



When the Witch Met the Minotaur (Leafshire Cove Monsters #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She crafts perfection; he conjures chaos—and neither is prepared for the spell they cast on each other.

I am respected in Leafshire Cove because I perform magic exactly the way it should be performed—with a witch's intuition. My spells are precise, and they're either wonderfully practical or completely fun. Regardless, my magic is true magic. On market days, my cart always has the longest line.

That is, until he arrives.

An arrogant, foolish minotaur with a ridiculously posh accent sets up shop right beside me. And even though his magic is only a mishmash of tacky illusions and over-the-top displays, townsfolk flock to him.

Infuriating.

When one of his stupid illusions triggers a magical mishap, I have to step in to keep the whole town from going down. And just when I think he's my biggest issue and I might have to murder the fool, we discover something far, far more dangerous hiding beneath the streets of Leafshire Cove.

This rivals to lovers cozy fantasy romance features spice, monsters, and banter that will have you kicking your feet. Book Two in the Leafshire Cove Monsters series, this book is a standalone with a happily ever after ending.

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Chapter 1

Tully

In the busy marketplace, a light snow floats down to land on my customers' shoulders and hats. Thankfully, the cold doesn't dissuade them from waiting to buy my potions and vials of magic.

Halvard, the large orc male who runs the sword training sessions at the armory and works at the pub lifts a sparkling vial. "Tully, does this new flying potion work on larger folks?"

A gust of wind tugs at my pointed witch's hat and the ends of my wild, red hair. I do my best to hold my hat on.

"It does. Just be sure to take it on a full stomach or it might make you nauseated."

He closes his big green fist around the potion and retrieves a handful of coins with his free hand. I accept the payment and look to the next customer in line.

It's young Greta. As a goblin, her skin is nearly as green as the orc's, but it has a sheen to it. Her black eyes take in my wares.

"I need a love potion," she whispers.

I lift a scarlet-hued sachet from the box beside my wooden vial holder. "Remember, I announced a new rule concerning these types of magical potions."

She raises her head and her chin barely reaches the cart's shelf. Goblins are always on the short side, but she is even smaller than most.

"I know," she says. "Only use them at the town dance and you must inform the one taking it before dosing them or yourself."

"Correct!"

Lord Mayor Rustion insisted on this new rule after hearing about what I did to Laini and Rom during the harvest season. I think the rule takes a good bit of the fun out of using a love potion, but I don't want to go against Rustion and lose my right to sell at the market. It's not as if Laini and Rom weren't absolutely dying for one another at that point. I just shoved their shyness out of the way.

Greta pays me, and I lean to the side to see who is next, but my line is gone.

Poof.

Like I waved my wand and made them disappear.

What in the world?

I turn to see a new cart set up only a stone's throw from mine.

It's him .

It's the arrogant minotaur that had the nerve to suggest he could help me with one of my spells on Laini's wedding day. He has wide, broad horns that are decorated with metal bands and a chain. A ring glints from his aristocratic nose and his wavy hair falls into his dark eyes. A tail like a whip flicks behind him. I swallow and grit my teeth as he smiles at his line—a row of customers that were mine.

I march over and point my wand at him. Blessed Stones, he's tall.

"What are you doing here?" I demand.

His gaze peppers my cheeks, forehead, and eyes, and his lips flick upward at the sides like this is completely amusing.

"I'm taking a bath, Mistress Tully. What does it look like?"

"Hilarious." I bare my teeth. His eyes twinkle like he's just super happy. Well, he's about to be a lot less happy.

"Good morning to you, too," he says with a smirk that enrages me.

"It was a good morning until you showed up," I snap. "What are you hawking here?"

I finally look at his cart of goods. My mouth falls open and my wand arm drops to my side. Like me, he has a vial holder filled with sparkling magical concoctions. Two smaller shelves on the side of his cart show small bags of what smells like sage and wishberries.

"You are selling magic?" It's impossible. Appalling. "But you're a minotaur!"

"Quite the observant creature today, aren't you?"

My face goes hot. A sure sign that I'm about to annihilate someone.

Like he has no cares in the world, the minotaur hands a vial to his next customer—a customer that should be mine—and takes their payment. I glare at him and raise my wand again.

“How dare you attempt to trick my fellow townsfolk?”

“I’m not.” He points to the green vials. “These are memory enhancers.” Next, he gestures to the pink vials. “These allow the drinker to fly for a bit. The sachets are for easing difficult relationships. They’re a twist on a typical love potion that I’m particularly proud of. Took me a full two months to perfect that mix.”

Ridiculous. He’s lying through his pretty white teeth. I spin to address those gathered.

“This is a sham,” I announce. “Minotaurs don’t even have a spark of magic.”

The crowd eyes me, then glances at the minotaur. They should know the truth of this already. The only Leafshire Cove folks who can do magic are Rom the gargoyle and Grumlin, my wizard friend with benefits. Their powers are incredibly niche though—nothing like a witch’s power.

I lift one of his vials and shake it over my head, my witch’s hat trembling like it’s angry along with me. “He is selling you junk. I guarantee this does nothing. He’s a charlatan. Only witches can create magic like this.”

“If you think I’m scamming these fine people,” the minotaur says, “why don’t you try one yourself?”

“Ha!” I jab my wand into his broad chest. His skin is a tan color, and he obviously doesn’t feel the cold much since his throat and part of his collarbone are exposed. “That just shows you know nothing about magic. Witches can’t be swayed by potions.”

The crowd is just watching all of this, and I’m over it. I have a powerful reputation in my town. I am not going to ruin it for this idiot.

“Oh, well, thanks for telling me,” he says. “I didn’t know that.”

I narrow my eyes at the trickster. “I suggest you get your stuff out of here before the hour is up. Someone will likely report you to the mayor and then you?—”

He lifts his hands suddenly and drops two handfuls of glittering dust. A unicorn appears in front of his cart, and the customers draw back, gasping and shouting with excitement. It’s just a stupid illusion, but I have no clue how he managed it without magic. The unicorn bucks and whinnies then disappears in a shower of stars. Everyone except me claps and cheers. They rush toward the cart again, pushing me back, and they begin demanding products from this charlatan.

“Can we buy one of those?”

“How about two, one for each of my younglings?”

“Can you make one that looks like a lion instead? I’ll also take three of your relationship potions.”

“I need a flying potion! Yours are cheaper than hers.”

I blink at them, my former customers. I have to stop this or I’ll be ruined. I push between two pixies to get back in the minotaur’s face.

I jab his chest with my wand. “Listen, you, what kind of trick is this?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out.”

“Are you serious? What kind of infantile statement is that?” My blood boils in my veins, and magic snaps and crackles within me.

Tail snapping behind him, he holds out his hands, palms up. “Easy, beautiful. Please don’t blast me to bits.”

I don’t even know what to do with his response. Growling, I whirl and storm away, my feet lifting from the cobblestones a few feet as I hurry away. If he won’t come clean about his little unicorn illusion, he must be using something dark. It must be dangerous. No matter what, his illusions go against the natural order of things. I can feel it in the air. It’s like a storm approaching and dropping the air pressure. And I can hear it—a high-pitched buzzing that likely no one but a witch can hear. I must tell Rustion. He will kick this fool out of town.

I pack up my things so no one can pity me. I loathe anything like that. I don’t need anyone’s kind smiles right now. I need a person of authority to take action. If Rustion won’t do it, I might have to do it myself.

I’ll probably accidentally murder the minotaur and the repercussions from that...

Well, it would be such a pain to deal with. Hiding a body. The threat of hanging. Far too much trouble. It’s time for winter fun, not managing a menace to our town. I want to ride in sleighs, make snowball cookies with Kaya, and join in on the new moon ritual that Grumlin always hosts at his tavern.

Stupid minotaur. Just the thought of that smirk of his has black smoke hissing from my wand.

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Chapter 2

Argos

I pack up and return to my temporary lodgings with the town's pub owner, Cyrus. When I swing the door open, the dragon shifter raises a hand. He has dark green wings and hair, and his skin is a fascinating shade of bronze. Gold scales shimmer on his face and arms, and he has horns, though they are small and curved backward unlike mine. The fellow always has a smile for everyone.

"Hello, Argos!" He frowns at the orc lad wiping down tables. "Trustan, help him out with that cart, will you?" Cyrus winks at me. "Have to take care of my only tenant."

I hand over some of my goods to Trustan. "Thanks."

We manage to get the folded-down cart into the back storage room behind the linen curtain and I climb the stairs to my room above the pub's main gathering area. That witch... Gods, she is gorgeous. Too bad she loathes me.

Once I have my stuff stashed away, I join Cyrus at the bar.

"What are you serving tonight? I'm starved. And I have the coin to spend finally."

Cyrus laughs, a trail of black smoke coming from his mouth. He scoots a pint my way. "Mincemeat pie and a local cheddar. Sound good?"

"Perfect."

Cyrus greets four pixies, kissing one of them soundly while throwing her back into a dramatic dip. She laughs, then sits with the others at a table in the center of the pub. A fairy joins them and soon they're drinking and trading loud stories.

A human male takes up a lute at the back of the room and begins plucking a jaunty tune.

The food is delicious. When I first lost everything and headed into the world to figure things out, I expected most lower-class food to be tasteless. But I've found it's like the food I was served at my parents' table growing up—sometimes good, sometimes awful. I prefer eating with the common folk. No fancy forks or spoons to juggle. You don't have to sit a certain way or follow any set rules of conversation over a meal. It's so relaxed. But I must stay focused on my goal even as I enjoy my time here in Leafshire Cove.

I must earn enough to buy back our family's estate from the debt collectors.

Cyrus leans on the bar in front of me. "Don't look so down. I'll have to fire my cook and when I say fire, folks tend to get nervous."

I chuckle and wave him off. Cyrus is a perfect pub owner—jovial and good with people. "The food is great, really, Cyrus. Thanks again for letting me stay here on credit."

He nods, and the scales that frame his face catch the sconces' light. "How was day one selling your wares? Did our town treat you well?"

"I sold nearly half of my stores."

"Impressive. But you appear troubled."

I don't want to get into talking about my father's death and all of that, so I focus on my other issue. "There is this witch..."

A laugh bursts from Cyrus and he slaps the bar top. "You met Tully! I'm sure she has a lot to say about your unique brand of magic."

"She certainly does."

I can't help but smile though because damn if that witch isn't the most intriguing female I've met in my entire life. That scowl, those fierce green eyes, that temper... I can't wait to give her more trouble tomorrow. I take out my notebook where all my experiments are recorded.

Cyrus gestures to my scribbles. "With the way you like to research magic, you might very well be the one to finally solve the puzzle of our saucy witch."

"I heard she was with the tavern owner."

"Grumlin? No, they're casual. There's nothing to bar from trying to court Tully if you're so inclined."

"I might die trying."

"That's a bet I would take, I hate to tell you."

We're both laughing now and he hands me a second pint. "This one is on the house."

Cyrus gets out some dice and we do a little low-level gambling. He isn't a fool; he sees I don't have money to waste, so we keep it to single coppers and just play for fun.

“Do you think Tully will hinder your ability to succeed here?” he asks, rolling the red glass dice again.

Two fives and a three. All odds, so it’s a win for me. I gather his coppers, then put one out to start a new pot.

“I don’t see how she could.”

The red of the dice brings Tully’s bright hair to mind. I imagine fisting my hand in those curls and forcing her head back so I can lick my way up her pale throat. I shake my head to clear the thought away.

“I see about ten ways,” Cyrus says.

I take a cold swallow of my pint. “But there’s nothing she is allowed to do per town law.”

“She’s quite good at getting around laws and ethics.” He says it like he admires her for it and I grin.

“I’m up for the challenge.” I finish up the cheddar and wipe my hands on my napkin.

“Just watch yourself if she starts being nice.”

“Will do.” I roll the dice, and they come up as a split, so I toss them once more.

The lute player starts a song that has the other pub customers clapping.

“Get to know this tune. You’ll hear it at the Goat and Dragon when Grumlin hosts the new moon ritual. If you’re the last to start clapping and someone actually catches it, you’ll owe everyone in the tavern a round.”

“Wow. All right. Thanks for the heads up.”

He nods and hands over his coppers. “Let’s end on your win here, friend. I need to see to those orcs. They get grouchy when I don’t keep them well-fed.”

I smile a greeting at the group of green fellows gathered at the door.

“Welcome!” Cyrus bellows with arms wide and his dragon tail swishing. I wonder how large a dragon he is when he shifts.

Trustan takes my plate and cup away and I focus on my notebook. The last experiment I did with the khymeia stones went awry, and I need to see where I might have misstepped. When I added a pinch of starshine pollen and a dusting of mercurialionion, the illusion which was meant to be an interpretation of my childhood home turned into a mess of vines. The combination had burned my fingers a bit as well. Maybe the stones didn’t need the mercurialionion because they had their own regenerative power. Hmm...

I jot down a few ideas about what to cup in my hands when I bring the stones together to produce the magic. I’ve done all right with no ingredients at all, but only for some spells. Maybe I could try wishberries. I wonder how that would affect the stones tie to my memory and my ownership of the stones. I actually don’t even know if my ownership of the stones even matters.

When I first found the stones in my father’s office, I hadn’t known what they were. I still don’t know much about them. I only found the one note beside them in the vault after his funeral.

I freely give these khymeia stones to my son by blood and by soul, Argos. Son, find a darkblood to give you guidance. I never could figure them out.

“Eh, Cyrus.”

The dragon shifter looks up from a book of his own, his quill dancing with his quick writing. “Aye?”

“Do you know what a darkblood is?”

I don’t want to bring up the name of the stones in case they’re illegal. They’re the only thing that has been useful for earning money. I can’t part with them until I can buy back our land, farm implements, and seed to bring our estate back to life. My mother is too far gone in grief to help out much. I don’t want to push her. Not yet.

“Ah, that’s what northern folks used to call witches and wizards.”

Makes sense. Father was originally from the far north. “Thanks.”

“Of course.”

I can feel the dragon’s focus on me, so I gather my cloak, notebook, and quill and head to my room. “Good night!” I call to him.

He nods, but he looks suspicious of me now. I shouldn’t have asked him about the darkblood term. It’s piqued his curiosity. I don’t need anyone getting into my business until I have it figured out myself.

That night, I try to dream about more spells I could cast and how to fix my illusion casting, but instead, my mind is filled with the witch’s glare and the way she came at me like a lioness.

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Chapter 3

Tully

The next day, I ease the shelf on my market cart open and smile at the bright blue of the cold winter sky. The sun paints wisps of clouds the shade of a summer peach. Yesterday's snow lines the roofs of Leafshire Cove and blankets the trees' branches. Very nice.

"Well done, World," I say to the sky.

I set out my sparkling vials and use my magic to arrange the little brooms I ordered from the birch besom down the way from my house. He did a fine job. I draw a looping shape in the air above the brooms and push my will into them so they'll fly two or three feet from the ground when asked. Brooms don't require a full potion to fly like creatures do. They enjoy it.

"Oh," a voice says behind me, "you have youngling brooms. How sweet." It's Betilda, a middle-aged orc who always knows the best gossip.

"Morning. Yes, I'm all sugar and syrup over here."

The middle-aged orc female laughs in her raspy way. "You'll make good money from those, no doubt. Some of the parents in this town live to spoil their wee ones."

I wiggle my eyebrows. "They're my favorite type of customer."

Betilda's expression turns secretive and she leans close to me, her ample cleavage pressing into my arm. I force back a laugh. I do love the gal despite how over the top she is in general. She's fun.

"Did you see the newcomer yesterday?" she asks.

I feel my smile melt. I know exactly which newcomer she is referring to. My witch intuition can almost see the image she's created in her mind's eye of the minotaur. Annoyingly, she isn't imagining him nearly as handsome as he actually is. Ugh.

She presses a hand to her chest. "I stayed indoors with my new lover, but I heard he is magnificent."

"I saw him. But even though he's easy on the eyes, he's a scam artist."

She pulls away a fraction and gapes. "Truly?"

"Aye. His magic is a trick. He has no witch blood. I would have smelled it. He does these ridiculous illusions and?—"

She clasps her hands together under her chin, her eyes dancing. "The unicorn! I heard how lovely it was."

"It's not right, Betilda. I am fine with Rom using his stone magic, of course, that's natural. And Grumlin only dolls up the food and drink with his inborn power as a wizard. But that minotaur? He's unnatural. Dark. I'm telling you, we have to get rid of him as quickly as possible."

She looks around the market and all the folks putting up stalls and carts. "Hmm. Yes. I suppose you're right. Did your intuition tell you he is a bad sort?"

I hold my breath. I want to say it did, but that would be a lie. My intuition was quiet about him, like it was trying to figure him out. “Not yet. But I’m sure I’ll have a powerful feeling about his dark spirit if he has the stones to show up again.”

“Did you give him a talking to?” Her lips lift at one side and she raises an eyebrow.

I elbow her and roll my eyes. “I did, but it wasn’t fun, Betilda. Seriously, be wary if you see him again. Warn everyone you know.”

“Oh, I will, dear.”

The entire town will know to give the minotaur a wide berth from this moment on. Betilda doesn’t waste time in spreading news.

She saunters off toward the perfumery, waving a hand heavy with cheap copper rings. “Not to worry!”

Kaya is setting up her stall beside me, laying out her lovely cinnamon scones, frosted cinnamon rolls, and a few cottage loaves. I give her a nod and she grins back.

Then the minotaur stalks down the road, pushing his cart of lies. I growl quietly and my head is suddenly pounding. He lifts a hand, greeting Lord Mayor Rustion, who appears to be on his bi-weekly shopping trip. Rustion is a good old fellow, a lion shifter who is always kind to everyone. Maybe too kind.

Setting up his goods, the minotaur glances my way and smiles. Infuriating.

“I thought we understood one another!”

He’s chosen a place beyond Kaya’s stall, so thankfully he’s farther away, but it’ll never be far enough to suit me.

Kaya glances from him to me, a question in her eyes. She has a wrap on her left hand—probably from rock climbing with Renen, her brother. She hates climbing, but she won't tell him. I ease over to her stall where a line is forming and the scents of butter and cinnamon swirl through the air.

I gesture at her bandage while keeping one eye on the minotaur. "What happened?"

"I'm fine. It's just a blister from trying to keep up with Renen."

"You should tell him you hate climbing."

"I can't. He would be so sad. I'm okay. Don't worry, Tully."

Over here at Kaya's stall, I can spy on the minotaur's goods. He is messing with what appears to be two small, black stones.

What are those?

I continue chatting Kaya up so I can spy more.

"You are a toughie," I say. "You'd never know it to look at you." Kaya had the appearance of a porcelain doll. "What's your next big adventure?"

"I signed a contract with Cyrus to provide fresh baguettes each day."

The dragon shifter runs The Gold Coin, one of two pubs in Leafshire Cove.

Kaya continues. "So I'll probably be stuck in my kitchen for the rest of my existence. But if I manage to get enough money to hire someone, Renen wants to hike the old volcano. To check out the hot spot on the western edge of the caldera. But supposedly, it gets a little too dicey for hiking far before you can reach the spot."

I give Kaya a deadpan look. “Gee, you think a volcano might be risky? What a shock.”

She snickers. “Shut up, Tully. Now, why are we glaring at this handsome minotaur?”

Laini approaches with Spark, her dragonfox, curled around her shoulders like a shawl. The creature has fox fur ears, dragon horns, green wings, and the snout of a fire-breather.

“I want to know what’s going on,” Laini says.

“That newcomer is taking people’s money and claiming he has potions like mine.”

Kaya gasps. “Minotaurs don’t have magic.”

“Exactly,” I say. “He’s a fraud.”

“I heard you two had it out yesterday,” Laini says.

Spark huffs a spark in the minotaur’s general direction. I pet his tucked, green wing.

The minotaur looks up from his multi-colored vials, linen packets, and folded squares of parchment. The stones are gone. Maybe he put them in his pockets?

“Good morning,” he calls out, looking at Kaya. “My name is Argos. I hope you don’t mind me setting up here.” He dips his chin at Kaya’s stall. “I do have permission from Lord Mayor Rustion.”

His line is the size mine usually is. Two of his illusions—a bear cub and a mountain lion—leap in a circle near his customers, or should I say, victims? More and more townsfolk gather at his cart instead of mine. I’m shaking I’m so mad.

Kaya and Laini look to me, and I glare at Argos. The gals join me in glaring. I like these women. They might be mere humans, but they're not bad. Not bad at all.

"Keep your good mornings to yourself, Argos," I say drawing out his name dramatically. "We don't associate with criminals."

His admittedly handsome lips tilt up on one side and he looks down, slipping his hand in his pocket. "I'm not a criminal."

When he looks up, his gaze locks onto mine. My heart jumps like I'm ready for a fight.

"Then what do you call your business?" I demand. "Because minotaurs can't do magic. Are you letting all these fine folk know that you're only selling some sort of trick?"

"Do you call this a trick?"

He pops his palms together and silver sparkles erupt into the air. The growing crowd stops to watch as the sparkles become a dreamlike waterfall. The water plumes into a river beside a white-stone manor house with black banners that snap in the illusion's wind.

The townsfolk gasp and flock to his cart.

"That wasn't real magic?" Laini asks me very quietly. A lock of her blond hair falls and she tucks it behind her ear with a dye-stained finger.

I feel my nostrils flaring. "No. I don't know how he's doing this, but it's not right."

I whirl back to my own cart where I still have one solitary customer—the butcher.

Laini and Kaya whisper about the tacky illusion as I force a smile.

“What can I help you with, good fellow?” I ask the goblin. “Would you like a brand new spell that I just developed?”

His black eyes glitter, but a pop sounds from Argos’s cart and the butcher glances that way.

I lean over my goods. “Eh, pay attention.”

“Uh, yes, of course. What does this new spell do?”

“It’ll protect you and your family from being fooled by illusions like those.” I jab a thumb toward the unicorns Argos has summoned with his trickery.

“But they seem harmless.”

