush with it. You have no idea

what it can do. What it has done. If someone is practicing it, here in the city, that is very concerning. And a surprising coincidence, I must say.”

“What does this mean for me?”

She smoothed one sharp-nailed hand down the front of her dress. “I do not know yet. I have summoned the council. But I will not deceive you about this, witchling. Necromagic is extremely dangerous. I know of no cure. We must hope the council will know something I do not. And that they will agree to help you.”

“You mean they might not?”

She shrugged, the movement so slight Evelyn almost missed it. “It is more likely than unlikely. We are not in the habit of using magic to help those not of our Order.”

Ah, so there it was. The Sage was no fool, and she was using this brush with necromagic to push Evelyn toward agreeing to work for the Lybbestre. Being aware of the attempted manipulation didn’t mean it wouldn’t work. Evelyn very much wanted to live. Valen had leaned forward to rest his forearms on his knees, his gaze locked on her face, the expression still carefully blank. He wanted her to say yes.

Evelyn closed her eyes and turned inward, searching within herself for the answer. It was a practice she’d turned to often as a teenager, but she hadn’t needed it lately. It only took a few seconds, then she knew. She was going to join them. She had always been going to join them. From the moment Lynorra first appeared at the top of the spiral staircase, her fate had been sealed. Her life was no longer her own. Hot tears threatened to slip out from beneath her lashes, and she blinked rapidly to force them back. Not here. Not now.

“Okay,” she whispered.

“What was that?” Lynorra leaned forward, her claws digging into the bedspread near

Evelyn's foot.

"I agree. I forfeit my life to the service of the Lybbestre."

A flash of pleasure lit up Lynorra's face, and the almost-smile returned for the first time that day. "Excellent. You have chosen wisely, witchling."

She left, turning back at the door to motion Valen to follow her out. He reached into his pocket and set something on her bedside table, giving her a subtle wink as he did so.

Evelyn took off her great-grandmother's moonstone amulet and held it in her hands. "What about the others who were with me in the Dark City. Valen tells me they're safe?"

Lynorra's eyes flicked to Valen with a flash of disapproval. "They are. For now."

"For now? What does that mean?" Evelyn's head throbbed.

"It means, witchling, that you bound their fates to yours when you brought them into this, and only your sacrifice will protect them. Fulfill your agreement to us, and they will remain safe and free."

Evelyn scraped at the black spot on her thumbnail. "And if I die?"

Lynorra shrugged. "Then they will no longer be of any interest to us."

Evelyn stood by the window near the bed. Hours had passed since her conversation with Lynorra and her acceptance of the agreement. The moon had risen high over the grounds, and Evelyn basked in the cool glow, grateful to be above ground. She opened the window a few inches to let the evening breeze flow in. It smelled like honeysuckle and jasmine.

Her life felt like it was over, but it she knew it wasn't. She would find a way out of this mess. She absently picked at the black speck on her thumbnail. She would figure out a cure for the necromagic that marred her fingernail. She slipped the small bottle of Granny Lucy's black obsidian powder Valen had left her into her pocket. And whatever came next, she was still determined to get the cursed book out of the wrong hands, even if it meant stealing it again. This time from the most powerful coven in history. Typical Tuesday.