Laini eyes the butcher. “If Tully says they aren’t, I believe her. She is a witch, a master of magic. Have you ever heard of a minotaur who can work spells?”

Spark narrows his slitted dragonfox eyes at the butcher.

The male rubs a hand over the back of his neck and blinks. “When you put it like that. How much?” he asks me.

I give him a grin. “This one is on the house.”

“Really?”

I nod. “You’re one of my most loyal customers. I like to reward loyalty.”

The goblin grins at Laini and Kaya and they smile approvingly.

Once he is focused on me again, I imagine a wall of protection over him. I visualize a sheen of magic welded like metal over his entire form. As I tip my wand this way and that, I imagine his daughter and his wife, then I draw the magic over where they would be standing beside him if they were here. The magic fills the air with the green, savory scent of sage and a smell like the blacksmith's forge fire. The dome, which is invisible to everyone else, shudders and I whisper strength into the spell. I draw my wand in a tighter circle to tie the magic together neatly.

Then the dome of power shivers and blasts outward—a complete disaster!

“No!”

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Chapter 4

Tully

My heart shoots into my throat and I grip my cart to keep from falling on my arse. Laini shouts and Kaya falls back a step. What is happening? I whip my wand in a quick movement as the magic tugs at the length of rowan wood. My hand is shaking.

My spell flies toward Kaya's stall. The magic grabs a stack of scones and flings them across the square. Maplecats scatter, snow flying from their fast-moving paws.

The wayward magic zooms back toward me.

"Duck!" I say to Kaya and Laini.

"What's wrong?" Laini grabs my wand arm and drops into a crouch with me.

The spell zips over us.

Sweating, I shake myself free of Laini. "Nothing. Hold on. I've got it." My magic has never acted like this. It's like I cast a major working—and a chaotic one at that—instead of a simple protection dome.

With a gust of magical wind, the spell grabs my little brooms and shoots them like massive crossbow bolts across the town fountain. People are running and screaming.

This isn't something that happens to mature witches. And it never happens to me.

I've always had perfect control of my power. That's why everyone trusts me. I can't let this go on. The spell is pulling so hard at my wand that I'm about to lose my grip. I don't know what will happen if I can't keep hold of it.

The wayward spell rushes toward Kaya's bakery in a purple and orange stream of sparkling power.

"No, no, noooo," I whisper, trying to force my will onto the spell. "Come back, you naughty beast!"

"I'm right here," Argos says, suddenly at my side.

When did he walk over here? The magic rips up Kaya's roof and flings chunks of wood shingles through the air. People cover their heads and shout for help.

This is terrible.

Argos lifts those black stones he was fiddling with yesterday. "Allow me to help."

"Stay out of it," I snap. "I've got this."

"I don't think you do."

He rubs the stone in his right hand and brings the other one to meet it in a quick rap like someone trying to break open a walnut. The spell shivers again, then it diminishes in size and power. I'm able to reel it back in via my wand.

I'm panting, and I hate the way everyone is looking at me. Like I'm not what they've always known me to be—a reliable, powerful witch who knows her business and doesn't make mistakes. Instead, their faces show doubt and even fear.

I tuck my wand into the belt over my corset top and raise my hands. “People of Leafshire Cove, I don’t know what happened there. But I promise you that I will find out what, or who,” I say giving Argos a loaded look, “caused this disruption in magic and rid us of the problem as quickly as possible.”

“So you’re blaming me,” Argos says quietly. I hate how calm and non-sweaty he looks.

I’m over here drenched and I likely appear insane. I’m sure my red hair is doing its best scary monster impression. I tug my hat down lower on my head.

“You’re the only thing that has changed with regard to magic around here this week,” I say. “The most obvious answer is usually the right one.”

“But it was your spell. It had nothing to do with my magic.”

“Your magic. Ha! You have no real power. Whatever those nasty little stones are, well, they must be dark magic.”

Lord Mayor Rustion appears from the gathered goblins, humans, pixies, and orcs. The aging lion shifter lifts his hands and says something that sounds calming.

Laini sets a gentle hand on my shoulder. “I can go get Rom or Grumlin if you want another magic worker at your side,” she whispers.

“I’m fine. It’s not my fault.”

“Of course, it isn’t,” Kaya says, no sarcasm in her tone.

Rustion’s normally kind face is stern when he looks our way and I can’t help but falter just a tiny bit in my confidence.

“What in the name of all the gods happened here?” he asks.

I point to the minotaur. “Ask Argos.”

Rustion looks Argos up and down. “You’re new here, yes? I recall your habitation request coming across my desk, I believe. Unusual name. Plus, I don’t believe we have anyone with minotaur blood here. Welcome to town.”

He’s being so painfully polite. Ugh. Rustion is great and all, but sometimes, he should be more direct and cut people down when the occasion calls for it.

Argos dips his chin and the chain on his horn catches the light. “Nice to meet you, Lord Mayor.”

His eyes are sincere and it’s silly how long his eyelashes are. A male with those muscles and broad shoulders shouldn’t have long eyelashes.

Rustion returns the nod. “Now, down to the problem at hand. What is your take on it, Tully?”

“I cast a protection dome over the butcher. Basic magic working. The spell exploded and went feral. The magic was created with Argos’s unnatural illusions in mind, so I believe his power is the problem here. It tangled with my true magic and did all this damage. He should be banned from selling his wares, and honestly, he should be kicked out of town for his crimes.”

Rustion crosses his arms. “Hmm. Argos, what do you believe happened? And I’d like to see the stones Tully mentioned.”

Argos’s mouth pinches, and I grin fiercely at the small win of annoying him. Old Rustion is going to give him the boot. I restrain myself from cackling with happiness.

I can't wait to have this thorn out of my side.

“Lord Mayor, my illusions didn't alter when Tully's spell went awry.”

The way he says my name has my heart beating too fast again. I wrinkle my nose and shake that off. He is such a bastard, blaming me.

“I have lived here for almost all of my twenty-five years,” I say. “Never once has anything like this occurred until you waddled into town.”

Rustion cranes his neck to look at Kaya's damaged roof.

“Waddled?” Argos mouths to me. He makes a show of looking at his arse, twisting and lifting his brown eyebrows.

Laini snorts. Kaya laughs, then covers her mouth. She eyes me warily and I roll my eyes.

Argos clears his throat and puts his large hands in his pockets. He has the hands of a farmer—broad and strong-looking, but he doesn't have any scars or dirt under his nails.

“I don't think the problem has anything to do with me,” Argos continues. “But I'm happy to show you the source of my magic.”

Now we're getting somewhere. He removes the rocks from his pockets and displays them to Rustion in one large palm. Runes mark the smooth surface of the rounded stones. They are so black that they seem to absorb light. Power shimmers lightly from them.

“Those are dangerous,” I say.

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Chapter 5

Tully

Curiosity burns in Argos's serious gaze. "You know what these are?"

I don't want this asshole to know I've never seen anything like them so I sidestep the question. "The magic coming from them is powerful. And wavering. Terrible combination. Plus, they're being wielded by a minotaur."

Argos looks down at the stones and huffs a laugh. "So you don't know what they are exactly either."

I'm going to strangle him right here with everyone watching. It's happening for sure.

"What do you think, Lord Mayor?" he asks Rustion.

I ball my fists and force myself not to commit murder.

"I don't know anything about the stones," Rustion says. "But I do know that I expect you to work together to clean up this mess and to keep it from happening again. Only Tully should use her magic for the tidying. Also, would you be willing to research these rune stones, Tully? We can make a decision on using them within town limits once we know more."

I'm not about to argue like a youngling and complain that I don't want to help Argos. I do have an entire library of magical texts. There is probably something in my books

and scrolls that has information on Argos's dark magical artifacts.

"Of course, Lord Mayor," I say in a super pleasant tone that has Laini pursing her lips and Kaya pressing a fist against her mouth to keep from laughing.

"Consider it done," Argos says to Rustion.

"Go on about your business, everyone," Rustion announces to the gathered people.

They break into excited conversation and slowly go back to their usual purchasing.

Kaya angles herself toward her stall where the line is quickly growing. "I've got to run. Keep me posted. Nice to meet you, Argos." She glances at me with a wince, her desire to be polite overriding her loyalty. I narrow my eyes at her and she shrugs.

"Me too," Laini says. She gives me a quick hug while Spark flies overhead, and then she leaves me alone with Argos and the emptiness of zero customers.

"Since you've scared off every single buyer we both had, I don't see any reason to wait on tidying your disaster."

"My disaster."

I raise my wand and use a replacement spell to move Kaya's shingles back into place on the roof of Two Cats Bakery. A few fellow townsfolk fetch brooms and other implements. Argos is soon sweeping the broken shingles into a pile. He takes a shovel from a fairy who lives nearby and they load the pile into a wheelbarrow.

"Do you know where the refuse pile is?" I ask. I don't want him dumping that into the river.

“Yep.” He grabs the wheelbarrow’s handles and walks off.

He has a strange gait like he’s somehow so important. All relaxed confidence and easy grace. Like nobility. I snort. And his trousers are far too tight. What a show-off.

“If you stare a little harder,” a low voice says, “you might manage to get his clothes off. You are a witch after all.”

My heart jumps, and I wheel around to see Grumlin smirking.

“Shut it, wizard.”

He chuckles and picks up two of my protection charms. “I’ll take these, please, love.”

“Trouble with the shrub gryphons again?” I ask.

“Aye.” He loosens the bag at his wide, leather belt and draws out a large gold coin.

“They can’t resist my shepherd’s pie in the winter.”

I take his offered payment. “I can cast a more powerful one if these don’t take. Just let me know.”

“Will you be visiting me tonight or are you hung up on that minotaur?” Grumlin asks.

“I am nothing of the kind. He’s an ass.”

He wiggles his eyebrows. “It’s a nice ass.”

“Seriously, stop.”

Grumlin grins and nods. “I’m sorry, love. Well, you know my door is always

unlatched for you.” He winks and heads off toward his tavern.

I give him a wave. I like Grumlin. It’s nice to have a friend with benefits. It’s not easy to be a magic worker. Sometimes, we have power we have to siphon off through connection. Sex helps us keep our bodies in a balanced state. Grumlin does have a technique he uses when I’m not in the mood. He casts a continuous type of spell that churns his extra energy out, but he says I’m a lot more fun than that method of maintenance.

There’s a lot about being magical that most folks don’t have a clue about.

And that’s another reason why this minotaur needs to be stripped of his ability to work the power. I doubt he has any idea what he’s getting into. I wonder what his background is. Has he been using those stones for very long?

Argos returns, eyebrows lifted and a smile on his ruggedly handsome face. “Hello again, pretty rival.”

“Say it again and you lose your tongue.” I’m not sure I can actually manage that, but I can try.

He grins. “I’m sorry. I should have said stunningly, frighteningly gorgeous. My fault.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. The nerve of this fool.

He strides over to where the scones and my little brooms went flying. He retrieves one of the brooms from the fountain in the middle of the square. I walk over to join him. I don’t want his nasty magic all over my cute little bespelled brooms.

“Eh! I will handle those. Drop it.”

He shrugs and lets the broom fall to the cobblestones.

“Tully!” Rom the gargoyle shouts from his spot up in the watchtower.

“Morning,” I call up to him.

“You all right?”

“I am, thanks, Rom.”

The gargoyle nods his horned head. “Whatever happened earlier, well, it’s ripped up a bit of the garden beside Widow Warton’s place.”

“You sure it was the event?” I ask, ignoring the way Argos smells. It’s like woodsmoke and sandalwood almost. Annoyingly pleasant. “Grumlin said the shrub gryphons have been bad lately for him.”

“I watched the, the whatever it was tear up the ground,” Rom says.

I exhaled fiercely. “Fine. Thanks for letting us know. I’ll head over there.”

Argos has freed his tunic from his belt and pulled up the bottom to hold all the scones. “Who is Widow Warton?”

“You don’t need to know. You’ll be gone before you get a chance to meet anyone else here.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“Who will be kicking me out? The mayor? Or am I lucky enough to be mistreated by you? I can only imagine the very bad, bad things you could do to me, a mere minotaur. But you might find that my kind isn’t exactly what you think.”

I roll my eyes. “I’d rather keep you in suspense on who is going to lob your arse out of town. Now if you return those scones to Kaya, she can use them to feed the birds or give them to Rustion for his pigs.”

Still smirking the smirk that is going to get him killed, Argos nods and heads off. I blink at his back. He is so incredibly strange. He taunts me and then compliments me. What a jerk, attempting to toy with my mind. I’m not snowed by his good looks and games. Not one little bit.

Swallowing and pushing him out of my mind for the moment, I bend to ruffle a dark brown maplecat’s leafy pelt, then I walk across the snowy ground toward the widow’s place at the edge of the town’s center.

The widow lived here before most of these buildings existed. Part pixie and part vampire, she’s a longliver . Grumlin, with his wizard blood, is the only one who will see as much time as she has. I knock on her plain wooden door and wait for an eternity for her to open the door.

“Oh hello, Scarlet.” Her voice is old parchment and the creak of branches deep in the snowy woods.

She’s always called me Scarlet because of my hair, and she’s the only individual who can give me a nickname and not suffer a punch to the nose.

“Morning. I heard that our newcomer’s dark magic tore up your kitchen garden. I’m here to fix it up if I can.”

“Come on in.”

She takes my hand and leads me inside her warm home. The walls are covered in paintings she did when she was young. She’s told me all her stories over our weekly tea times. The widow was once an artist for the king and her work is lovely. Bright stars, maplecats, rivers, and complicated patterns of color make her house incredibly pretty.

The thought reminds me that Argos called me pretty. Ugh. What a creep.

The widow leads me out back to her normally tidy kitchen garden. She bought a complicated casting from me to keep one side warm enough to keep growing the cucumbers, tomatoes, and dill she adores. But the view from the back door shows that there won’t be another winter magical harvest for her anytime soon. Argos’s stupid actions have uprooted all her plants and shredded them.

“I hate to tell you this,” I say, “but I’ll need a good week to get this right again. I’ll do some work today and return tomorrow.”

“Ah, that’s how life goes sometimes. What happened anyway? I’ve never known your magic to go awry. Was this Grumlin’s or Rom’s doing perhaps? I don’t really know what all they’re capable of, magically speaking. Wait. You mentioned a newcomer...”

She trails off, her slightly glassy eyes telling me she is trying to recall what exactly I said.

I pick up a glove she must have dropped at some point and tuck it into her hand. “Argos. A minotaur. He has some dangerous way of accessing power and uses it to make stupid illusions that make my spells explode.”

Patting my hand, she frowns. “I didn’t know minotaurs had magic.”

“Yeah, they don’t,” I say. “That’s the issue.”

“Hmm.”

“ Hmm is right. It’s a puzzle I’m going to crack.”

I pull out my wand and begin casting over the area, easing the earth back into its proper beds and encouraging it to bring the shredded plants with it underground.

“So how does he do it, Scarlet?”

“He has these two rune stones. Have you ever heard of black rocks carved like that? With runes?”

“I haven’t. Do you want some tea?”

Focusing on warmth and my desire to see the widow’s garden grow, I hold my wand steady and let magic tingle down from my forehead, into my palms, and out the wand. I urge the warmth to cover half the garden in a protected pocket. It’s tough magic, and I’m sweating again already. Magic takes a toll on the body.

“I have to get back to the marketplace. Thanks, though.”

“All right then, deary. Oh, this is looking wonderful already! You are a wonder.”

I smile down at her wrinkled face. “Thanks, Widow. I’ll see you in a few days, aye?”

“That’s right. I’ll have a new white tea by then. With cranberries! I ordered it from the king’s market.”

“Ooo, fancy. I can’t wait.” I give her a quick kiss on the cheek.

“I’ll have those heart cookies you like too.”

Those cookies have a drop of her blood in them and she thinks I don’t know that. She likes to believe she’s secretly giving me a bit of her vampire health. I don’t mind the sweet trickery though. It’s good for a witch to have a little blood now and then. I usually just get a rare steak at the Goat and Dragon, but vampire blood is superb and helps me look younger than I am.

I’m on my way back to the market and the whole stupid Argos situation when I notice another hole in the ground from this morning’s ruckus.

But this one feels wrong somehow...

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Chapter 6

Tully

I can't put my finger on what is giving me pause. A feeling. A fuzzy bit of air above the area. I don't know. Snow sits in heaps around the disturbed area. The cobblestones are out of place, and the dirt is churned up. Wiping my brow with the back of my sleeve, I breathe in and out slowly. I don't have the energy for this right now. I need a pint and a nap.

I look up toward the watchtower. I'm on the far side of it now and I'm not sure Rom will hear me if I yell up at him. I should really know more about my best friend's mate—do gargoyles have better hearing than most? Probably.

"Romulus!"

He appears at the opening under the peaked roof. Well, that answers that.

"Yes?" His wings shuffle behind him, altering his dark silhouette.

I jab a thumb toward the destruction. "Can you take care of this hole for me? I'm bushed."

"Of course."

As Rom raises his hands, a snap of magic hits me in the back like a vicious snowball made of ice. I spin to face the opening in the ground only to see magic shimmering

into the air in dancing motes of blue, white, and gold.

I rush over and look inside. What in the name of all the gods was that? The stones begin to shake, so I hold up a hand.

“Wait, Rom!”

Everything calms around me, the rocks going back to where they were. The magic zing is gone now.

I crouch at the hole and squint into the dirt. There’s nothing. But no—there is something . The echoes of a great power hum under the disturbed cobblestones.

The beat and whoosh of large wings sound behind me, and suddenly Rom is landing. He takes a knee beside the hole.

“What’s going on?” he asks. “Did I wreck it further?”

I laugh. “No, you big, sweet thing. You’re great. I wouldn’t have set you up with my Laini if I didn’t have total confidence in your magic and your control.”

His smile is too nice for this world. “So what is the deal?”

“I felt magic down here,” I explain. “Not mine. Not yours. Not the dumb minotaur’s either. Something else. Powerful as hell.”

“Want me to clear the space so you can poke around more easily?”

“Not yet.” I stand and wipe my hands on my skirts. “I need to do some meditation on this.”

“Do you usually do that?”

“It’s a regular part of being a witch. One must be in tune with one’s intuition.”

“I had no idea,” Rom says. “Should I try it for my magic?”

I slap his massive arm. Only the minotaur’s is more muscular than his. Or maybe they’re tied. “You should!”

His gargoyle fangs peek out between his lips. “I’ll do it.”

“Pick a quiet spot,” I say. “Get comfortable. Think of nothing. Or just white space. You’ll get there.”

“Thanks, Tully.”

I get a slip of parchment from the small pouch on my belt and magically pen a note to Rustion, asking that this area be roped off. I bespell the letter and it zips away in a flurry of purple sparks.

Argos joins me and crosses his huge arms. Snow is caught in his wavy, brown hair and little, icy flakes slide over his wide-set horns. The chains hanging from them jingle quietly.

“Do you want a hand here?” he asks.

“Your hand? No, thank you.”

“If you’re so proficient and respected, why are you being so defensive with me, a lowly competitor?” he asks.

I grip my wand tighter. “Give me those stones of yours.”

“No, I don’t think I will.”

“You must.” He’s infuriating.

“The mayor didn’t confiscate them,” he says. “He allowed me to keep them. Do you believe you have more authority than he does?”

Red sparks crackle from the end of my wand. “Rustion is too nice for his own good.”

“And yet he’s the only one who can confiscate property in Leafshire Cove, right?”

What did this minotaur do? Study our town laws before his arrival?

“Fine,” I snap. “Keep them. Did you finish tidying up back there?” I point in the general direction of his cart and mine.

“Aye.”

“Then we’re done here.”

He studies the hole in the cobblestones and the heaps of earth around the spot. “So we aren’t fixing this?”

“Nope.”

Two of our gate guards in Rustion’s livery show up and begin to set up poles and rope around the area.

“Okay, you’re definitely not telling me everything, Mistress Tully.”

“Don’t mistress me. And don’t worry about this,” I say, jerking my chin at the disturbed ground. “This is a problem for true magic workers.”

He raises an eyebrow. “So it’s a magical hole in the ground?”

“Maybe.”

I start toward my house, and Argos follows. I do my best to ignore him, hoping he’ll drift in another direction, and I silently plan out the rest of the cleanup. I’ll send a lad to gather my cart and potions and brooms later on. I’m not in the mood to be in the town square at the moment.

Argos won’t go away. He walks in step with me, his height casting a shadow over me. He’s just so big. I wonder what his weight on top of me would feel like... Ugh. I shove that thought away. He’s an idiot. I refuse to be physically aroused by a fool.

“You must concede that my magic isn’t the only strange power that was involved in today’s disaster,” he says, startling me. “Perhaps whatever is in that area is our real problem.”

“Please stop following me.”

“I’m on my way to the mayor’s manor. My direction of walking has nothing to do with you.”

My jaw twitches as I grind my teeth together. Must not commit murder. But Blessed Stones, it would be so peaceful if he ceased existing.

I finally stop and round on him, my hands on my hips. “I won’t see your cart tomorrow, right?”

“It’s up to you what you look at. I did notice you’re inclined to stare at my arse in particular.”

My blood boils. I storm off, giving myself a boost with my wand’s ability to let me fly a few inches from the ground. I refuse to look back at Argos.

I have two mysteries to figure out now.

Are they related? It’s too much of a coincidence for them not to be. I don’t have a real plan yet, but I know my first step.

I’m going to get that minotaur drunk at some point and steal his rune stones.

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Chapter 7

Tully

It's the night of the New Moon, so only the stars illuminate our walk to the Goat and Dragon, the tavern where we'll dance the night away. It's tradition to douse even the gaslights that normally dot the town. Laini and I wear the required owl masks, complete with feathers made of silk and wool. The midwinter festivities are headed up by Grumlin, but the rituals involved are older than anyone can remember.

Laini tightens her arm around mine and shivers. "Tell me the plan again."

Her little dragonfox, Spark, and his dragonfox girlfriend, Moonpetal, fly overhead, their green dragon wings blocking the starlight. Their furry fox tails flutter in the cold wind and they each let out a flirtatious spark of flame at one another.

"We do some shots," I explain to Laini, adjusting my mask. "We dance and enjoy the night just like we do every year. And then..." I wiggle my eyebrows at her.

Laini pulls the hood of her cloak over her golden hair. "I need more than the eyebrow wiggling."

I roll my eyes and blow the end of an errant fake feather out of my mouth. "I will get him into a corner or dance close with him, and then I'll steal his little magic rocks."

"You shouldn't make out with someone just to thief their possessions. You do know that's super wrong, correct? I have at least given you a semblance of an ethical

compass, haven't I?"

I snicker. "You've tried."

"Tully," she whines.

"Yes, yes. I am definitely a better person because of you. No lie. Honestly, I'd never do what I'm about to do except this is for the entire town's, maybe the world's, good! The minotaur is going to hurt someone if we let him keep on."

"Rustion won't take the stones?"

"No. I asked him again via letter and he quoted some stupid town bylaws."

The snow crunches under our boots, and Spark and Moonpetal flit into a tree that stretches over the tavern.

Laini releases my arm and lifts her masked face to the dragonfox duo. "You two will be okay out here, right? It's awfully cold."

Spark coos and huffs a cloud of black smoke.

"All right then. I'll see you in a few hours," Laini says before turning back to me.

She looks at the tavern door like she's trying to muster up the will to enter. Already, the conversation inside is loud and raucous. The large bells the males wear clang into the quiet night.

"Come on. You can leave early if you want," I say. Laini isn't the party type. This feral night isn't really made for quiet folks like her. "I only need your backup for the first part of the plan. Rom is going to sit with him, right?"

“He said he would, yes. I didn’t tell him what you were up to.”

“Good. He would probably try the nice way and that would only alert Argos and make my job harder.”

“I don’t like this, Tully.”

“Did you see the market today?” I ask.

“Yes, Argos was putting on a show again with his illusions of an estate where unicorns galloped near a waterfall.”

I pretend to gag.

“So over the top,” Laini says.

I cut my eyes to her face, and even though she’s wearing a mask, I can tell she is fibbing to save my feelings.

“Look, if he keeps on, I will go out of business, Laini. I’ll have to move. Because I refuse to settle for selling to the customers he leaves for me like crumbs.”

“I know. He needs to stop. I agree with that...” She stares me down, her earnest eyes glittering through the holes in her mask. “You promise not to use your magic on him?”

I hold up a hand. “I swear it on my grandwitch’s grave.”

She nods. “I still don’t like this plan.”

“Well, I like it enough for the both of us. Now, come on.” I take her arm again and

tug at her.

When we walk into the cacophony of folks singing and the heavy bells clanking from the backs of all the males, I see a set of bull horns and I grin. I'm going to get the best of this arrogant minotaur if it's the last thing I do.

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Chapter 8

Argos

Wood and pipe smoke gather in the rafters at the Goat and Dragon. It's insanely loud in here what with these ancient bells strapped to my back as well as the backs of every other male in attendance. I'm at a round table in the center of the large room, having a pint with Romulus, the watchtower gargoyle.

"Explain the bells to me, Romulus."

I'm glad to spend a fun evening here, but what I truly need is an opportunity to pick Grumlin's mind about the khymeia. From what Cyrus said, the northern folk—which includes most of my kith and kin—call wizards darkbloods, and my father told me to ask one such person about the stones. But I do worry about what he'll think of me having them. Will he be like Tully is, believing I shouldn't have them because I'm a non-magical creature?

"Call me Rom, please." The gargoyle seems like a good fellow, quiet but clever when he opens his mouth. Unlike most people. "I had a meeting with Rustion this morning," the big gray guy says. "He explained that the bells are meant to scare away the dark so that the spring comes early."

"But why don't the females wear them?"

"The whole event is an old fertility rite, so originally it was meant to boost virility and encourage rutting. More ringing bells means more younglings in the spring."

I laugh and take a sip of my ale. It's sharp and slightly sweet. Delicious. "And the masks?"

Rom shrugs one shoulder, one of his bells clanking. "Rustion didn't tell me."

I nod and touch one of the embroidered straps holding the bells to my back. "I'm assuming it's to honor the Owl of Winter." The owl is a symbol of wisdom throughout the Veiled Kingdoms. "Maybe it's simultaneously keeping a bit of secrecy for the whole rucking part of the evening."

Rom nods. "Who helped you put your bells on?"

"Oh, that was Cyrus. He's letting me room at the pub for half price until I get my feet under me."

"I should take him for a drink sometime," Rom says.

"How does this all go anyway?" I ask.

"Drinking. Music. Dancing. The usual plus the dousing of the lights. It will get wild in here tonight, just so you know. I haven't attended Leafshire Cove's version of this ritual, but at the ones I've attended in other areas of the Veiled Kingdoms, there is always a wild fervor that spreads through the crowd once all flames are doused."

"Interesting."

The idea of being near Tully during such a crazy evening has my cock throbbing already. I imagine pulling her into my lap and holding her against me so she'll notice exactly what minotaurs have to offer. Shoving that daydream away, I take another drink.

Like a spell I cast just with my own horny mind, Tully slinks through the double doors. She has Laini on her arm, the two of them grinning like they're definitely up to something. The corset Tully is wearing has my blood rushing in the wrong direction for the brains I need to keep up with her banter.

"Do they look mischievous or am I being paranoid?" I ask Romulus.

"Oh no, you're spot on." Humor colors his tone as he regards his mate, Laini. "Those two are thick as thieves."

"Should we invite them over?"

"Aye."

We both wave to them, and they weave through the crowded tavern to our table. Instead of frowning at me and avoiding me as I thought she would, the red-headed witch slips into a chair right beside me and smiles.

I make myself shudder. "That grin isn't as welcoming as you think it is."

Her eyes narrow to slits. "Watch that tongue, bull."

I touch the side of my mouth with said tongue and give her a half-lidded look. Her gaze snaps to my lips and her breasts rise and fall more quickly. Like it or not, she's attracted to me. I don't know why I'm flirting. She is my rival, and I can't have her meddling in my affairs. But she's just so very tempting.

I down the last of my pint and raise my hand to order another from one of the many servers Grumlin has milling about the smoky room. I am not usually a drinker, but hey, it's been an exciting few days, so I think I might have a little more than is wise tonight.

“How are you liking our town?” Laini asks me, her hand in Rom’s.

“It’s fantastic. Everyone, well mostly everyone, has been very welcoming.” I give Tully a meaningful look and she smiles with all of her teeth. Gods, she’s scary. And stunning. What I wouldn’t give to tie her up and torture her in the most pleasurable ways...

“They all just adore you, Argos,” Tully says. She grabs the server before he can pass by. “Get us four smokewaters, will you? Thanks.”

“What is a smokewater?” I ask. I smell trouble for sure now.

Tully crosses her arms on the table and her red-stained lips curve upward. “You’ll love it. They’re tradition for the winter festivities, isn’t that right, Laini?”

Laini’s face gives her away. This is no tradition. “Uh, yeah. Yes. Have to take a shot on the first evening of Grumlin’s celebrations.”

“At least one shot,” Rom says. He studies his pint, a grin tugging at his gray mouth.

I give them all a raised eyebrow, but I’m willing to play along. Perhaps a bit of hazing on the part of the inhabitants will help me in my business.

The server returns with a tray of tiny crockery cups. Smoke as dark as ink floats from each one.

“Looks delicious,” I say.

Laini snorts a laugh and grabs for one of the shots. Tully clears her throat and makes a big show of choosing her shot as if they are different somehow. Finally, she makes her selection and whips it down faster than my eyes can track. Rom and I take ours,

and I shut my eyes against the scent of the stuff. It's like pine tar. I get it down and am pleasantly surprised at the easy warmth the drink sends through me. The shot leaves the faint taste of lingonberries and sugar on my tongue.

"If you can get past the smell, it's pretty good."

Tully nods, her eyes too wide. She wiggles her fingers at the server and points to our table, ordering another round. I don't think the shots are really that strong. I feel fine. We set into a warm loaf of bread, which we dip into a hot pot of melted white cheese. It's fantastic fare.

"I didn't see you at the market today," I say to Tully over another shot.

"I was too busy researching whatever is going on with that hole in the ground."

"Ah. I'm glad that's the reason. I would hate for you to give up competing with me. After all, I had more than enough customers to share all day long."

Tully's delicate nostrils flare, and she pauses, her piece of bread dripping cheese onto the table. She seems to shake herself, and then she lifts her chin and puts her pink little tongue out to catch another string of cheese before she devours the bite.

I've never wanted to be cheese, but I suppose there is a first time for everything.

Grumlin claps his hands from where he's climbed up on top of a table near the band. "Time for dancing! Move the tables!"

I've fully given up trying to get a word with the wizard. This is pretty obviously not the right time. The Leafshire Cove inhabitants are well-versed in Grumlin's command. Before I can do more than save the last of my shots, our table and all the others are scooted to the sides of the room.

“Move, move,” Tully demands as she takes hold of my chair.

I stand and the room tilts. “Whoa. I guess those shots are finally catching up to me.”

A quiet cackle comes from Tully’s direction. She’s tucking my chair beside the others against the wall under a tapestry of maplecats playing dice. The music is rising—lutes, pipes, and a hand drum of some sort. I remember to clap along quickly like Cyrus told me, so I don’t have to buy everyone a round.

The clapping erodes into a dancing. Tully takes my hand and I don’t even argue. She pulls me close and begins dragging me around the makeshift dance floor. I grip her waist and stare into her green eyes.

“I know what you’re doing,” I say.

“Oh yes? What is that, exactly?”

“You’re getting me drunk so you can have your way with me and then leave me brokenhearted so I give up my business.”

Her head tilts back, and she laughs loudly over the sound of the music and the crowd. “You would think that.” Her gaze strays behind me to my tail. The unmistakable shine of desire washes over her gaze. “Males are quite similar even when they are minotaurs.”

“Why else would you be giving me too many shots and dancing with me, your rival?” Even if she wasn’t a witch with magic that I find endlessly fascinating, I’d be completely enthralled by this female. She’s just so much more than everyone else.

“Shhh.” She puts a finger over my lips, and my tongue darts out to lick her cool fingertip. She startles, her wicked grin fading and her eyelids fluttering. I didn’t plan

to do that, but I guess my tongue has ideas of its own when it comes to this witch. I draw her close and put my mouth at her ear.

“What are you up to, little witch?”

Her hand snakes down my chest and pauses low, close to my cock which has joined in with my tongue on showing desire for her. I suck in a breath and feel my tail thrash.

“Just dance, Argos. Live a little. Have some fun.”

I’m dizzy. I’m lightheaded. I’m turned on. But I’m not an idiot. I can still keep my wits about me.

Maybe.

She spins in my arms and stomps her tall, pointed, black boots in time with the rest of the dancers. Her scent is like a spell in and of itself. I don’t bother trying to mimic her moves; I just shift one way and then the other in rhythm with her, letting her lead and inhaling her alluring scent. The music rises and falls, and soon, it’s cresting and the crowd is going wild. Shouts and cheers and dares fill the air.

“I’ll swim across the river!”

“I’ll do it twice!”

“I bet three pints you have to be fished out!”

“To long nights!”

“To Grumlin!”

The hearth's light goes dark. Next, the flickering gas lamps positioned around the tavern black out. Only faint starlight drifts over the masked crowd. The dancing breaks into a mishmash of bumping bodies and laughter. The bells are so loud that it creates a buzz in my head that is somehow exciting.

It's fantastic and so free—nothing I've ever experienced has been like this. Nobles aren't permitted to act so uncivilized. I'm so glad I'm here and not stuck at a fussy court dinner as I have been so many nights of my life.

Tully is a vision more intoxicating than the drinks. She's tossed her pointed hat to some friend in the stramash and her red hair is a gorgeous mess. She pulls me close again and I dip my chin down. Our lips are only a breath away from touching.

Does she want to kiss me? Does she know what it means to kiss a minotaur?

"I want to kiss you even though you're horrible," I whisper.

Her chuckle dusts warm air over my neck and chin. "I like the honesty."

"But I can't."

She frowns. "Why?"

"When a minotaur kisses someone, they are claiming them. Especially when they do it in public."

"No one cares. And I'm certainly not letting you claim me. Even if you weren't the ultimate thorn in my side, I'd never allow you to do that."

The crowd is pushing and jostling around us and the lights have all been doused so it's dark enough to provide some secrecy. With the moon in its hidden state, there is

little light coming through the tavern's windows.

"I want to do very dirty things to that dangerously pretty mouth of yours, but I hesitate because of my kind's ways."

"Screw your minotaur tradition. You're in Leafshire Cove. Make your own traditions. Start with kissing me just because it's a party and hate sex is fabulous."

I laugh at that, and my body heats at hearing the word sex come out of her red lips. She has a good point. I'm here to start over. To make my way in the world. I don't have an estate right now; I'm not really a lord any longer. Why should I adhere to a custom that no one here even knows about? There aren't any other minotaurs in town—I checked. There's no council to demand I follow the rules of courting.

My heart beats hard once as I lean closer. "Fine."

I press my lips to hers and desire shoots down my body. She tastes like mint and smokewater and I can't get enough. Her hands find my hips and bunch in my tunic, just under my belt. I spread my fingers into her hair and ease her even closer. My cock and the knot at its base—just a bump at the moment—rub against her belly and she moans into my mouth. Gods, I want to take her right here in the middle of this wild mayhem. I want to turn her around, throw her over that table, and pop a knot into her so big that she'll scream my name. She'll want me the way I want her.

I'm definitely drunk.

Her tongue tangles with mine and her breasts push against me. I drag my lips down her smooth throat and lick my way over her collarbone as she moans. I take one hand from her hair and cup her breast, right at the bottom of that luscious curve. I move my thumb over her nipple and it peaks under the black fabric of her dress. She gasps and makes a mewling noise that could make me come in a matter of seconds.

I want her to touch my horns or my tail—two of the most sensitive parts of my body. My tail wraps tightly around her leg as I try to touch her in every way I can here in the middle of a dark tavern. I use the tip of my tail to tickle her thigh, and she hums into my ear, her hands still bunching my tunic and the waist of my trousers like she has to hold on to me or this will end. I don't mind it one bit.

I dare to slip my tail farther up under her skirts until I feel the heat of her center through her underclothes. Wiggling the end of my tail, I just barely touch the fabric over her folds. She gasps loudly and nearly breaks skin as she grips me through my clothing.

“Like that, do you?” I whisper into her ear.

Pulling away, she looks up at me. We're both practically panting.

“Can you get me some water?” she asks, her eyes bright behind her mask.

“That's not what I was hoping you'd say.”

She lifts a shoulder. “I'm just parched.”

It's fine. It is hot in here, and we've been downing copious amounts of alcohol. “I'm on it. Be right back.”

I adjust my trousers and tunic, and then I work my way through the wild dancing and clanging bells to the bar.

When I return to where I left Tully with a glass of water in hand, she is gone.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:07 am

Chapter 9

Tully

I waltz out of the tavern and into the cold night air. Argos's rune stones are warm in my dress pockets—whether from his body heat or magic, I don't know.

His scent is all over me. Musk. Woodsmoke. Sandalwood. I bite my lip, wishing I didn't like it so much. I exhale, leaving all that behind and ripping my mask off. I tuck it into my belt and hurry through the snow.

Is it bad that I stole from someone while making out with them? I'm soaking wet from his tail's delightful attentions under my skirts. I have to admit there is a part of me that wishes he was on his way back to my house with me, ready to spend the night exploring everything it means to sleep with a minotaur.

So am I a bad person? Did I cross a line stealing?

I don't think so. My actions would be horrible if I didn't have my heart in the right place. I'm borrowing the khymeia so I can study their power. It's in the interest of keeping my town safe. I won't keep the stones. I want to, but I won't. Laini has woven a thread of ethics into my soul, damn her. Two years ago, I would have taken these stones and kept them forever and not had a single gray hair over it.

I shake my head at myself as I hurry home through the snowy streets. The lamplighters have done their duty, so the pathways and roads are painted in gold from the burning wicks on the oil lamps high above me.

A Great Crowned Owl hoots from a rowan tree at the corner. She swivels her head and her small antlers sparkle like ice in the starlight. It's my friend, Lady Owl. I give her a nod in greeting. Silent in her graceful movements, she leaves her perch and flies overhead.

"How are you on this night of no moon, Lady Owl?"

She hoots twice. She's doing well.

"Good to hear. Can you sense the power in the stones I took from the minotaur? Is that why you're paying me a visit?"

Lady Owl lets out a low trill and one quiet hoot. I don't know how exactly I understand her, but her sounds are quite clear in meaning to me. They always have been ever since we met eight months ago. She sees visions too and sometimes shares them with me. Nothing too helpful as of yet, but I enjoy her wise company.

"Yes, I'll be careful with them. You sound like Laini."

She hoots and clicks her beak, chiding me.

"Sorry. Owls are nothing like humans." I reach my door and swing it open. She flies in circles over my front steps. "Want to come inside and warm yourself by my fire?"

Inside, I flick my wand at my hearth, and the logs are suddenly wrapped in orange fingers of flame. A flash of Argos's dark eyes blinks through my mind and I suddenly feel the heat of his hands on my scalp. The way he tangled his fingers in my hair and how his tail felt sneaking up my skirts...

I growl, forcing those thoughts away and I take a steadying breath. Stupid, handsome minotaur. He has no business being so seductive.

Lady Owl settles on a perch I made for her out of fallen branches and some scrap wool Laini gave me. I take a seat in the cushioned chair by the fire and remove Argos's stones from my pockets. They hum in my hands, their power quiet but steady.

One rune is repeated on both rocks. I set the stones beside me and grab the largest of my books on magical symbols. With the heavy tome weighing down my lap, I flip the parchment pages slowly. The fire snaps, and I look up to see Lady Owl watching the stones next to my leg like they are mice for the taking.

"Hmm." I focus on the book again, searching until I find the runes I'm looking for.

My stomach sinks when I find what I'm looking for. This is what I was afraid of.

"This rune summons energy from the surrounding environment," I tell my wise owl friend. "Argos is draining the earth when he uses these."

Lady Owl echoes my feelings on that by making a low trill like a growl.

I pick up one of the stones and study the other runes. Paging through the tome, I make my way through every rune. There are two small ones for strength to the wielder, which makes sense considering these were obviously created to give non-magical creatures power. One rune on the slightly larger stone is shaped like an oak leaf. The book says it's for memory. But the translation seems off to me. I reread the whole page on that leaf rune, but it's not very clear.

"Have you ever heard of a magic that accesses a person's memory?" I ask Lady Owl.

She coos. That's a yes .

"Interesting. I didn't know that was a thing."

Two hoots and I am raising my eyebrow at the sassy owl.

“Yes,” I say to her, “I realize there is much you know that I don’t.”

Her next trill tells me she thinks of me as a youngling. I wonder how old she is, but I know not to ask a Great Crowned female that question. Witches have stories shared at the gathering that tell of what happens when you trouble the matriarch-level Great Crowneds about time or age. I don’t know why it bugs them so.

At some point, I must fall asleep because I wake to someone knocking at my door. I’m sprawled across my extra wide chair, one leg hiked up over the arm. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I point my wand at the door and open it.

“Come in, Laini.”

Her energy sometimes has a signature, so to speak. Not always, but when she’s keyed up.

“Are you all right?” She stomps her winter boots on my entrance area rug and clumps of snow drop around her.

“I’m perfectly fine. Thank you for asking.”

Look at me being so delightfully and disgustingly polite even though I just woke up and haven’t had my very strong tea yet. I adore Laini and I’m trying to be less of a beast.

The morning sun streams into my house and I rise to stoke the fire back to life. It’s freezing in here. Lady Owl rests on her perch, her big eyes blinking at Laini.

“Why did you take off so quickly last night?” Laini asks. “It looked like you two

were having a very good time.”

I wave her off and trudge to the kitchen to make tea. “That was all part of the plan.”

“So you managed it? You stole his stones?”

I snort a laugh. “The ones not attached to him, yes.”

Laini laughs and clears her throat. “What have you learned so far?”

“Let’s finish here and I’ll fill you in.”

I hurry the tea along with my magic and soon we are both toting a steaming cup into the sitting room.

“Oh, hello, Lady Owl,” Laini says.

We get comfortable by the fire—me in my chair, Laini in the large, round cushion sitting near the crackling fire, and Lady Owl on her perch.

The owl hoots and Laini leans over my book as I open it.

I point to the last rune I looked up. “All right. Let’s see. I have learned that these can access a wielder’s memory and that they pull energy from the world to work. It’s dark magic. I don’t like it. There are other runes, too, but the rest are pretty basic.”

“What do we do now?”

“I’m going to use them near that mysterious hole in the ground and see if anything pops up,” I say.

“Mysterious hole? Oh, is that what Rom was trying to tell me about earlier?”

“Probably because he was about to fill it back in for me when I felt the magic hiding in that area.”

Laini makes a thinking, humming sound. “Any ideas on what it is?”

“No.”

“But it can’t be related to Argos and his magic rocks, right? Because he just now showed up and Rom said the divot in the ground was substantial. I saw where Rustion had it roped off, but there was a crowd nosing about the place, so I wasn’t able to see it properly.”

“I suppose whatever is in the hole was there before Argos arrived, yes. But it gave us no trouble before him. Therefore, it is his fault. All of it is his fault.”

Laini gives me a look.

“What? I can’t help it if the truth isn’t nice. He is a problem for our town. It is what it is.”

We drop that side of the subject and she helps me comb through more mouse-nibbled scrolls, yellowed books with rusted buckled closures, and stacks of leather-bound tomes in a variety of languages. Thankfully, most have sketches and symbols that explain the magic they’re detailing.

Finally, I spot a line in a black grimoire that looks promising. Laini pours out another cup of lavender tea and sits beside me.

“What is it?”

“This one talks about storing power in a stone via runes. Ah!” I jab the words with my index finger. “The rune on the stones is a type of strength rune! It just looks different.”

I take the stones out and hold them up beside the drawing in the book.

Laini leans close and squints. “I don’t know how you can tell these things apart. They’re all a bunch of lines and squiggles.”

“Look at this one on the underside. It’s like this one in the book just here.” I point to the next paragraph in the grimoire. “This is what I call a type of warm up rune. It gets the spell going, so to say. There are countless forms of this type of rune and they were used in the early days when witches were even more rare than they are now.”

Blowing out a breath, Laini eyes the stones. “So this is what they are then? Khymeia stones?”

“Yep. I think so. In fact, I’d bet on it.”

“You should use that term, khymeia, talking to Argos and watch his reaction. If he looks intrigued or surprised, then maybe he is as clueless as I hope he is. If not, he knew already and is probably hiding even more.”

I point at her and purse my lips. “Smart. Yes. I like that idea.” I get up and go to my desk. “I’m going to write to Rustion and keep him in the know.” I crack the window, letting in some of the wintry air, then bespell the note to fly to Rustion.

By the time Laini, Lady Owl, and I have downed some toast and jam, Rustion’s reply is zipping through the window by my desk.

I’m furious.

Laini flattens her palm. “What’s wrong?”

Lady Owl swoops down to peck the crust of Laini’s toast from her hand, and then the owl returns to her perch.

“He asks that I return the stones to Argos and bring him along when I delve into the mysterious magic under the ground near Widow Warton’s place. Claims ‘the lad needs a magical education’ to keep things safe in Leafshire. Ugh.”

“Maybe you can come up with a compromise with Argos if you can figure out how to keep his magic from destroying the earth.”

I snort. “Excuse me? What exactly are you thinking I should give up in this proposed compromise?”

Laini doesn’t hesitate. I love that she isn’t afraid of my moods and my power. She feels secure in our friendship now and I won’t be taking that for granted.

“I don’t know,” she says quickly. “Maybe he can sell his time creating those illusions for events and birthdays and whatnot. He can leave the rest of the magic sales to you.”

“I doubt he’d make enough from illusions to pay his rent.”

“Where is he staying?”

“At Cyrus’s.”

“Hmm. Cyrus is kind, but he can’t do without rent for his only room. I wonder why Argos chose the pub. He should be at the inn or taking a room on the town’s outskirts.”

“He’s a fool. He chose the cushy lodgings and now he has to pay for them. Have you noticed his accent and his hands?”

“What about them? I mean, he sounds northern, but other than that, no.”

“I think he was raised with nobles. There are a ton of minotaurs up north and that’s where their true kingdom and court sits.”

“Well, that would make sense. Maybe he was a scribe or something.”

“Maybe.”

“Why do you care, Tully?”

“I want to know where he came from so I can send him back.”

Laini chuckles and I glare.

“I’m not kidding, Laini.”

“Oh, I am aware.”

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Chapter 10

Tully

I push into The Gold Coin and look around the pub for any signs of an annoying minotaur. He's at a table in the back, pouring over his little notebook. His horns cast a shadow over his chosen work spot. How does he deal with having horns that large? How does he sleep? Then I'm imagining him in bed, lying on his stomach with his very muscular back bare and his horns resting above one of his bent arms. He has one arm slung over a horn in this imagined moment. His lovers could potentially hook a leg over those horns...

I take a deep breath and shove that stupid daydream to the pits of my mind where idiotic ideas go to die. I stalk over to his chair and poke him in the arm.

"Here you go." Near his steaming cider, I set his stones down carefully so they don't touch.

His gaze slides up my corseted waist, to my breasts, up my throat, and finally to my face. I tug at my neckline. It's too hot in this pub. Cyrus needs to tamp down his hearth fire.

"How kind of you to return them," Argos says. His tone has nothing to do with kindness.

"You can thank our mayor for asking me to return your khymeia stones."

Recognition flares in his eyes.

“Ah ha!” I whip out my wand and jab his big, meaty arm. “You knew their name. What else are you hiding?” I lean in close and lock my gaze onto his brown eyes. They’re exactly the color of darkwood honey, the stuff I get each year at the witch’s gathering. “I don’t know what you’re lying about, but I can feel the stories you aren’t telling us. They push at my chest like a strong wind. I will get the truth and it won’t go easy for you, Minotaur.”

A sly grin ghosts over his lips, the cupid’s bow at the top becoming more pronounced. The sudden urge to nibble that spot has me leaning even closer. I shake my head and straighten to look down on him.

“Why Tully, you have been thinking of me quite a lot, haven’t you? Did some research on my magic, did you?”

His tone is teasing now and he turns toward me, easing back in his chair and hiking one boot up on the second chair at the table. His tail whips sinuously behind him. I lick my lips, feeling suddenly parched.

“What else would you like to study about me?” he asks in his annoyingly deep voice. “Or are you only interested in my stones?”

He spreads his legs wider, and though his trousers aren’t that tight today, there is no mistake about how well-endowed a male he is. I clear my throat and look for Cyrus, wishing he would come out of the back. I don’t like being alone with Argos. It makes me itchy.

“Where did you get the khymeia stones?” I demand, glaring at the minotaur.

“I only talk to friends and lovers about my personal life. You are a dangerous witch

who loathes me, so I'm afraid you fit neither category at present."

I nearly snap my wand with my tightened grip. "You stole them. From a witch."

"That's your theory?"

"It is."

He frowns. "What data do you have to back that up?"

"Witches created them. Perhaps for clouded ones."

"What are clouded ones?"

"Witches born of witches who can't get their magic to work."

"Perhaps I had a clouded one in my family line?"

"No. I sense zero witch blood in you. I would know. And don't suggest your family received them later on. Witches wouldn't give something like this out in this day and age. The khymeia are ancient. Powerful. Dangerous. Unfit for non-magical folk. They should never have been created."

"I hate to disappoint you, Witch, but I didn't steal the stones."

"Why should I believe you?"

He shrugs and lifts his cider with annoyingly calm movements. "I suppose you can't. For now."

"For now?"

“Yes. Perhaps later on, you will come to trust me and we can be friends and I’ll tell you everything.”

“I will never be your friend.”

“My lover then? We’ll see.” He eyes my body, and his eyebrows lift in what looks like appreciation.

My heart pounds in my ears and in my core. Dammit. “You’re ridiculous.”

I turn on my heel and start toward the door. “I’m going to research the magic under the square. Rustion wants you there, so finish your cider and get your tail out here.”

I push the door open with more strength than the action required and storm away.

When I pass the town fountain and glimpse the area I’m aiming for, I realize something is wrong. A crowd has gathered around the mysterious hole in the ground and someone is talking rather loudly amid the ruckus. Rustion’s rope lies on the churned-up cobblestones and splatters of dirt mar the outside of the shops and homes that surround this side of the market square.

The speaker continues, and now it’s clear Betilda is the one regaling everyone with the tale of whatever happened here.

“I saw a shower of sparkles which were leftovers from a storm potion on that roof there, I think. They dropped into the hole, and then it exploded!” Betilda has a hand on her forehead and is batting her eyelashes.

Cyrus stands beside her. No wonder I didn’t see him in his pub. “Is that how the shrub gryphon ended up in the tree?”

“Aye, yes. I think his little wing is broken.”

“He was probably digging for worms,” the chandler’s daughter said quietly.

Her mournful eyes lift to the whimpering gryphon slumping over a high branch in the maple overhead. One of the small creature’s flame-hued wings hangs at a disturbing angle. Poor thing.

I eye the chandler’s daughter. “He will heal They’re remarkably resilient. I’ve seen ones far worse off come back even stronger in a twenty-four-hour period.”

The young female nods and gives me a tentative smile. I pat her head, unsure of what to do with the tears now dropping down her cheeks. Thankfully, her father and mother arrive and save me.

Laini’s Spark comes zipping from behind the row of shops. He flies into the maple and settles beside the gryphon. Laini isn’t far behind, her face scrunching as she approaches. She stands beside me and tries to look over two goblins’ shoulders to see Betilda.

“What’s going on?” she asks me.

“Not sure yet.”

Betilda catches my eye. “Here’s Tully! She’ll fix this up,” she says, waving me forward.

“Can everyone take a good ten steps away from this area?” I say, raising my voice so all can hear over the gusting wind. It smells like snow. I squint up at the tower. “Rom! Are we going to get a snowstorm?”

“Aye, but just a regular storm,” Rom says. “No magic involved. Might be a heavy fall for a while though.”

My fellow Leafshire inhabitants and I nod and wave a thanks for his warning. A tingling sensation flits down my back and I turn to see Argos. Hmm. I guess his khymeia are affecting his aura because usually I only sense magical folk in that particular way.

“Want these people farther back?” he asks, studying first my face and then the crowd.

“Please, yes.”

Laini and Argos lift their hands and urge everyone a few feet back from where I’d already backed them up.

I point my wand at the disturbed ground and will the dirt and stones away from the spot where the odd magic is strongest. Magic curls down my arm and focuses in my wand. The debris lifts into the air and settles around the area. I accidentally drop the equivalent of a shovelful onto Argos’s boots.

“Oopsie.” I give him a wicked grin.

His eyes narrow, and he shakes his feet to throw off the dirt.

I aim my wand again and urge more earth away, but there are only simple rocks, wet dirt, and the occasional larvae.

“Hmm.”

Pushing more power into my wand, I switch my aim. A prickling sensation dances over my back and along my arms. There’s a loud bang. A snap.

Night drops down like a sack over my head.

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Chapter 11

Tully

I blink, and I'm in warm, strong arms.

A voice is suddenly at my ear and breath drifts over my temple, giving me chills. "You could have just asked for a hug, Witch. No need for the dramatics," Argos whispers.

The foreign magic at play must have blasted me backward. I shake loose of Argos and find my feet.

"You all right, Tully?" Laini presses a hand to my cheek like I might have a fever.

"I'm fine. Thanks."

Argos lifts my hat from the ground and dusts it off. I rip it from his grip and slam it on my wayward red curls. This is all his fault. Everything was safe in town until he showed up and he is acting like he's completely innocent.

"Okay," I say to Argos. "I realize this sounds wild hearing this from me, but I think maybe we should stick to shovels until we figure out what is going on."

"Maybe you should just put your khymeia in your room so they're not in the vicinity," Laini adds.

“But what if you need backup with whatever this?” Argos asks.

I raise an eyebrow. “Back up from you? Let’s not worry about that.”

“I’m keeping the stones,” he says. “I’ll go get some shovels.”

But he doesn’t leave because a few townsfolk appear with what we need. We get down to work. Laini leaves us and the crowd breaks apart. I can only shovel one scoop to Argos’s three, but soon enough we have a large opening in the ground. Our shovels clang against something metal.

I bend and wipe the wet dirt away from the object. Scrolling flowers and skulls made of both bronze and some dark material appear in the muddy earth. Argos joins me in cleaning the dirt from the thing. We uncover a shining surface that reflects our faces back to us.

“A mirror?” Argos tilts his head, and the mirrored image of his wide-set horns reaches from border to border on the strange object. “Is this what’s causing our problems?”

“You are causing problems.”

“Yes, of course. But in addition to my existence, maybe?”

“So you do acknowledge it.”

“Yes. But maybe this is creating problems as well.”

“Maybe.” In reality, the magic zipping off this scary-ass mirror is mind-boggling. I’m not about to tell him how worried I am.

“Do you want me to get it out of there?” Argos rolls his sleeves up to his elbows. Muscles and veins show along his forearms. “Eh, did you hear me?”

“I.. What? Yes. Yes, remove it. But slowly and I’m going to stay ready to fight back.”

“It’s going to attack us?” he asks.

“Quite possibly.”

“Fantastic.”

He grips the edges and yanks the mirror free. Clumps of mud and churned earth fall away from the object and the crowd reforms around. Thankfully, they keep their distance. Magic hums loudly from the mirror and makes my skin buzz. It’s not necessarily a terrible feeling, but I don’t adore the fact that it’s powerful and I have no clue what it is.

“Is this stone here in the frame the same as my khymeia?”

“Oh. Yes, actually. I think it is.”

“I’ve done some research on this material,” Argos says.

“You have?”

“Aye. It’s midnight adamant.”

A bolt of recognition goes through me. “The stuff they used to make portal stones out of?”

Argos tilts his head and his horn chains jingle lightly. “Uh, I don’t know anything

about portal stones.”

I hold out a hand. “Of course you don’t. You weren’t raised to wield magic. Yet another reason you shouldn’t be using any.”

He ignores my comment and begins carrying the mirror in the direction of the pub. “Think Cyrus will be all right with me taking this to my room?”

“He loves an adventure even if he ends up on the wrong end of fate.”

Argos chuckles. “That does sound like him.”

Inside The Gold Coin, a few tables are full of folks eating and drinking. Cyrus is explaining something to his employee behind the bar. He gives us a quick wave and then does a double-take.

“Ooo, what do we have here, magical friends?” Cyrus asks.

I grimace and shrug. “We don’t really know yet, but we will find out.”

Cyrus grins wickedly. “Up in Argos’s room?”

My glare has to be hot on the dragon’s forehead even if he is good with all kinds of heat. “Yes, why do you say it like that, Cyrus?”

“Nothing. Go on ahead. I’m sure you two will learn a lot alone up there together.”

I snarl quietly. “Please stop.”

Cyrus smirks and I raise my wand. He lifts his hands in surrender and I turn away to trail Argos up the stairs to his room.

Argos sets the mirror on his narrow bed, then steps back to wipe his hands on his trousers. The room is small but tidy. He has a gas lamp on his nightstand and a small window that looks out the back of the pub to the river a few streets away. A trunk of folded clothing sits near a desk. The trunk is a fine one with tooled leather, bronze studs, and an engraved plate near the handle. I squint, trying to make out the shapes on the engraving.

“Is that a coat of arms? Where did you get that trunk?”

He purses his lips, and with a foot, shoves the trunk under the desk. “I didn’t steal it if that’s what you’re implying.”

“I’m implying that no one knows why you moved here and where you got those witch-made khymeia. You expect me to just let you waltz into my hometown and charm everyone’s trousers off without knowing a single thing about your background. You could be a murderer. A traitor to the Veiled Kingdoms. A violent sort who left his family in poverty in his last town. When you tell me nothing, I can only assume the worst so that I can be ready when you show your true colors.”

Something dark flashes across his eyes. I’ve hit the mark with at least some part of my tirade.

“Wow,” he says, his tone light but forced. “That’s a big jump. From pretty magical illusions to murder?”

“And once again, you’re avoiding revealing anything about yourself. If that’s not the move of a guilty male, I don’t know what is.”

He acts like I said nothing at all and instead of filling me in, he goes to his desk and removes his precious little notebook from the top drawer. Then he takes a small set of scales from another door in the desk’s side. He sets the book and scales on the desk

and takes a minuscule knife from his pocket.

“I’m not about to try to cut you into pieces if you are curious.” He moves toward the mirror.

I roll my eyes. “I didn’t think that.”

“Good. Because I’d definitely use a larger knife for that kind of job.”

“Funny guy.”

The corners of his lips lift in an almost smile as he leans over the mirror. “I’m going to make sure I’m right about this material.”

He picks at the mirror’s frame with his knife and pries a flower free. Dropping it onto one side of the scale, he frowns at it. Next, he adds three bronze weights to the other side of the scale. The dark material is heavier than the weights, so he adds another of the bronze triangles.

“What does this tell us?” I ask.

He opens his notebook and leafs through a few pages very quickly, his gaze darting over his records or whatever he writes in there.

I cross my arms and tap my foot on the floorboards. “What are you looking for?”

“I was going to put one of the khymeia stones on the other side of the scale to take a peek at their weights, but I worry the scale will serve as a conduit and perhaps explode my lovely room here,” Argos says.

“Your body is a conduit.”

He turns and wiggles his eyebrows at me. “Thanks.”

“It wasn’t a compliment, you dolt.”

He just laughs quietly and then lifts his notebook, pointing to a page. His handwriting is painfully neat. Numbers, letters, arrows, and circles cover the page.

“What in the world am I looking at here?” I ask.

“It likely weighs as much as the khymeia.”

“So maybe you’re right about the mirror being partially made with the same stuff as the stones.”

He nods. “Aye. Let’s do a scratch test.”

“Let’s do a magic test.” With a hip, I bump him away from the bed and face the mirror.

Wand out, I imagine a revelation spell.

His eyes widen. “Aren’t you worried about it exploding?”

“Yes. But I’ll only let a wee fraction of my power out, and I’ll use caution.”

Magic crackles from my forehead, down my dominant arm, into my palm, and out through my wand. Blue and purple sparks dance across the space above Argos’s bed, then pour down onto the mirror.

“What will you learn from this?”

I would be annoyed by his question if he didn't sound so genuinely curious.

“Power has a signature of sorts so it's possible I'll find out the mirror's origin, its maker. I can also measure its currents to see if its power is affected by mine and if that reaction is constant or varying and if so how wildly.”

He looks positively giddy.

I slide a glance his way. “Does data get you off?”

A laugh punches from his lips. “It does. That and the magical female in front of me.”

“Simmer down, Minotaur. We have work to do. Also, in your wildest dreams, you'll never have a witch in your bed.”

“I mean, you're already standing right next to it.” His smirk is strangle-worthy. “That has to count for something.”

I can imagine Argos lying in this bed with his powerful thighs spread and his—I shut that thought down. “Please shut your gob. I'm working.”

“As you wish.” The twinkle in his eye has me wondering if he somehow knows what I was imagining.

The magic snaps and flings itself back at me in a stream of bright red flashes. I duck and the power bangs into the far wall, knocking an unlit candle off Argos's desk.

Well, this is not what I expected.

Chapter 12

Tully

S haking slightly, I tuck my wand into my belt. Damn it.

Argos goes to the mark the magic left on the wall. His big, tan fingers trace a spray of black residue beside a line of dark red. “What are your findings?”

“This mirror was made by a witch who lived in this area before Leafshire Cove was founded. She was in love with a pixie, who wanted magic so badly that the witch was moved to break her covenant’s rules and create this for her.”

“What did the pixie use it for?”

“For illusions.” I raise an eyebrow at him.

“So the damage in the town square is at least partially my illusion’s fault because this also works with illusions? Is the magic in my khymeia and this mirror clashing?”

I fist my free hand and rub my knuckle over my bottom lip. “Something like that. The witch wouldn’t have realized it at the time, but she accidentally created a chaos artifact.”

“I’ve never heard that term,” he says.

“They’re bespelled physical objects that increase the power of a spell. They don’t

work the way the original creators wanted. Not only do they ramp up a magic's power, they fracture and twist its intent and then you have it."

"Chaos."

"Yep."

"So now what?" he asks. He opens his notebook, dips his quill in the blue inkwell at the desk, and jots down a few lines.

I shrug. "Do your scratch test."

"Really?"

"Do it. We need to see if it's made of the same stuff as the khymeia. I have an idea. Go ahead. I'll be here in case things go awry."

"But your wand is sheathed."

"I'm fast."

A slow smile spreads over his handsome mouth. "I bet."

Before I can bark something at him, he has a knife out and is scraping some of the black material. A wave of power pours from the chaos artifact and he freezes.

"Damn. What was that?" He pulls his knife back and studies the residue he's collected on the sharp edge.

"Defensive spell that's built-in. We won't be able to blast it apart."

He is in his notebook again, flipping pages and muttering to himself. Cursing quietly, he opens a small drawer and pulls out a pair of spectacles. He puts them on and glances at me from behind a fallen lock of wavy hair. Why do his glasses make my thighs clench? I swallow and he looks back to his notes.

Rubbing the residue between his fingers, he murmurs nonsense about minerals.

“You’re muttering like an old woman.”

“What?” The notebook has him completely hooked.

I huff a laugh. “Blessed Stones, but you are a proper nerd, aren’t you?”

He isn’t listening though; he’s back to giving that black residue all his attention.

“Should I leave you two alone for a while?” I ask.

“I’m sorry?” He doesn’t even look up from his notes.

“Wow. This is incredible. I bet your last lover had to ink formulas onto her breasts just to get your attention.”

The scribbling in the notebook starts up again and my fantastic insult is wasted. “Please tell me what you discovered.” I am tapping my foot on the floor and about ready to pinch his arse to make him spill it out.

He whirls, and I fall back a step.

“Caught you enjoying the view again, did I?” He winks, and heat shoots to my core.

“Dammit. Just tell me your stupid results!”

“No need to shout, lovely scary witch. Ooo, your nostrils are flaring. How would you like to punish me for making you wait?”

I tug at my neckline. “Keep dreaming, Minotaur.”

“The residue has the same exact properties as the khymeia.”

“I love being right.”

He smiles and lifts his notebook so I can see a graph. His writing is neat but has a rushed quality to it. Like he’s always too excited about findings to take his time recording them.

“That graph makes no sense to me. I’ll just have to trust you.”

He shrugs and sets the notebook on his desk. “So what is your idea?”

“Since the khymeia’s magic works by draining the environment, we cast a spell with them and use the action to drain the mirror of power.”

Blinking, he studies my face. “That’s genius. But how do we manage to control it like that?”

“We need a place to work the spell where the only thing the khymeia can possibly pull from is the mirror,” I say.

“But we’ll have to be with the mirror in whatever place we set up, right? Won’t the khymeia attempt to drain us?”

“I don’t think so. They pull from inanimate objects. Organic, yes, but not from creatures.”

“You’re sure?” he asks. “Because if you’re not, then maybe we should try some other ideas first? Or can one of us cast with the khymeia from behind a wall?”

“It’s possible we could build a structure of stone that doesn’t hold much energy.”

“Right.” He is pacing now, walking back and forth between the door and the end of the bed. “No granite, of course. No soapstone since that tends to gather the sun’s heat...”

“No basalt,” I say.

“Oh, because of the white hydrogen often hidden inside.” He shakes his finger at me and smiles over his glasses. Gods, why are the glasses so hot? “Yes. Good one.”

He rattles off a few types of stone that could work—mainly ditchite, a worthless material I have heard of, but know little about.

“There is a quarry of the stuff near my hometown,” he says.

“Where are you from?”

His gaze cuts to me and his eyes narrow. “If I tell you, will you keep it to yourself?”

“Why don’t you want anyone to know? Did you get kicked out because you were overcharging for your pretend illusions?”

“They aren’t simply images of my imagination, you know. The khymeia accesses my memory when it creates those images. I use a memory spell to cast those.”

I frown and cross my arms. “I did notice a memory type rune on them. Do you combine the memory spell with a will to share?”

“I think so? It’s one of the open spells.”

I nod. It’s smart, to use those together. Awkward and bumbling for certain, but since he wasn’t born with magic, it’s a smart way to dazzle a crowd. Open spells are spells available to anyone who cares to pick up the Veiled Kingdom Grimoire . It’s a basic book that anyone can get at a library or a bookshop.

“You look less like you think I’m an idiot,” he says.

“I have to admit your spell combination is pretty smart. And you know a ton about rocks.”

He chuckles. “Thanks.”

“Finish your story, Minotaur. What is this secret background of yours?”

“I’m from Mytilene.”

“Isn’t that a noble’s domain?” Last I heard, Mytilene wasn’t a chartered town, but more of a sprawling estate. Granted here in Leafshire Cove, we have Rustion as our noble in charge, but that is more a succession of coincidences and his plentiful money and less about title and land handed down through generations.

“It was. The king owns it now.”

“What happened to the duke?”

“You don’t pay attention to local heralds much, do you?” There is an odd look on his face.

“I don’t. No. I like staying focused on my here and now.”

Nodding, he bites his lower lip. Part of me wants to bite it for him. I shake my head slightly as he opens his mouth to continue talking.

“The duke died suddenly at the end of summer.”

“Finally angered a tenant farmer too much and ended up with a pitchfork in his back?”

He breathes out slow and long. “I understand why you would feel that way, but no. A fever took him.”

“Sickness can strike high as well as low. The true equalizer.”

“So you truly hate nobles?”

“I don’t like fiefdoms. They’re set up to serve the nobles instead of building an environment that encourages a happy life for all inhabitants.”

“I agree. But I’m a hypocrite saying that. You see, I’m the duke’s son.”

My mouth falls open. “You’re a duke?”

Chapter 13

Argos

Here it comes. I'm spoiled. Yes. I grew up with every advantage so why am I hawking wares instead of working to make the lives of those on my parents' estate better? I'm a noble; I know nothing of real work.

"I'm sorry you lost your father," Tully says.

I am stunned. This quick-to-anger female usually hits right below the belt at any chance she gets because she sees me as a rival. But she is looking at me with kindness.

"I, um, thank you."

"Why didn't you stay with your mother and work to run the estate?"

A familiar weight settles on my chest. "She is still grieving deeply. I haven't been able to pull her out of the darkness. She isn't herself. The king demanded his tax paid in full and the wheels were just completely off by that time. I was also wrapped in shock when the king's collector first arrived."

"Loss can paralyze us."

I look up to see her jade-green eyes shining with unshed tears.

“Who did you lose?” I ask gently.

She turns toward the window. “My grandwitch. She raised me. I knew she was on her way out, but it still shocked me. I couldn’t work magic for almost a year. Do you know what that does to a magical creature?”

I don’t think she wants me to answer that. She wants an ear to listen.

Her hands fist at her sides as she gazes at the glistening river in the view beyond the window glass. “Humans call the experience depression .”

“I’ve heard of it. I think that’s what my mother is dealing with.”

“Laini helped me climb out. That’s why I take care of her when she needs it.”

“Good friends are worth more than gold.”

She nods and looks at me again. “Not to sound accusatory, but why did you leave your mother?”

“Because we’re out of money. Our land manager is there, caring for my mother. The king is holding our estate for two more months as a favor to my father’s memory.”

“So you have two months to do what exactly?”

“To earn enough to pay off our debt. When father first grew sick last winter, his management skills weakened. We were completely unaware that he had failed to order the seed for the next season. He bounced back for a while, but then the fever arrived again and latched its claws deeply. He’d never been good at delegating responsibilities, so no one else knew what to do when. And the farmers tried to talk to mother and me, but we were in over our heads. I was an idiot. I tried ignoring it all. I

was gambling. Spending weeks away in frivolous travel. I was everything you probably hate in a noble. Spoiled. Selfish. Thoroughly unhelpful to the community. Living on other people's coin."

She tilts her head and looks me up and down. "The fact that you can admit that so freely means you aren't like that anymore."

I shut my eyes briefly, soaking in her words like the cure I've been searching for.

She touches my arm for a moment, pulling back like she hadn't meant to rest her fingers on my forearm. "We will get you that money. Somehow."

"But I'm your rival."

She sighs. "Laini's and Rustion's good hearts have rubbed off on me, I guess because I don't think I'll enjoy smashing your business into oblivion now that I know you're not who I thought you were."

Her dark green gaze pulls me under. I feel like I'm drowning and couldn't be happier. I can't seem to move, but blood rushes through my veins like I'm sprinting. Her lips part.

Chapter 14

Tully

The moment stretches out in a strange sort of quiet. Like we are waiting for something big. Something life-altering. Argos's breath is loud and uneven. His pupils widen, threatening to swallow his irises. He is taking his sweet time examining my neck, the swell of my chest, and the exposed lower half of my legs. I can hear my heartbeat in my ears, oddly loud, and I can smell only him. A touch of salty sweat, fire smoke, and sandalwood. His hands are lifted, fingers slightly curled. The light brown hair on his forearms rises like lightning is about to strike.

"Tully, I..."

His voice is hoarse, and the heat in his stare has my stomach flipping.

"Yes?" My voice doesn't sound much better.

My body hums and I can't break the eye contact.

Suddenly, we are kissing.

But not like usual kissing. This is violent. Arms wrapped like rope around muscles and lungs and bones. Teeth biting on lips and soft skin. I want to breathe him in, to eat him whole, to absorb him somehow. I'm smashed against his massive body and I'm still not close enough.

“Gods, Tull...” he grunts out as he slams me against the wall near the door.

I drive my tongue into his mouth and he returns the favor, his tongue much larger and longer. The heat of his mouth on mine has sweat beading on my lower back. His big hands slide down my body to cup my arse. He presses tightly against me and moans my name.

I tug my neckline down to expose my chest. I grab his head to direct that mouth to my nipple. He curses against my skin and nips at my breast. My core is molten.

“I still hate you,” I say, my breathy voice a betrayal to myself.

“Of course,” he says messily with my tit in his mouth.

I writhe against him, all thoughts whirling and insensible. It’s just his scent and his hands and his body and his lips.

“Hold on. I... Just a minute,” he whispers.

I moan and whimper. “You’re the worst.”

“I know. Just a second...”

He moves his hand between us, adjusts an erection that could change the world, and then he gives me friction exactly where I need it. I roll my hips and groan. Pleasure slams into me, like that lightning I was expecting really did strike. A climax drums and echoes through me, sharp and fast and nearly painful with its intensity. He is latched onto my neck, his teeth not quite breaking skin, and his body bucking.

“Damn it. I am about to?—”

His cock pushes against me even harder, larger. Then he freezes, releases me, and puts air between us. I can barely stand on my shaking legs and his hand grasps mine, his eyes on me as if checking to make sure I can stay upright while he frees himself from his trousers and...

“Oh,” I whisper.

His cock isn't your run-of-the-mill appendage. “I've never seen a minotaur naked, so I didn't realize.” Aside from the impressive size, there is a swollen area right at the base.

“It's a knot,” he says.

He strokes himself once and the knot grows a fraction more. His throat moves in a swallow and I really just want him on the floor. Now. My heart hammers a frantic beat against my pulse points.

“How does it work?” I ask, my voice a touch shaky.

Hesitation shows in the pinch of his dark eyes and how his lips part as he tries to explain but can't seem to find the right words.

“Tully, I don't know if we should...”

My heart is still crashing around inside my chest like a firecracker, but I force myself to calm down. “I'm listening.”

He tucks a strand of my crazy hair behind my ear while my mind spins around the word knot .

“You're so deadly beautiful, Tully.” His eyes are sincere and kind.

The tension in the room shifts to something softer, something tentative and deeper. I take a breath and tug my clothing into place. When he pulls his trousers on, I try not to mourn the loss of what almost happened.

“Minotaurs can’t just have full sex with any creature,” he says. “We’re different.”

“Tell me everything. I mean, if you want to.”

He looks away, blowing out a breath. “I don’t think we are ready for that.”

I blink. Of course not. He doesn’t want this intimacy with me. We’re rivals. I don’t know why I thought I wanted it.

“Right. Agreed. Sorry about all of that.”

He takes my chin between his thumb and forefinger and forces me to look him in the eyes. “Don’t do that. I want this. I just need to figure some things out. All right? I’m not sorry this happened. Not even a little bit.”

“Me either actually.”

I’m as raw as an open wound and I hate this feeling. I don’t want these sensations of hope and worry and whatever this is. I laugh off my discomfort and straighten my skirts.

There’s a pounding at the door. “Eh, you two. We have some weather headed our way and it seems our handy weather-shielding gargoyle is out of pocket. Can I get your help?”

Chapter 15

Argos

Though we are both brimming with unspent tension—or at least I am—we help Cyrus load in wheels of cheese, ham hocks, baskets of greenhouse/magic-grown vegetables, and even three kegs of brew from the brewmaster one town over. I don't mind the physical labor. It is good to work beside Tully and not have to talk. I don't know what to say after what we did. I'm afraid to bring anything up in case my words ruin any possibility of that happening again. Because that's all I want. Well, it's all I can think about, anyway. And I never did get to finish, so the sweating and labor are making that more bearable.

Gods, she is gorgeous. I have to figure out what is happening between us and how I can possibly satisfy her without hurting her.

I watch her use her magic to fling a sack of beans onto the highest shelf in the store room behind the pub's kitchen. I tuck another round of cheddar onto the cooling platform near the icebox. The gaslight flickers as Tully bespells the door open for Cyrus who is shouting and has his hands full.

The store room is full to bursting by the time we finish and snow is coming down in thick curtains of white.

“Does Romulus usually leave town during the winter? I'd have thought that would be a no-no considering his position in town.”

“No, he doesn’t leave at all normally,” Tully says.

Two more helpers—an orc and a human male—trudge down the stairs. They’re carrying an awkwardly large sack. I assume it’s laundry or covered furniture that needs repair—some such chore. The whole pub is busy with those Cyrus asked to come give him a hand. His regular deliveries were moved up a day because of the incoming storm, so everything that usually takes him a four-day period is taking place in one day. It’s managed chaos.

A female pixie, a male human, and a female fairy crowd around him, and he is flirting like it’s just his way of life. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s sleeping with all three. You don’t have to be a seer to know that Cyrus gets around. He appears to have the goodwill of everyone in town though so he must be mindful about choosing and accepting partners.

Tully picks up our thread of conversation as we return to the main room of the pub. “Rom and Laini went to visit her sister, Sorina, beyond the Veil in the human world. She’s hoping to talk some sense into her.”

“They’re on the outs?” I ask.

Cyrus is pouring over a list and making one of his lovers laugh.

“Always have been. Laini is too good for that brat of a sibling. I don’t know why she bothers with her at all. If they do bring her back, that human is going to get a very big, very nasty piece of my mind.”

I grin. She is a mean thing, this witch, but she’s a loyal friend.

A crack sounds, and then there’s a bang on the roof. Cyrus swears and runs out of the front door. We follow him only to see a tree limb the size of two orcs stretched out

over the thatch.

“I have to get that thing off of there,” Cyrus says. Snow is already blanketing all of our heads. “Tully, think you can help me out?”

“I can,” she says.

She looks tired though, probably from all the magic we did on the mirror and the work she’s been doing with the unloading for Cyrus.

“How about we let our resident witch have a break? I can climb up there and roll it off.”

“That’s a big ask,” Cyrus says. “You sure?”

“Oh yeah. Minotaurs are pretty strong.” I wink at Tully.

She narrows her eyes before releasing what appears to be a reluctant grin.

Cyrus chuckles and heads back inside, his dragon tail swishing through the snow. It’s already two feet deep. Everyone was saying this storm didn’t have magical elements like some do, but there is a sheen on the powdery stuff that makes me wonder if they’re mistaken.

I use a smaller tree beside the tree in question and climb up to the roof. Once there, I begin shoving the limb with a boot, rolling it toward the edge. The slight slope of the roof helps the limb along too.

“Make sure all is clear!” I call down.

Tully’s commanding voice barking at folks carries up through the flurries of white.

“Ready?” I shout over the edge.

“Yes!” Tully shouts.

I kick at the limb one last time and it pitches over the thatched roof’s uneven edge. Despite the snow, there’s a tremendous smashing sound as the limb hits the ground. The whole pub trembles and I fall on my arse.

I’m slipping down the snowy thatch.

“A little help, Tully?”

I am falling clean off the roof by the time the words are out of my mouth. My heart climbs into my throat.

This isn’t going to be pretty.

But then an invisible hand of magic cocoons me and floats me like a feather to the ground. I find my feet and look up at a very smug witch, wand in hand. Circles hang under her alluring spring green eyes and the skin around her red lips is more pale than what is healthy.

“Thank you so much, you gorgeous, scary witch.”

She nods, then crumples. I dash forward to catch her and am just barely able to get my arms under her knees and around her back before she drops into the snow.

“Damn it,” I whisper, staring into her face and willing her not to be too worn down.

“We have to get everyone inside. This is thundersnow.” Cyrus’s part-time cook, a massive orc, looks at Tully, eyes wide in his green face. I think his name is Halvard.

“Did the limb hit her?” he asks.

“No, she saved me from falling and did too much magic today.”

The orc opens the pub door for me. “Really? I’ve never seen our Mistress Tully run out of power.”

I hurry Tully inside. Cyrus is talking to some of his staff, his fisted, scaled hand lifted.

“Damned thundersnow. I haven’t seen this in years,” he is saying. “Horrible. Do not under any circumstances try to clear the snow, or Blessed Stones forbid, go out in it. It’ll eat you up and beat you senseless.” The dragon shifter’s gaze snags on Tully. He races around the bar and moves a chair so I can get to the stairs more easily. “What happened to her?”

“Thundersnow?” I ask. I’ve never heard of it. My mind is whirling.

“Argos says she ran out of magic,” Halvard orc says. “She saved him. He fell off the roof when the thundersnow gave its first shake.”

Cyrus looks from me to the orc to the door. “Too much is going on at once. I’ll fly to the healer.” He grabs a sack from a table and slings it over his shoulder and one wing and then he’s out the door in a flash of green and gold.

I leave the rest of the staff downstairs and take Tully up to my room. I’ll have to set her down somewhere to move the mirror off my bed...

I kick the door open, my temples pounding. She hasn’t even cracked an eyelid.

The mirror is gone.

My khymeia are gone from the desk.

Panic bolts through my chest and I settle Tully on the bed. She mutters something and I kneel beside her to push her hair away from her face. Her skin is pasty white now and dotted with perspiration. She's murmuring something I can't hear.

"Say it again." I lean my ear close to her mouth.

"Wrap mirror and stones in blankets or sheets. Sprinkle dill over them. Cyrus has some in his kitchen."

"Dill?"

"Keep thundersnow from..." She splays her fingers in a motion that indicates an explosion.

"But the mirror never reacted to your magic or the other storms before I arrived with the stones, did it?"

She opens her eyes and I exhale, so relieved to see her awake. "We activated the chaos mirror. It might not react to just my magic alone. Didn't seem to. But this storm..."

I help her sit up and hand her the half-full cup of water on my nightstand. She swallows it all down, her hand around mine as I hold the rim to her lips. Her fingers are trembling. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and eyes the storm through the window.

"Thundersnow is no joke. It's like a chaos artifact of its own," she says.

"Is that why you're so drained? The orc and Cyrus both found it odd that you were

suffering.”

“Halvard and Cyrus don’t know the work we did on the mirror earlier. As I was saving your clumsy arse, I felt a power tugging at me. I think the mirror is pulling from me.” She lies back down and I maneuver the covers over her. “The storm probably threw some magic at it, something like a smashing or dislodging spell, and the mirror decided it likes using my energy.”

“Damn it.”

“Yes, damn it a lot.”

“Why? How?”

“Because I stupidly gave it my magic’s signature when I studied its makeup. I didn’t realize it was sentient.”

I pull back, a chill sweeping through my bones. My tail whips the space behind me like an enemy is on the prowl. “The mirror has a mind of its own?”

“Apparently. And we don’t get on.”

I almost laugh and run a hand through my hair. “Okay. How do we fix this?”

“Where is the mirror?”

“I assumed you had it moved.”

She sits straight up, her head nearly colliding with my chin. “I didn’t.”

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Chapter 16

Tully

“I have to get up. Someone has stolen the mirror.”

“And my khymeia.”

“Damn the fools!” I try to stand, but the room spins and I’m back on the bed with the minotaur’s worried face hovering over me. “I guess I’m staying put for the time being. But you have to go.”

“All right.” Argos stands. “I’ll send that orc?—”

“Halvard.”

“Right. I’ll send Halvard up and I’ll question Cyrus’s employees and the few patrons stuck here. Cyrus is fetching the healer to see if they can help you.”

“Good.” I shut my eyes and listen to his door open and close.

Argos thinks I’m going to rest and that’s just as well because I need no one bothering me for a few moments while I try to locate the mirror and the khymeia with my third eye sensing. I shouldn’t be doing this, not when I’m this drained, but this is an emergency.

Argos appeared properly concerned, but he has no idea how serious this is. If the

wrong people have that mirror and those stones and decide to give them a whirl, three things will happen. I will die. The mirror will likely drain a mile-wide area in a very explosive way. The mirror will only grow stronger—and that's without whatever horrid nonsense the thundersnow will toss into the mix.

Breathing slowly, I concentrate on the spot between my eyebrows. A shining purple and gold light hovers behind my eyelids. My body shakes as my third eye wakes and magic spreads like wildfire down my limbs. My wand is hot against my waist. I picture the mirror and the magical stones—their weight, their magical signature. They are red in my third eye's view of the world. I see Leafshire Cove in shades of energy—gold, green, gray—everything has at least a touch of power hiding inside it. My third eye magic travels over the town like Cyrus probably is right now. The mirror and khymeia aren't in the town center.

I keep searching.

Sweat rolls down my forehead and gathers at the back of my neck. I'm shivering. But I can do this. I must do this.

Sending my third eye magic soaring over Rustion's lands, I finally spot three distinct red energy signatures. The wavy ones are the khymeia, their light fainter. The pulsing and flaring light is the chaos mirror.

Whoever stole the objects is at Rustion's estate, below the front gate. Way below. I didn't realize Rustion had underground quarters. Hmm...

The magic overwhelms me. My senses dull to nothing. The lights go dark and I fall into nothingness.

Chapter 17

Argos

After questioning his entire staff and finding nothing, Cyrus joins me in his pub's kitchen. We'll do some more inquiries as soon as possible in this wild weather.

Right now, we're putting together a small, simplified steam distillation system. I hold the thin bar of tin and lead alloy against the tubing and the pot which will hold the water and steam. We already assembled the piece that will hold the plant material and the tubing that runs into the collection jar.

"If you don't mind?" I say.

He nods and releases a small stream of his dragon fire, melting the alloy. The solder is drawn into the seam and the contraption is nearly finished.

"Thanks." I look up and he is wiping a bit of something from his cheek. "You all right?"

"Aye. Shilia had a little too much rouge on. I think I'm wearing half of it now."

I grin and he laughs as he watches me ready more rosin to use as a flux. It cleans the surfaces of the next pieces to be soldered.

"Just tell me when to blow," he says, a teasing note in his voice.

I shake my head. “I’m guessing more than one person has called you incorrigible in your life.”

“Oh yes. It might as well be my given name.”

“Have you ever been serious about someone? As in, finding a potential mate? I mean, no judgment; I’m just curious. Tell me to shut it if you don’t care to answer.”

“No, it’s fine.”

He crosses his arms and shuffles his wings as he leans back on the countertop. The oven behind him flickers with the coals that heated the alloy for me earlier. I hope he doesn’t get upset about me using his ladle to hammer the solder flat.

“I have actually,” Cyrus says, “but it didn’t work out.”

“Someone said no to you?”

He snorts and a bit of dark smoke curls from his nostrils. “She didn’t exactly give me a no , but I could tell she wasn’t interested, so I backed off. I don’t blame her, I suppose.” He jabs a finger at his chest. “Incorrigible, remember?”

I smile and hold the resin in place. “A little heat, please?” I wonder who the female in question is.

Obliging, he helps me clean the last of the pieces for fitting. Once we have that done, we solder them together and then the distiller is complete. I fetch the pot of dill I’ve been soaking and put the plant material into the condenser while Cyrus fills the boiler with water. He lights the small oil lamp burner sitting below the boiler, and the process begins.

As the water bubbles and the steam hisses through the tubing, we enjoy some cider that tastes a little different from the usual.

“I like it, but what’s in this?”

Cyrus’s face lights up. “It’s Kaya’s new cider recipe. I think it has thyme or something in it.”

Perhaps it’s the baker. The way his eyes light up talking about her is telling. “Kaya is close to Tully, isn’t she?”

“As close as someone can be to our witch.” Cyrus elbows me lightly. “But you like them prickly, eh?”

I laugh and take another sip of the cinnamon, apple, and slightly herbal-tasting drink. “I guess I do.”

“I’ve never seen her like this with someone,” the dragon shifter says. “What’s your secret to wooing a witch?”

Cyrus is obviously changing the subject from Kaya, but I don’t fight it.

“No secret,” I reply. “I don’t think I’ve wooed her. Not really.”

“I disagree.” He clinks his cup against mine. “I think she’s smitten.”

“I know I am.”

“Can’t blame you. She’s a heartbreaker, that one. Oh, don’t look like that, Argos. I’ve never enjoyed her company behind closed doors or in front of them.”

I didn't realize I showed my feelings so openly with my features. I try to clear my face of any telling mannerisms. I just nod and finish my cider.

"If you hurt her, I'll warn you, sweet Kaya and sensible Laini will lose their minds and rip you limb from limb."

"I have no doubt."

"And that's after Tully eviscerates you."

I chuckle. "I didn't expect disembowelment to come up this early in the day."

Cyrus claps me on the shoulder and takes my empty cup. "Never know what you'll hear in my pub, Master Minotaur!"

He strides out of the room, his spiked tail and broad wings swishing behind him.

I turn to check the distiller. Steam continues to shush through the piping. The water in the boiler gurgles and the cold water inlet drips into the vapor chamber. A bit of excess water drips from the waste pipe attached to the vapor chamber.

The familiar sounds of a makeshift lab soothe my nerves. I spent most of my youth avoiding my literature tutors and sneaking into the workroom my father and mother created for me. Sometimes, they even joined me in experimenting. Once, we grew soybeans without soil. Another time, I blew a hole in the wall trying out new fertilizers. They grounded me from the lab for a month. Longest month in my life. I grin, recalling my parents back when they were well and happy together. I rub a spot over my chest. There will always be a hole there. At least I have my memories and nothing can take them away. I whisper a quick prayer for my mother.

"I'll try to be home soon," I say to her even though she is far away.

I can't return until I have the money though. She is safe enough, for now, staying with Hamish, our estate manager. She won't be herself until we can move forward though, with or without the estate. But Mother wouldn't have wanted me to leave Tully and Leafshire Cove without fixing the mess I stirred up with the khymeia.

I check the collection jar. No oil yet. It'll take patience. An hour. Maybe two. I hope this dill oil works the way Delixian—the healer—assumes it will. I can't let Tully sacrifice herself, even if it is for her dearest friends and this town she loves so much. I only met the witch, but I'm already head over heels. I wish I weren't, but it is what it is. She deserves someone with a future, not a male drowning in debt.

But first things first. I will do what I can to help her protect her people and protect herself. I might not have magic, but I have my mind and my predisposition to tinkering with science.

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Chapter 18

Tully

When I wake, I smell one thing.

“Pickles?” Why do I smell pickles?

I sit up and swing my legs over the side of the bed. I’m still woozy; the world is a touch blurry, but I feel much better. Nothing like a nice little pass out. I snort at myself and lift my wrists. Someone has given me bracelets made of twine braided with sprigs of dill.

A knock sounds at the door. “Come in.”

Halvard pops his big head in. “Tully, you all right?”

“I’m fine. Where’s Argos?”

“He’s in the kitchen. He just booked an event with the brewmaster’s guild. He impresses me if I’m honest. So much going on at the moment and he still has a head for a business opportunity.”

Heat creeps up my neck. “And just what did he promise to do at this event?”

“His illusions, of course. I’m sure you saw them lately, right? Amazing stuff.”

I stand and roar as best a witch can. Halvard's eyes go wide.

"What's wrong?"

I push past him. "Argos is what's wrong. He knows he can't use those stones anymore. For Blessed Stones' sake, we don't even have them in our possession!"

Halvard doesn't follow me too closely. He used to be a warrior with the king's army, but he gave that up and seems keen to stay out of trouble. Wise of him to give me a wide berth when I'm riled up like this.

"Argos!" I storm into the pub's small kitchen.

The minotaur is there tinkering with some bizarre contraption of metal tubing, a pipe bringing heat from the pub's wood-burning stove, and loads of large glass jugs.

"Hello, Mistress Witch. Are you feeling better? Unfortunately, we didn't find out anything during our questioning of the staff. I heard you had a nap," he says quickly, not turning around.

"I passed out locating the mirror and the khymeia."

He whirls and opens his mouth to speak, but I cut him off.

"I can't believe you're still trying to book events," I snap. "You know you can't use the khymeia even if we do get them back."

"I don't know. We can experiment once we deal with the mirror."

I growl and bare my teeth. "They're dangerous. I thought you had learned that. They're made of the same stuff as the dammed mirror!"

He shrugs. “We’ll see. I’m sorry you passed out. If I had known that, I’d have sent Delixian back up to your room.”

“I assume he put these on me?”

“Yes, he seems like a great healer. Your town is lucky.”

“I don’t feel lucky right now. We are stuck in a mess of thundersnow and the thieves who stole the magical artifacts are at Rustion’s doing only the Blessed Stones know what.”

Argos stops fiddling with his machine. “You found them?”

“I did.”

“How?”

“I used my witch’s third eye. I can travel beyond my body and see energy signatures.”

“Wow. That’s wonderful. Can all witches do this?”

“No.”

“I knew you were special.” His lips twist up into a grin and his eyes twinkle. “Are you still mad at me?”

“I am mad again if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Because of the event planning?”

“Yes.” I huff and study his contraption, refusing to look at the way his slightly sweaty shirt clings to his large pectoral muscles. I will not lower my gaze... “You’re a fool, Argos.”

“But I have to get the funds. You know the truth now.”

I grit my teeth, hating the grief and worry straining his handsome eyes. “We will get that money without using the khymeia.”

“We’ll talk more about it once we get them back. Now, I want to show you something.” He turns back to his little project.

“Great. You’re tinkering in the kitchen when we should be sending messages to the town guard about the artifacts.”

“I have a good reason.”

“What reason could you possibly have that’s more important than finding our stolen items?”

“You.”

I blink. “What?”

“This is a distillation system. I found about a pound of dried dill in Cyrus’s storeroom and I’m distilling it to gather the essential oil. Once I have that in hand, I can make you a better bit of jewelry to wear so you’ll be protected from draining.”

The wind goes right out of my angry sails. “I...”

“I make it tough to hate me, right?”

“You do.”

“You’ll find a way. I believe in you.”

I laugh. “Shut up, Minotaur.”

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Chapter 19

Tully

After fiddling with his distillation machine a little more, we don our cloaks and decide to test the thundersnow.

Cyrus grimaces at the view of the snow out the window. “You’re sure about this?”

“It’s started melting,” I say. “It might not be as bad now.” I hope my guess is right or this is going to hurt.

Argos pushes the door open and a gust of cold air blows in. “Let’s give it a go.”

We step delicately into the snow at the same time. The ground trembles and we freeze.

“Are we about to perish in this nice fluffy snow?” Argos eyes me, his brows lifted.

The sun breaks through the gray clouds and illuminates one of his dark eyes and the cut of a cheekbone. Intelligence puts a spark in his eye and his ridiculous confidence gives his presence a weight I can’t help but be drawn to. He is far more interesting than any other male I’ve known.

I smooth my skirts and glare at the piles of slush and ice. “Nothing about this snow is nice.”

The ground shakes again, and then the whole of it rolls under our feet like a sea wave crashing onto the shoreline. We fall back through the pub's double doors and onto our arses.

"Great work, you two," Cyrus says, chuckling from where he's serving up some roast and potatoes to one of the couples stuck here like us.

Argos stands and holds out a hand. I take it and haul myself to my feet.

"Now what?" the dragon shifter asks.

"You shift into dragon form and fly us to Rustion's."

"I would have suggested that ages ago if it weren't for the fact that I can't shift when thundersnow is surrounding me. I have tried. Believe me."

He shudders and starts back toward the kitchen. Cyrus had brought Delixian over, but from what I'd heard around the pub, it had nearly been a terrible idea. Unshifted, Cyrus can't carry much weight. They both almost ended up in the thundersnow, trapped. They could have been roughed up really badly.

"I'm out of ideas," I say, straightening my witch's hat.

"Let's eat, drink a bit, and wait for a day," Argos says. "The snow might melt completely if the temperature rises a little more tomorrow."

I shrug and head for a table by the crackling fire. "I guess we have to."

"Can we send word to Rustion about the thieves?"

I shake my head and remove my hat to shake a few errant ice flakes from the edge.

“No. My magic won’t work correctly with this stuff around and neither will notewater.”

“All right then.” Argos drags two wicker chairs from a table and positions them in front of the hearth. “We just relax as best we can with someone out there who may or may not blow up the mayor’s estate.”

Snorting a wry laugh, I sit beside him and stare into the flames, trying to figure this whole thing out. “So no leads at all after questioning the staff? Are you truly certain nothing they mentioned was helpful. I wish I had been there.”

“Yeah, no, we didn’t get anything really actionable. Cyrus did mention that there were a few extra helpers around right before the storm. He thought they were with one of the supply companies like the brewer or the greenhouse company, but it’s very possible a couple of them were just here and saw an opportunity.”

“They likely just want to sell the artifacts,” I say. “I didn’t see any magical creatures.”

“Right. They probably don’t even know what they stole, only that the stones and mirror looked expensive.”

“Hopefully, they’ll just leave them be until the storm clears. Then they’ll show themselves and probably try to sneak out of town to sell them off.”

Argos shrugs. “It’s a good guess.”

“Either way, we can’t do much about it at present. I just hope Rustion, Nisa, and the rest of the folks at his place don’t suffer for our inaction. I wonder if they are employed by him or they simply took shelter, leaning on his good nature.” I wave my hands. “No use going on about it now. We’re stuck and so are they. Let’s eat and try

to stop fretting.”

Cyrus brings us some beer in pewter mugs that keep the brew pleasantly cold. Soon, we are at a table with a few others playing cards and making increasingly fantastic bets.

“If you defeat me in this hand, I’ll hang from the beams and sing you a song,” Argos says.

“What about you singing is a win for me?”

“You’ve never even heard me sing, have you?”

“No, but I assume you have an awful voice or you would’ve tried busking before doing dangerous magic.”

“You, my scary witch, assume wrong.” He stands and begins belting out a song about an innkeeper, three goats, and a bard which details an incredibly questionable polyamory affair.

The whole place dissolves into laughter as he takes a bow and ends his little ditty.

I put my dried beans on the table. “I take it back!” We didn’t want to try to use real coin since most of us only had a few on hand. Argos had suggested beans and the idea had caught on well. “But what do you get if I lose?”

The others excuse themselves to join another group playing dice near the back of the pub. It’s just Argos and me now.

“How about a kiss?” he suggests.

I roll my eyes. “Please.”

“Fine. Then let’s up the risk. How about we forget kissing and singing? Whoever loses the next hand must remove a piece of clothing.”

“Right here in the middle of the pub? I mean, I’m game, of course, but most folks don’t have my level of not giving a piece of shite for what others think.”

“I’m the same way. Although, perhaps we need to take this game upstairs?”

I’ve had just enough beer to say yes .

Laughing, we drag a small card table up the stairs. Always up for fun, Cyrus is applauding us as we work the table through Argos’s doorway.

The room isn’t spinning. I’m not hammered. I’m just woozy from all the twists and turns of the day and ready to throw it all away for a while. Argos deals the cards. His hands mesmerize me with their quick and graceful movements.

I have a killer hand. “Get ready to expose yourself, good sir.”

“Oh really? I don’t know if this is going to go your way.” He shifts one card behind another and purses his lips.

After another drink and five more fast hands of cards, Argos is only wearing his undershorts and I haven’t removed a single item. With every loss, the minotaur took his sweet time pulling off his belt, tunic, boots, socks, and finally trousers. He kept his gaze on me the whole time and to say I was heated up would be a massive understatement.

I tip my hat at him. “Perhaps you should give in before this gets serious?”

He leans forward on the table and my mouth waters just a little at the set of his horns over his intense face.

“Never.”

I play my four empress cards, ease back, and grin up at him. “I’ll take those shorts now.”

He stands, grinning wickedly, and tugs off his undershorts. I lean back and admire the view.

“We should make this a little more fair,” he says, going to a bag he has stashed in the corner. He pulls out some rope and holds it up. “What if I tied you to the bed?”

“You’d die trying.”

“Unless you allow it.”

I tilt my head, impressed at his confidence as he stands there completely naked and asking to bind me to his bed. “What exactly do you have in mind, Minotaur?”

“I want to make you scream, Witch.”

I’m wet as hell already.

“Let’s see what you’ve got.” I slip off my hat and boots, then I sit back on his bed and permit him to tie each of my wrists to the curving brass rods that make up the headboard.

“I’m enjoying the view, but I’m not sure you will be as good at this as I could be,” I say.

He kneels at the end of the bed and begins sliding his hands up my ankles, my calves, and then over my knees. Shivers spread from his touch like he is made of thundersnow and soon my whole body is vibrating—warm and sensitive.

“If you want to tie me up next, I’ll be your glad victim.”

I smile as he unclasps my garter and begins rolling down my thick winter stockings. Once they are on the floor, he kisses his way up and down each leg. His breath is hot and soft on my skin and my eyes flutter closed as pleasure skips across my body in gentle waves. He moves to hover over me, his cock brushing my corseted stomach, and he reaches between my back and the mattress to untie my corset. The release of the corset’s pressure has me taking a deep breath that shifts my breasts free to dust across his powerful chest. My nipples harden and I take another breath, this one uneven. He sets his nose against my hair and inhales.

“You smell amazing.” His hand bunches in my curls. “I love your wild hair.”

He moves lower, and the chains on his horns tickle my cheek as he licks my throat once, twice. His mouth closes over a nipple, and he bites it hard enough to hurt but not so vicious as to injure. Desire ricochets down my torso. I gasp. He slides down farther and dips one horn under my knee.

“I thought perhaps those horns would come in handy,” I say breathlessly.

He hums against my thigh and heat pools at my center. I want him to kiss me there. I need touch now. Not thinking, I try to grab at his horn to ease his mouth to my core, but the rope holds. I growl.

“Ah, ah, ah, Witch. You will be patient.”

He shifts his head so that my other knee is also hooked over a horn. He grins, eyes

twinkling with mischief. My body pulses with heat.

His tongue reaches out to circle my most sensitive spot, and I fist my hands and buck my hips as pleasure courses through me. His tongue is much longer and larger than any I've seen, and he uses it to sweep across my center and through my folds. The sensation is intense and a climax coils inside me, shivering and nearly ready to spring. He pushes his tongue inside me, deep and unrelenting.

“Argos!”

The heat and wetness of his tongue are driving across the exact right spot inside me and I want more.

“Please, faster.”

He pulls away a bit and whispers, “Not yet, my rival. I think you've earned a little punishment for how terribly you've treated me.”

“Bastard,” I hiss.

He laughs, kisses my thigh with just a brush of his lips, and then plunges his tongue inside me once more. I gasp and moan as he slowly moves in and out. He's moving far too slowly for my taste. The pleasure is so incredibly intense that I raise up again, urging him to give me more. He grips my hip and meets my gaze again. What is he on about?

Something tickles my arse. His tail. He uses the tip to brush my arse cheeks while he keeps his tongue delving deep and slow inside of me. I'm shaking. Sweating. I'm near the edge.

And then he eases my legs onto the bed and rises up to crawl on top of me.

“Argos, no. I need more.”

“I’m in charge, remember? You’ll come when I say you’re ready.”

“You’re going to suffer for this.”

My body is trembling as he sets his cock against my center. He rubs himself up and over, not entering me but rubbing along the outside. Every time his slightly swollen knot runs over the right spot, I see stars. My heart beats low in my belly. He increases his pace and then I’m coming so hard I can’t take in any air. The climax roars through me.

“Take me, Argos.” I want him inside of me. Now.

“I can’t, Love,” he pants into my ear. “It might hurt you.”

I peer down between us to see the knot at the base of his cock. It’s more swollen now and rubbing against me creating more waves of pleasure. I climax again, and he goes with me this time, his horns knocking into the wall above the headboard and his grunts so incredibly satisfying to my ears.

With quick fingers, he unties me, cleans us up, and then collects me into his arms.

“I’m not usually a cuddler,” I say. He’s so warm and large and it feels perfect. Not a chance I’m telling him that though. “But I’ve had a little too much to drink.”

“You’re just resting. No cuddling happening. Totally understandable.”

But I can hear the grin in his voice.

“Are you teasing me?” I ask in a whisper that would scare most people.

“I would never,” he whispers back.

“Says the male who just tied me to his bed.”

Chapter 20

Argos

The thundersnow is gone by sunrise, and we are up and headed to Rustion's to retrieve the stolen items before the thieves accidentally blow the town sky-high.

The sun lights the town in shades of gold and touches the ends of Tully's red braid, turning it to flame. She's wearing the lava stone jewelry I crafted for her out of odds and ends during the night. I doused each piece with the dill oil so she's fully protected if the stones or the mirror attempt to drain her power.

"Do we need backup at all?" I ask as we rush through the empty square. The town is still asleep and the air has a bite to it.

"I'm a witch. I don't need backup."

"Got it."

"I assume you know how to fight?" she asks.

I frown. "Why do you assume that?"

"Because you were very good on that dance floor and not too shabby in bed."

"Not too shabby? I seem to remember someone screaming my name not once but twice."

She glares at me and I give her a wink.

“I still might have to murder you,” she says.

“Because I’m an arrogant, magical upstart?”

“Correct.”

“I will try to enjoy every moment then just in case it’s my last.”

She lets out a reluctant chuckle at that.

When we arrive at Rustion’s manor, the gatehouse is dark and quiet.

I eye the black windows above the portcullis. “What now?”

Tully whips out her wand and flicks it at the metal bars. The portcullis rises halfway and we run through as a guard shouts at us.

“It’ll take too long to explain,” she says over her shoulder. “We just need to get to that underground room before the thieves have a chance to move the artifacts.”

I nod and run down a winding set of stairs inside the open half-wall of the gatehouse. We go down and down and down, and soon Tully is using her wand like a torch.

“That doesn’t take too much of your energy, does it?” I ask, panting.

“Not at all.”

Her circle of light falls onto a door at the bottom of the stairs. A lock hangs from the latch handle.

“Allow me to deal with this one, so you can keep your power ready for whatever might await us on the other side, all right?” I ask.

“You just want to show off.”

“A little.”

I back up and then run at the door. I ram my shoulder into the heavy wood and the hinges snap and come free. I shove the broken door aside, and Tully enters. I’m on her heels as she rushes down a corridor with her circle of magical light to lead the way.

A large storage room packed with barrels and crates sits at the end of the corridor. Shouts rise behind us. The guards will be here soon.

In the center of the room, a small table holds all three artifacts.

Tully eyes the dark corners of the room and I raise my head to sniff the air. I don’t have the sense of smell that some Veil creatures do, but I can usually pick up something.

I hear a shuffle. A body hits my side. I grunt and turn, swinging a fist blindly in the near dark.

A wave of fatigue sweeps over my body. It’s like weights have been lashed to every one of my limbs, to my eyelids, to my back. I drop to my knees, then I begin dreaming.

Tully’s voice, tight and angry, flows above me. Hands are pulling me up. I’m trying to help them, trying to walk on my own.

Then there is light.

I squeeze my eyes shut against it because all I want is darkness and sleep. I blink. Colors blur. I can smell Tully all around me. I think I'm in her house. My eyes shut and I give in to the dark.

Chapter 21

Tully

In my workroom off the side of the house, I pour a vial of moonlight-infused defense potion into my small cauldron. The contents hiss and release a stream of pale smoke. The pink and sparkling blend smells of its varied contents—sage, salt, parsley, and the magic I add with an old spell my grandwitch taught me. I add another heater below the cauldron. The diminutive oil lamp heaters were handed down to me and have lasted over six generations of witches.

“What happened?” Argos’s voice has me turning around. Propped up on his elbows on the cot in the corner, he looks dazed.

Lady Owl is perched on the half-open door to my kitchen. She eyes Argos.

“Our plan did not play out the way we wanted,” I explain.

“I assumed as much from the bump on my head and the way I feel.”

“Your fatigue isn’t from the physical attack. Yes, the thieves surprised us, but the mirror and the stones attacked us all.”

“How? Why aren’t you suffering? Is it the jewelry I made for you?”

“Yes, yes. You saved me. Thank you very much.”

“Wow. I didn’t think I’d hear that anytime soon.”

I snort and add a vial of green mist that I gathered two years ago in the northwest marshes. It helps potions sneak into bloodstreams and helps my clients’ bodies accept the magic. The cauldron gurgles loudly. That means it’s working.

“The mirror and the stones have apparently latched onto every Veil creature that was within a quarter mile when the thieves attempted to work the stones and strike out at us,” I say, my voice shaking slightly. I truly hope this day doesn’t end in a widespread tragedy.

“Who are they?”

“The thieves? Oh, an orc and a human male. Not locals. You knocked the human out with your fist if my guess is right. It was dark, so I’m not completely certain. The mirror and stones took care of the orc and also you thereafter, unfortunately. I fetched every human available in town to help me get you here and to check on and keep watch over Rustion and all the other Veil creatures the artifacts are draining.”

“They’re still draining us?”

I nod. “You might die.” He deserves to know the truth.

“Then let’s have sex.”

I laugh in full then, nearly toppling the cauldron. “You would say that.”

“What are you making over there? It smells dangerous.”

I stir the potion and steam rises, the moisture clinging to my chin and cheeks and likely making my hair frizzy.

“I’m crafting a waking potion for you and the others. It should also serve to protect you in a deeper way than my usual dome. You’re handling the draining far better than some. Rustion, I’m afraid, isn’t looking good at all. Nor is Romulus, who happened to return to town right as the mirror struck. He was headed to Rustion for a report on the storm. Laini is with him now and Kaya is caring for Rustion and his wife, Nisa. She’s a sprite.”

“Anyone else affected?” I hear the cot squeak. He’s lying down again.

“Yes, but we have a few humans helping them out as well,” I say. “It’s under control, but if this potion doesn’t work, we will have a sad day on our hands for sure.”

“So you weren’t just joking about the whole dying thing.”

“No, sadly, I was not.”

Lady Owl hoots three times.

“She thinks you should stop talking and sleep. Owls know more than you might think, so I’d listen to her advice.”

“I’ll try. It’s not as easy to shut your eyes when you worry you might not open them again.”

“Then just lie back and breathe slowly.”

I sprinkle a pinch of ground mullein into the cauldron and the concoction turns to a bright shade of lavender. I begin to sing quietly. It helps me focus on my work.

“When the fog comes down and rings the town,

it's time to grind your mullein down,

When the moon is high and the grasses dry,

you best pick all your blue fungi.

When the wind goes cold and your bones feel old,

find the oak and scrape sooty mold.

When the branches clack and the lightning cracks,

find the ring with the gold filling.”

“What is that song?” Argos’s voice is raspy and quiet.

“My grandwitch used to sing to me. A traditional witchling song.”

“What does it mean by a gold filling?”

Poor thing really is desperate to get that money for his mother and the estate. “It’s speaking of a golden plant that grows inside some fairy mushroom rings. Very valuable stuff. Perhaps we can hunt some down to help with your estate.”

“That would be great,” Argos whispers. He’s obviously about to fall asleep again.

Even though I’m afraid for him, it’s likely better that he gets rest right now. Once I finish this potion, I’ll get him to drink a good dose of it. The stuff still needs a while to cook and blend.

I keep humming the song’s simple tune and take out my wand to cast the room with

peace. Soon, Argos is snoring.

Although the situation is somewhat dire, I have to admit to myself that I like this moment in time. My workshop is filled with lovely herbal scents. The cauldron is bubbling properly. The small hearth crackles with fire. Light washes through the back window and spreads a veil of gold over herbs hung to dry, shelves stacked with colorful jars of ingredients, and Lady Owl's lovely antlers. Argos's large form in the cot gives me a strange feeling that isn't at all unpleasant. I like taking care of him. It's nearly the same way I felt caring for Laini when she was having trouble, but somehow, it's different.

I go to the cot and sit on the edge. Careful not to wake the minotaur, I smooth his hair away from his damp forehead. All the sleepers affected by the mirror and stones are feverish like they've caught an ague. I don't like it. Not one bit.

Argos's eyelashes are a thick fringe of black on his smooth, warm skin. I touch the thin skin beneath his shuttered eyes. He's so strong. It's shocking that anything could take him down like this. I simultaneously want to comfort him and curl into his big arms to feel safe. It's a lie—that idea of safety. No one can love me like that. I'm too prickly. Too cold. I'm not a good person most of the time. Argos is cocky, but he is incredibly kind and brave. He deserves someone sweet like Kaya or Laini. Not this morally gray witch.

"Tully..." His lips move as he says my name again, but he's sleeping, dreaming.

I touch his full mouth with my fingertip like a kiss. His lips part and I want to lean in to kiss him properly, but he needs rest right now, not a lover.

I stand and begin to pace. How exactly can I negate the power of the artifacts? The potion needs more time, so I hold out my arm for Lady Owl and she accompanies me for a walk in the nearby woods.

The tree branches shuffle against one another, sounding like younglings pretending to sword fight with twigs. The sky is a dark blue and I smell snow—normal snow—on the wind.

“Lady Owl, can you give me your advice?”

She hoots once, so I detail the special room that Argos and I plotted out.

“It should work, but the building of said room will need to happen very quickly. Once it’s ready, I’ll have to be inside to work the magic, to urge the khymeia’s desire to drain toward the mirror, and then perhaps double that back so they’re draining one another. I’m not certain that’s possible. I have no real idea how to manage it. Maybe I should just focus on using the khymeia to drain the mirror. I don’t want too many things going on at once.”

Lady Owl trills. She agrees with simplifying the process.

“All right then. That’s what I’ll do. Argos will try to go into that room with me. He’s smart, but he is also determined to be in the middle of things.”

“Hooooo...”

“Yes. He really is a bit of a genius. I like him more than I want to.”

My face heats like I’m a schoolgirl from one of Laini’s tales about the human world. I shake my head and laugh at myself. Perhaps I don’t care if he deserves better. Maybe I will just take this minotaur to be my own.

If he survives the dark magic he has brought into the light...

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am

Chapter 22

Argos

I wake to the taste of berries and some foul metallic thing. Sputtering, I open my eyes to see Tully glaring at me and holding a vial of purple potion. The stuff steams and bubbles like it's alive.

“You must finish drinking it,” she says. “I thought you were brave. Let's prove it, shall we?”

“For the draining defense, I guess?”

“That, and to heal you. I'm not actually sure it will keep the mirror and stones from sucking the life from you again. But I'm hopeful. We will do this dill oil thing with you too before we try anything.” She shakes her wrist and the bracelet I made for her clicks. The scent of the herb wafts across my face.

I take the vial from her cool fingers and drink it down fast.

“Ah, that's very good.” She stands.

“It burns like fire. You could have just poisoned me, my scary, lovely rival.”

She crosses her arms and shrugs a shoulder. With the movement, her breasts lift deliciously at her neckline. “You'll just have to trust me.”

“You’d be bored without me around to ruffle your feathers.”

The corner of her red lips quirk upward and she glares again. “Perhaps.”

I slide a hand up her skirts until my fingers are curled against the warmth at the back of her knee. She watches me as I do it, a strange glint in her eyes.

“Wait.” I pull my hand back, my heart tripping over a beat. “Did you actually poison me?”

She laughs loudly at that and leaves me on my cot. At her worktable, she has two large wooden frames filled with two dozen or so vials just like the one she made me drink. She corks one last vial and sets it into the far frame.

“How do you feel?” she asks. “Good enough to explore my skirts, so I’m guessing it’s working?”

The room comes into focus a bit more. I hadn’t realized my vision was blurred. “My eyes are clearing. My head doesn’t ache anymore.”

“Good. Now, get up, you lazy bull, and help me with this. We have some townsfolk to save.”

She hefts one of the wooden frames and starts out the door, her skirts swishing around her lovely backside.

“I’d follow you anywhere, Mistress Tully.”

I can’t see her face, but somehow I know she’s smiling.

We work our way around Rustion’s estate and the homes and shops nearby. Everyone

who is given a vial manages to get it down. I love watching Tully interact with her fellow townsfolk. She knows them all by name, knows their lives.

“You know, Minotaur, you’re the only one who complained of the taste,” Tully whispers to me as a young wolf shifter downs his potion.

I give her a fake scowl. “I didn’t complain. I can’t help sleep-induced sputtering.”

We leave the home with a wave and hurry toward the next house.

“It burns,” she says, moaning and mimicking my deeper voice and making a face.

Keeping my stash of vials safely braced under my arm, I chuckle. I pull her close to speak into her ear. “I’ll make you moan in full tonight if you let me.”

A shudder rolls through her, jangling her load of vials, and her breath catches. Satisfaction dances through my blood and my cock starts to stiffen.

A human female with dark hair opens the home’s narrow door and comes out with arms wide. She looks about Tully’s age, likely in her late twenties since she is human.

“Hello!” the female says. “I’m so happy to see you, Mistress Tully.”

Tully makes a shooing motion and the woman leads us inside.

“Good to see you, Rychell. How is Nate doing?” Tully asks.

“Not well, I’m afraid.” The hitch of a swallowed sob breaks her words into pieces.

Rychell takes us into a room off the main sitting area. A large bed with a multitude of pillows and blankets sits near the far wall. A small, male blue pixie appears to drown

in the swathes of comfortable items.

Tully wastes no time in dosing the youngling with her potion.

“How old is he now?” Tully asks her. “Did the birth mother ever contact you?”

“Nate’s just turned seven. Yes, she did. We arranged visits. She’s on her way here now, actually. She’s too young to see her child suffer like this.”

Tully places the cork back into the empty vial and tucks it into the frame sitting on the bed beside her. “I don’t think such a thing gets easier with age.”

I keep my mouth shut because this is a conversation between close friends and I really don’t belong here. Tully may say she’s not a good person, but she’s wrong. Every word from her mouth is either the honest truth someone needs to hear or the good advice they require. She might not hug and grin like most, but her words and her deeds speak loudly to her heart.

She turns toward me like she somehow knows I’m thinking deeply about her. Those bright green eyes shoot lightning through my chest.

Gods, she is so gorgeous. Inside and out.

Rychell is saying something and then the little pixie is sitting up and reaching for her.

“Thank you so much, Tully,” Rychell says through her tears. The youngling is nearly strangling her with his hug.

“Send a note to Rustion’s place if he shows any symptoms of draining again. We will be there for a while.”

We leave the home and finish handing out all the vials. By the time we finish, the sun is setting. We've talked about herb lore, Lady Owl, my home back in Mytilene, and how she messaged everyone now involved in building the room of ditchite. Turns out, Rustion had a pile of the stuff in the back forty acres of his estate holdings.

"We work well together when we choose to, don't we?" I take her empty wooden frame as she unlocks her front door.

"I suppose."

"Just admit it."

Her front room is attached to a small kitchen where copper pots and a large black wood stove take up most of the space. Beyond that are two doors, one of which leads to her workshop. It's strange that I have already been there, sleeping on a cot. That feels like a dream.

Inside, she returns the wooden frames and empty vials to their shelves. She uncorks another vial of her purple potion, a dose she seems to have kept here.

"Bottoms up," she says.

"You'll see how awful it tastes now and you'll stop insulting my malehood for griping."

"I doubt it." She grins, then swallows the potion down like a shot. A grimace bunches her face. "Oh, that is horrid."

I laugh and start to help her with the stuff on the higher shelves. Once most everything is tidied, I pick up the broom beside the dark hearth to sweep a few of Lady Owl's fallen feathers.

“Stop.” Tully’s voice surprises me into freezing. “That’s not for cleaning.” She sounds panicked, and her arms are spread wide as if I’ve just lit a fuse and something is going to go off.

I hand her the broom. “Apologies.”

She lifts a brow and looks me up and down. “Want to fly to Rustion’s?”

A thrill beams through me. We planned to go back as soon as possible to help with the building. “Definitely.”

I hurry out of the house on her heels. She straddles the broom and gestures toward the open spot behind her.

Shaking my head at how wild this is, I throw a leg over the rowan wood broom.

“Hold on tight, Minotaur.”

Before I can give a smart-mouthed retort, we are flying. Fast. The broom somehow feels all right on my arse—a magic force cushions my seat like an invisible pillow. Wind tears through my hair and my horn chains. I keep one hand around Tully’s waist and one on the broom just behind me. My tail wraps around the broom as well, keeping me in place as Tully takes a dive toward Rustion’s open courtyard.

When we disembark, I can’t seem to keep from laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Tully holds her broom aloft and narrows her eyes at me.

“Don’t wallop me. It was amazing. I’m just happy.”

A smile curves those lips I want crush them with mine. “Oh. Well, then, I’ll allow it.”

The building of ditchite is nearly complete. Eight people—two pixies, a fairy, three orcs, two goblins, and Cyrus—are working on stacking the stones that Halvard is cutting neatly just beside the structure.

“I don’t think I’m as strong as Halvard.”

Tully eyes the orc, obviously enjoying his build. I can’t blame her. He is impressive.

“No one is as strong as Halvard,” she says. “Don’t let it tamp down your ego too much. That’s my job.” She snickers as she sways off toward Rustion.

I stop to just admire the view before catching up.

Rustion is talking to her. “...it’ll be finished in an hour. Will you be ready?”

She digs into the satchel hanging across her body. “I’m prepared.” Turning, she faces me again. “Eh, I forgot to give you these.” She pulls out two lava stone bracelets and a necklace. “Kaya, Romulus, and Laini finished them and left them at the smith’s forge.”

I had missed most of the visit to the blacksmith because I had been checking up on a possible draining from a towns person we hadn’t had on our list. Turned out to be a simple ague though.

“Thanks.” I put them on, smiling. The people of Leafshire Cove made these for me under this gorgeous witch’s advice.

“What’s that face for?” Tully asks me in a whisper while Rustion instructs the builders on the final keystone at the top of the structure.

“It’s silly.”

“Tell me,” she orders. “I saved your life. You owe me.”

“It’s just... I didn’t realize the folks here would welcome me so easily.”

“You didn’t? You certainly acted like you were welcome from day one.”

I drop a quick kiss on her forehead, which sends a thrill through me. She rests her head on my chest and takes a deep breath. I envelop her in my arms.

“You must be exhausted. I wish I could do this next magical task for you, but of course, as you never fail to remind me, I’m no witch.”

She sets her lips against the base of my throat and flicks out her tongue as if she is a snake tasting the air. “I can do this. I don’t want you in there, but I know better by now that your arrogant arse won’t listen.”

“Correct.”

I kiss her hair. I’m no longer truly worried about another minotaur seeing us kiss and deeming her as mine forever, but I was trained to believe that so it’s tough not to feel like I’m claiming her. I would love to claim her. I wonder what she would think of that. Would she ever commit to being one person’s mate? And if she did, could we ever have proper sex? I don’t even know for sure if we’re physically compatible. I mean, we are, but we might not be in every way.

“The only reason I’m not fighting you more is because if I pass out,” she says, “I’ll need someone to drag my arse out of there, so I can heal and try again.”

“I will always be up for dragging your arse.”

She shakes with a laugh, and I adore the feeling of her happy in the circle of my arms.

If I could persuade her to be my mate, what could I offer? I have nothing. I have less than nothing—I have a multitude of problems. I don't want to pull her into all of that. She said she wanted to help me with raising the money, but it's not her problem and I don't want it to be.

“Tully, now is the worst time to bring this up, but how much are you enjoying this thing we have going on?”

She stills in my arms. “Too much.”

I huff a laugh. “All right. Why isn't it exactly the right amount?”

“Because I'm a witch. You're too good for me.”

I take her arms and hold her so that I can look into her face. Her chin is sharp and her eyes sharper even in the gloam of the day's last veil of light.

“You are good, Tully. You can act snippy and fiery all you want, but you have a heart of gold. If I had any money, I'd bet it all on that fact.”

A slow, reluctant smile ghosts over her mouth and she sets her hands on my chest. I lift one and kiss her fingers.

“But you do smell like pickles.”

“I'm not the only one.”

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Chapter 23

Tully

Cyrus, Rustion, Romulus, and Laini wave encouragement before they brick up the door of the room. The place is pitch black. I know the mirror is in the center of the structure and the stones are now in my pockets, but I can't see them at all.

"Is the darkness a problem?" Argos asks.

"No, I'll use my witch's third eye."

"Can you, uh, keep me updated? Because I won't be able to tell if you need catching or support unless you let me know."

"The magic will be bright. You'll see it all."

"How do you know?" It's not a condescending question; his tone is pure curiosity again. "Also, are you feeling good about the stones drawing from the mirror?"

"You're never going to stop studying me, are you?"

He chuckles. "If I get my way, no."

"Magic almost always produces light. It's pure energy. And yes, I feel good about it. Like calls to like, as I have told you. They're both made of the same rare material. My first spell will attempt to link them more fully than they would find one another

naturally. To speed up that process and help us, well, keep us alive. The second is a complicated spell to work the power through the stones. Now, hush. I'm beginning."

"All right. I'm here."

It's strange how comforting it is to have Argos beside me. He can't do anything really to help me, so I'm not sure why I feel so very glad he's here.

I pull the khymeia from my pockets and begin the incantation. My wand heats at my belt, wishing I would use her instead of the stones.

Blessed Stones, this is so very dangerous. We could both die right here, right now.

I just hope the potion I gave Argos—the same stuff I eventually downed too—works to keep us safe from these abominable objects and their dark power. I hope the dill jewelry does its thing as well. I feel nauseated just messing with them, but it must be done.

The incantation becomes a chant that I can repeat over and over easily, the syllables falling from my lips. They feel cold as icicles and sharp as knives. This is difficult magic. My blood sings with power though and I feel pleasantly warm all over. The chant grows in power as I repeat it faster and faster, and soon the light from the khymeia combines with the words to create pulsing spheres of green and gold illumination. I flick the stones in a whipping motion like I would my wand, cease the chant, and cast the spell.

To get the khymeia to drain the mirror in full, I had to think of a pretty complicated spell. If it isn't layered enough, the stones might only partially drain the mirror and I have no idea what would happen at that point. The mirror is sentient. It might lash out once I stop hindering its power with the khymeia's draining. So the spell has to completely drain the mirror once I start.

I go quiet to focus. The chant has done its linking work, so now it is simply time to cast my main spell.

I imagine the forest hut where I grew up. The tall pines swaying in the wind. A white buck watching the meadow beyond our garden. My grandwitch bespelling the front steps to keep mice and ants away. In my mind, it's harvest time, and the whole place smells of wishberry jam. It's a tart sort of sweetness and we always mixed it with a dash of magic—just some sage-scented daydream encouragement.

Magic sparks from the stones to the mirror and then to a spot between them where it forms the images in my mind. Grandwitch is smoking her old witch's pipe and the scent of Longway Leaf hits my nose.

Argos makes a small noise of surprise and appreciation.

"It doesn't escape me that I'm creating illusions like you did in the market when you stole my customers," I whisper. I shouldn't talk, but my mouth seems to have a mind of its own at the moment. Probably because I'm opening my memory; such work tends to make people emotionally unstable. "I suppose I was wrong about this magic being false in some way. The power feels clean in my veins. This memory is real and well-rendered. I feel the dark power of the strange material in the artifacts. It is tainting this lovely magic a bit, but it's not as dark as I had estimated."

"Hmm. Thank you for telling me that," Argos whispers, his tone genuine.

I'm once again struck by the content feeling I have with him beside me. "I don't need anyone. Never will. But this... Well, this is nice, Argos. Thank you for being brave enough to stand here with me."

"It's very nice. Aside from the possible death part, of course."

I snort. “Aside from that.”

My spell is finished and the illusion grows nearly opaque, a feat Argos never managed. The colors deepen to their true shades.

“How do you feel?” I ask him quietly as the illusion shimmers like a wave of magic is rolling through it, keeping it strong, feeding from the mirror.

“Just fine. Scared shitless, but fine.”

I smile at his honesty. “I can feel the stones tugging energy from the mirror. It is working.”

“So far.”

Breathing slowly, I urge a little more power into the spell. The stones vibrate against my fingers. The mirror creaks like an old door and the scent of ash rises, overtaking the pleasant aromas of the illusion.

“It’s happening, isn’t it?” Argos says, his voice closer now.

I want to turn and see the wonder in his face, but I must remain focused. “I need to cast more. It’s not drained.”

“You have enough in you for that?” he asks.

“I think so.”

I release another cluster of magical energy, a wash of heat from my sacral center. My illusion begins to alter into something decidedly not from my time as a youngling in the woods.

The house falls away, and the trees follow. My grandwitch spins and the light that created her becomes a version of me. I am reaching for someone. The pipe smoke, river, and sunlight from the first illusion morph into Argos, leaning forward to take me into his arms.

“Wait,” he whispers. “Is that me? Shirtless?”

I can’t help but laugh a little. “This is a dream I had.”

My pulse rate ramps up. I don’t love telling him that I’ve had him on my mind at night, but I do feel safe with him. Despite our being rivals, I truly believe he wouldn’t use my vulnerable moment here to hurt me. I trust him.

“I hope it doesn’t bother you,” I say, raising my chin.

“Definitely not. I adore the fact that you dreamt of this. It’s an honor.”

I look at him then, just a glance. The illusion’s light flickers gold and blue over his sharp cheekbones and square jaw. His luminous brown eyes will never fade from my memory.

“You amaze me, Tully.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

I pour the last of my magical energy into the illusion and the dream version of Argos sweeps a hand down dream Tully until his hand cups her arse.

Argos hums approval.

Our illusion doubles deepen their kiss. Argos’s horns dip to one side as he grips my

jaw and drags his parted lips over mine. I can almost feel their movements. My breath catches as dream Argos slips the shoulder of my dress down.

The scent of ash increases suddenly and it's nearly unbearable. I'm shaking and it's not from arousal now. The magic of the mirror is running low.

"Almost complete," I say, my words trembling from my efforts.

The stones are hot in my hands. I'll have burns after this. If I survive.

The real Argos sets a hand on my back and I take a deep breath. Magic prickles along my arms and forehead and the stones grow even hotter. I grit my teeth, and then all at once, the room goes dark.

Chapter 24

Argos

Tully stirs beside me, and I ease my hold on her so she can turn onto her other side. Her eyes crack open. The light from my window turns her green eyes to a brilliant spring grass shade. I take a curl of her long hair between my fingers and savor the silky feel. Her eyes float closed again and she's sleeping once more.

A warmth spins across my chest. I glance down at my loose sleeping tunic, and I freeze.

Black drops like rainwater swirl together to form a symbolic heart. More dark lines combine to create the look of magic sparking all around the symbol.

I take a shaky breath and my grip on Tully's hip tightens.

It's a mate's mark. My head spins for a second. I'm shocked, but... I'm thrilled. Nervous as all hells, but hopeful? Is there really a chance for us to be mates? If one formed on her as well, she would have told me, wouldn't she? Or maybe it shaped itself while she was sleeping and she has yet to discover it. I wince, thinking of her possible reactions. Tully isn't one to be tied down. I know that. I love it about her. Could she ever commit to me? I will enjoy her no matter what, taking whatever she'll give, but to think of having her as my mate is paradise.

She wakes and turns her face to mine. "We are constantly blacking out, you and me. We need a new trick."

I laugh and press a kiss onto her head.

“So what happened?” she asks. “The mirror is dead, right?”

“You were magnificent,” I say quietly. “Complete success.”

“Please tell me you’re talking about my magic and we didn’t have sex while I was delirious.”

Relief loosens the tightness that has plagued my shoulders and neck since she passed out. “I don’t do delirious sexy activities.”

Her red eyebrow lifts. “Well, we were pretty drunk that first night.”

“The one where you enjoyed my tail’s attentions under your skirts while you stole from me or the night I held you on my horns and devoured you?”

Her throat moves in an audible swallow, and she glares.

My lips just barely brush hers and a tingling warmth hovers over my heart. “I love that glare.”

“I don’t hate your smirk. Actually, I do, but it also makes me want to pin you to the bed.”

I laugh triumphantly. “My plan has succeeded then.”

“Indeed.”

She kisses the bare spot of skin at the opening of my tunic. Her touch is a balm and a match to the fire simmering in my veins, but I wonder what will happen if she tugs

my clothing down a bit more and sees the mate's mark.

"How worried were you?" she asks.

"A little."

"Really?"

"Maybe more than a little."

She waves a hand lazily through the small space between us. "I'm tough."

I kiss her fully, and she parts her lips to allow my tongue passage. I taste her sweet mouth and her tongue slides over mine. Heat shoots to my groin and I moan, wanting more than anything to push my way into her warmth right here and now.

"You promised that I would be the one moaning."

"As you wish, my witch."

Using my tail, I tug up her skirts and begin tickling the heat of her center. Her mouth opens with a quick gasp and she rolls her hips. I put the heel of my hand against her core and press up and down.

"Yes, like that."

I lean my head down to bite the side of her throat, and she whimpers, her chest rising and falling at a faster rate. I take the neckline of her top between my teeth and yank it down to expose those beautiful breasts of hers. With my long, minotaur tongue I lick the underside of one savoring the sweetness of her skin. She leans into me and rocks up against my hand.

“You’re so soft. So warm.”

Her fingers slip into my trousers and she wraps my cock in a tight hold. I curse and swear nonsense into her red curls, my head swimming and my pulse pounding at the point of contact.

“If you move much, this will be over in a heartbeat,” I grunt out.

“I think you can hang on. I believe in you,” she whispers saucily.

“I knew you’d be the end of me the moment I saw you outside the chapel.”

“Truly?” She strokes me once, hard.

I’m trembling and nearly there. I grunt and grit my teeth. “Aye. The shape of you. Your vicious stare. The way you angled yourself between me and your friend just in case I was trouble.”

“I was right to assume mischief.”

“Definitely.”

She strokes me up and down, and my pleasure pushes me toward the edge. I force the tide of desire back. Not yet. Not quite yet.

“I want you,” she says, her tone changing, softening. “I want you inside of me.”

“I don’t think we can. Remember? The knot is made for minotaur females.”

“Witches are tough. I like the danger of it. I can handle it.”

“No, Tully. I am not going to hurt you.”

She releases me, pushes me to my back, and climbs on top of me. The evil grin on her lips makes my cock jerk under her. I grip her underthings and rip until I feel hot flesh through the fabric of my trousers. She lifts herself, tugs my trousers down, and then it's just her core on my cock, sliding slightly and making it very hard to breathe.

“Gods, Tully. I'm going to come right now.”

“No, you are not. I want my fun first.”

“I can do it again.”

“No. This time,” she says, “I'm in charge.”

With her wand uplifted, she produces a rope seemingly from the air, and after setting her wand beside me, she quickly binds my hands over my head. She's threaded the rope through the wooden slats of the headboard. She tilts her head like she's thinking. Her gaze goes to my desk and soon my glasses are soaring from the drawer and into her hand. She opens them carefully and slides them onto my nose.

“Glasses?”

Grinding on me, she practically purrs. “Yes, I adore your slutty little glasses.”

I'm barely hanging on, my body buzzing and burning with the urge to finish this.

“I have something to show you,” she says.

She unlaces the outer corset over her dress, her fingers slow and sensual. Sliding her dress off her shoulders, she begins to bare her breasts to me, inch by smooth and

glorious inch. I grit my teeth, my pulse throbbing in my cock beneath her heat.

There it is.

A mate's mark.

"Tully."

Her gaze loses its usual flame of confidence and wariness tightens the corners of her eyes. Looking down at her chest, she traces the shape of the mark. A heart symbol rules the center like every mark, but tiny gears circle the symbol.

I meet her gaze, my chest aching with love for this powerful, sharp-edged witch. "You see my inventive nature."

Biting her lip, she nods.

"Pull my tunic down. Rip it if you like," I say.

She tilts her head and narrows her eyes. "All right."

Instead of using her hands, she takes her wand and aims it at my tunic. She whispers something I can't hear clearly.

Starting at the opening near my collarbone, I watch the fibers of my tunic unravel in a neat line straight down the middle.

Tully gasps. "You have one too." Her eyes glisten and she bites her lip again. She draws her fingertip over the mark's sparks of magic and a sweet smile graces her mouth. "I never thought I would have one of these."

“On yourself or on someone else?”

“Both. Either. Neither.”

I buck against her. “You either need to get to work on me, my mate, or untie me so I can. This torture has gone on long enough.”

She cackles like the gorgeous witch she is and eases down my body. She removes the rest of my clothing and climbs back up. With a wicked glance up, she takes me into her mouth.

“Tully. Fuck. Tully, I...”

Sucking and stroking like it’s something she’s wanted to do for a long time, she unravels me as neatly as her spell did my tunic.

“Tully, I’m going to?—”

My knot swells a bit, and she eases away to study it. Kneeling, she removes her rumpled dress and underthings, taking her time and batting her thick red eyelashes.

“I really and truly want to bend you over, Witch.”

She bares her slightly sharp incisors at me and I lash my tail as much as I can with half of it trapped under me. Once she is in her fully naked glory, she throws a leg over me and straddles me. Once my knot lessens in size, she meets my eyes.

“It’s time to try this,” she says, her voice husky and undeniably sensual.

I swallow hard. “I don’t know.”

“I do. I am in charge here. Are you willing?”

“Once I’m inside and it swells, there’s no going back.”

Lifting one knee, she gives me a full view of her sex. Desire slams into me, and I shudder.

“You’re absolutely perfect,” I grunt out and lift my hips, wishing these damned ties were long gone.

She takes hold of me and positions my cock at her slick entrance. “Slowly, now, Minotaur. You seem in too much of a hurry.”

“Can you blame me? You’re exquisite.”

Pride gleams in her sultry look. “I know.”

I grin, adoring her confidence, and raise my hips. She bears down to meet me, throwing her head back and letting out a moan. The sensation of her heat fully enveloping my length has me trembling again. She lifts herself a fraction, and then I buck against her, slamming into her all the way again. We both cry out this time, and my cock is shuddering against the squeeze of her silken warmth.

Chapter 25

Tully

“I have to come, Tully. You’re sure you want to try this? Last chance to back out.”

I narrow my eyes and bounce on him slowly. Blessed Stones, the way he is all sweating and undone with those damned glasses on... I suck in a vicious breath, not allowing myself to come quite yet.

“There will be no backing out,” he hisses.

I press down, taking him in full.

Argos grunts my name as well as a few obscenities. Pleasure unfurls from my head to my toes. He grips my breast with his tail, flicking the end over my nipple. I whimper and ride him hard, and then, I feel it—his knot is swelling.

My climax slithers impatiently inside me. I am so wet for this monster. His knot is filling me so completely. I shut my eyes and swallow, my legs trembling.

“It feels amazing,” I whisper. “So full.”

“Tully. Gods?—”

His hips jerk seemingly without his control and his tail whips against my breasts, wild and just the amount of rough that I adore.

“Yes, Argos!”

Then heat surges inside me. He is coming hard, and his knot is hot as fire and I love the almost painful full feeling of it. I force myself not to come. To wait. It will be that much more fantastic. He’s thrashing against me, and I hiss, loving every second. I dig my nails into his massive chest and let my breast bounce right in front of those glasses of his.

At last, I unleash my climax and it ripples through me like an earthquake. I’m gasping for air and soaring with pleasure. I brace myself on his chest.

“You might just earn the right to be freed from your ropes, Minotaur.”

He is still moving, just barely, hardly noticeable to the eye, but like a world-altering action to my core. I’m going to come again.

“Eyes on me, Witch.”

A thrill dances down my back and along my thighs. My legs shake even more. I need to come. I need it now.

“You’re panting,” he says, eyeing me over his glasses. His muscled arms strain against my ties like he’s dying to touch me.

“So are you.”

His lips twist into a naughty grin and I love that his hair is sticking a little to his damp forehead. “I can move a little more if you’d like.” His eyes change; they soften for a moment. “I don’t want to hurt you either.”

“You’re not going to hurt me. This feels fucking maddening. I love it.”

That wicked smile returns to his handsome face. “How does my knot feel inside you?”

His knot shakes slightly inside, and the way it presses so tightly into every nook and corner of my most sensitive places is the best feeling I’ve ever experienced. His tail slinks across my ribs and the end circles my center. I arch my back and the movement nearly has me over the edge. My mate’s mark heats and tingles, sending a feeling of rightness through my bones.

“How does it feel? I’ll move more if you tell me,” he says.

I look at him with no guile, no walls up. “Like I will never be satisfied with anyone but you.”

“Tully, I love you.” Somehow he looks both dangerous and kind. It’s a magic all of its own.

“I love you, Argos.”

He pushes upward in painfully slow motion. He bares his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut, and I can’t get enough of watching him take pleasure. Using the tip of his tail, he toys with my clit until I’m whimpering again. I shift my hips. I can only manage a small movement, but just that change elicits a massive crescendo of pleasure when combined with the lift of his body.

He flicks his tail over my throat, then circles it gently. We make eye contact, and I can tell he’s asking permission to tighten his hold. I nod, my body vibrating so hard that he must feel it too. His tail tightens and his nostrils flare as he comes again.

I shift back and forth as much as I’m able and I’m falling, falling, falling down that sensual abyss of pleasure. Pleasure spirals down my body in powerful waves. He

swears as my heat closes and spasms around his knot and his cock.

I drop onto him and reach for my wand. His knot releases, and I untie him with a flick of magic. He wraps me in his arms and breathes into my wild curls.

“My vicious mate,” he whispers. “I adore you.”

His skin is hot and sticky and I long to lick every inch of him. I trace his mate’s mark, wanting to be completely honest here.

“I will never be a pliant sort of mate, Argos. You know that.”

“I do, and I love you exactly how you are. Independent. Fierce. Not at all in need of me.”

I chuckle, and he smooths a curl behind my ear.

“I do want you though,” I say. “I will always want you. I love you, Argos. I truly do. The marks don’t lie.”

“I don’t need a mark to tell me. Your eyes say it all.”

I lift my head. “They do?”

He nods, looking too arrogant, so I pinch his nipple.

“Ach, Witch!” He bats my hand away, chuckling.

I settle back onto his chest. “Don’t go around telling folks that I’m all ridiculous for you. I won’t stand for it.”

“Will you consider joining forces at the market?”

Hmm. I look to the window, tasting the idea in my head. “We will have to create a contract. I can’t have you ruining my reputation with your attempts at magic.”

“I wouldn’t be doing any magic at all. I was thinking I’d be your research assistant, finding new spells to try out in your workroom.”

“I love that idea, but you will have magic. You still have your stones. Or did you wall them up in that ditchite structure?”

“I have them, but I meant to give them to you to destroy or just keep safe.”

“No, I believe you can come up with a way to use them safely.”

“Seriously?”

“Now that you know better how they work and why, you can invent something. I am willing to bet the town’s safety on that brain of yours.”

He lifts me onto him and cradles my face with his huge hands. “Thank you, Tully. Thank you for believing in me.”

I smile against his fingers, then nip at his thumb, nearly hard enough to draw blood. “Don’t get too comfortable. You’ll have to earn my trust with this joint venture idea.”

He pulls me into a kiss. I tangle my tongue with his, and he cants my jaw and deepens the kiss with devouring motions that have me hot and wet all over again. I moan into his mouth and soon we are experimenting with this new love all over again.

Chapter 26

Tully

I take a seat in Two Cats Bakery. The crowd is light at the moment since it's lunch break and most like to eat a bigger meal at home, the tavern, the inn, or the pub. The bakery will get busy again at tea time, nearly as stuffed as it is in the mornings. Maplecats snooze on top of the bookshelf by the front window, under the display case of pastries, and in several unoccupied chairs. I pat my lap and one big beauty obliges me by hopping into my lap. I stroke the cat's leafy, velvety pelt, and a purr starts up, making the kitty's weighty warmth vibrate against my legs.

Kaya pours me a cup of hot cinnamon tea with absolute gob tons of honey—just how I like it. “I heard about what you’re doing.”

She sets down a small plate of orange zest scones and I have one halfway down my gullet before she can join me at the table.

“Love the new icing,” I say around a mouthful.

“Thank you. I used clove.”

“Perfect.” I take another because they’re really very tiny.

Kaya grins at my delighted munching and slides a handful of gold my way. I choke on my scone and she gets up to pat me on the back until I’m able to breathe again.

“That’s too much, Kaya. You don’t even know what I’m using the money for.”

“You have never once in your entire life asked anyone for anything like this.”

“So?”

“So your reason must be a good one. I trust you, Tully.”

“You probably shouldn’t.”

“Too bad. I do.” She crosses her arms and gives me a haughty little grin.

I chuckle and take the coin. “You’re sure? You said you needed a new mixer mechanism and a full-time employee.” I lean close, and the cat’s purring rumbles against my stomach. “This has to be your whole savings unless you’re some lost princess and you’ve been holding out on us.”

Kaya’s dimpled cheeks lift as she laughs and she dusts a bit of flour from her chin. “There’s always more money to make, right? I’ll be fine.”

“If you say so. I do promise that it’s for a good cause.”

“You might be turning into a solidly sweet person, Tully.”

I hiss at her and show her my teeth. The maplectat leaps from my lap. “Never.”

Kaya shakes her head, eats one of her scones, then stands to leave. “Rom told me that Laini is coming by, so you can save yourself a trip to her place.”

“What’s she up to?”

“Bringing the widow in for a treat.”

“That’s a fine thing to do.”

“She said you inspired her by fixing up the widow’s garden.”

I wave her off. “I always do that because I like veg even in the winter months. That’s a selfish endeavor.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.” I scowl at her as she returns to the countertop to sell more pastries.

My tea is piping hot and perfect. I inhale the spicy scent, and Argos crosses my mind for the thousandth time today. As I put Kaya’s donation into the satchel beside my chair, I can’t help but wonder how he’s faring with the khymeia and his invention by the river.

“Good day, Scarlet!”

It’s Widow Warton hanging on Laini’s arm like her life depends on the support. It might be on a cold morning like this and her as old as she is. Even half vampire, half pixies eventually give up the ghost.

I turn and stand to give the widow my chair. “Sit, now. I’ve had too many of these things, so you’ll have to finish the plate for me.” Sliding the scones so they’re right within her reach, I smile at Laini.

Laini helps Widow scoot her chair in to her specifications.

“Damned place has a draft. I knew it would.”

I grab my tea and press it into her hands. “This will warm you up until Kaya has a second to serve you.”

“You always take such good care of me, Scarlet.”

Laini bites her lip to hold in a laugh, then mouths my nickname, Scarlet. I snap my teeth at her and she laughs fully then, pulling her hand away just in time.

When Kaya returns to take the widow’s order, Laini slips me a small sack of coins. “This is from Rom and me.”

I take my satchel from the floor near the chair and tuck the sack inside with the rest of the money. Looping the bag over my head, I nod.

“It’s good of you, Laini. Thank you. Thank Romulus, too.”

“Will do.”

“You don’t want to pry answers out of me?” I ask. “We are close enough for you to press me on things, you know.” I feel awkward saying something so full of feelings out loud, but I owe her and she just loves feelings.

The memory of me telling Argos how I feel trips through my mind’s eye. I chew my lip. I really hope he is as great as I think he is. Giving him back the khymeia didn’t feel like a risk when I did it, but now...

What if I’m a buffoon for love just like all the other ninnies in the world?

“What are you plotting?” Laini asks. “And I’m not talking about the money. Something else just went through your head.”

“You sure you don’t have witch’s blood?”

She snickers. “I wish.”

“Of course, you do,” I say, grinning. “I told Argos that I love him,” I whisper.

Laini’s mouth falls open, but she recovers quickly. “Tully.” She squeezes me tightly and then looks me in the eye. “I’m so happy for you.”

“So you agree that he’s not the horse’s arse I thought he was originally?”

“I do. He’s proven himself.”

“He has.”

I hug her, and she jolts with surprise before tightening her arms around me. It’s not half bad to have real friends and a lover who might end up being my true mate. I suppose if I do end up hurt—as Grandwitch always warned me about feelings—at least I will have had a lovely time before the pain.

Chapter 27

Argos

I finish nailing the tiny plate of midnight adamant to the waterwheel. The stuff was painfully challenging to file down. I hope this works and that the stress I put on the magical stone didn't negate its psychic connector functionality.

"All right! Let it go, Cyrus! Halvard, release the rope! Rom, you can let go!"

The dragon shifter, orc, and gargoyle release the holds they had on various points in the waterwheel system, and the wheel creaks and rotates. Water shushes through the system.

"Argos!" Tully's voice rises over the sound of the water and the conversation filtering from the back deck of the Goat and Dragon tavern.

I meet her farther up the riverbank and we walk toward the deck.

"How are things faring here?" she asks.

The wind is cold, but now it smells of melting snow instead of ice. It smells like spring isn't more than a moon away.

"Great." I open the side door for her and we take a table overlooking the river. The wheel is turning nicely.

Cyrus, Halvard, and Rom are drying themselves and laughing. I give them a wave and they shout some congratulations back.

Once Tully and I order two pints of the last of Grumlin's winter ale, she sets a sack on the table. I frown and poke at it.

"What's this?"

She tugs open the top. Gold, silver, and copper glitter from the bag.

"There has to be a year's worth of a common fellow's wages in here," I say, puzzled still.

"It's for you. For your mother and the estate."

"What?"

Tully nods, her red hair lifting in the breeze and her hat shading her brilliant eyes. "I didn't tell anyone what it was for. Your privacy is secure. But the folks of Leafshire Cove listened when I said someone needed it, and they all gave. Every last one of them. Even that nasty old pixie female, Jinian."

I shake my head, my heart pounding for this amazing witch. I take her hand and wrap her hand in mine. "Tully. I... I don't know how to thank you."

Her cheeks pink and I lean in to kiss her. Those soft lips will never not do me in.

"You've never once blushed," I whisper in her ear.

"Well, between your work, Kaya's, and Laini's, I'm becoming a great ball of mush."

“But you’ll still murder me if I hurt you.”

“Exactly.”

“Good that we are on the same page.” I kiss her again, wishing we weren’t in public.

She pulls away, smiling. “Tell me about your waterwheel contraption.”

“Like calls to like. You taught me that key concept. Want to test it?”

“I do. Very much.”

“You’re not worried I’ll blow up Leafshire Cove?”

“Only a little.”

I laugh and we set to finishing our drinks. Once we are done, we stand at the porch’s wooden railing. I take the khymeia from my pockets and hold them up.

“There is an adamant plate on the wheel,” I explain. “It’s building energy from the turning of the wheel. It should feed into the stones when I cast a spell.”

“Go on, then.” She leans a hip on the railing and eyes me curiously.

“Is this turning you on?” I whisper.

“It is. Your brain is sexy.”

Pride swells in my chest as I lift the stones and speak my will. The stones warm and vibrate as magic sparkles in the air around us. Everyone else on the tavern’s porch is watching now, their voices hushed and excited. The memory that the spell portrays is

a very old one. My father and mother walk through the large kitchen garden near the main house. I speed into the scene, covered in mud and grinning.

“Is that you?” Tully asks.

I nod. “Yes, at about seven years, I think. Same age as Rychell’s little fellow Nate.”

“Will you take me there?” Tully asks.

“To the estate? Of course. But...”

“It will be in disarray, I know. Of course, it would be because of your family’s struggles. The king hasn’t started work on the estate yet, right?”

“Not as far as I know,” I say. “All the farmers and other staff, save Hamish, left to find work.” I focus on the spell again. “Do you think the magic is working? Do you see anything I don’t?”

Tully looks around at the grasses peeking through the snow, the river’s gurgling current, the trees bare and stern above, and the folks watching my little show here.

“I think so,” she says. “I don’t feel anything draining and I’m not wearing my pickled jewelry.”

I snort a laugh. “Great. Maybe we should ask the others if they feel off at all.”

We take a while talking to the other tavern patrons as well as Cyrus, Halvard, and Rom. No one is being drained of energy, and the illusion remains strong and even takes on a hint of color. It’s not as strong as the one Tully cast in the ditchite chamber when we drained the mirror, but it’s probably as good a spell as a non-magical creature can accomplish.

Tully throws her arms around my neck. “You did it, Minotaur.”

I tuck the stones into my pockets, then grab her and lean her back for a dramatic kiss. She laughs against my lips. The crowd applauds and gathers around, peppering us with questions. Rustion has even shown up to see what I’m up to.

“Yes,” I say to Rustion’s question. “I would love to keep the stones here at the tavern if Grumlin is okay with it. Then, when someone needs magic to solve a problem, they can simply check them out like a book in a library.”

“Argos, that is an amazing idea,” Tully says.

“It is!” Rustion squeezes my shoulder.

“I’m fine with that, Argos,” Grumlin says as he lifts a pitcher.

I nod a thanks to the wizard.

Rustion grabs my hand and shakes it. “We are lucky to have you here, Argos. I hope you’ll stick around.”

Tully is watching me, her gaze pressing into me.

“I need to go back to my hometown for a while. I’m not sure what my future holds.” I turn to her, a question in my eyes. “In fact...”

My heart pounds against my ribs and my mouth is dry, but I’m doing this.

I take the small box from my pocket and go to one knee. Tully’s eyes widen as I open the box to show the ring I made with the inert parts of the chaos mirror.

“It’s scary like you,” I say, chuckling.

She grins and lets me take her hand.

“Will you marry me, Mistress Tully, Witch of my Heart?”

Her eyes shine. “Yes, Argos. I will.”

I slip the ring on her finger. Three tiny skulls from the chaos mirror sit atop the copper band.

Rustion and everyone cheers.

“Only our witch would love a ring like that,” Cyrus says, smiling and raising his mug.

“It’s perfect.” Tully kisses the ring, then kisses me.

I’ve never been so happy in my life. Now, all I need to do is save my family’s estate.

Unless it’s too late...

Chapter 28

Tully

The next day, Argos and I mount two dappled gray horses—a mare and a gelding—and head out of Leafshire Cove. We should get to Mytilene, Argos’s hometown, in about four hours of riding through rolling hills, sleeping farmland, and a stretch of low, rocky ridges. Argos’s horse is called Fernie, a large female with a white nose and a swaying gait. My gelding, Orion, is a lovely fellow with a nice smooth gait and the tendency to wiggle every time we pass a field he quite obviously wishes to gallop through with abandon.

I lean forward and scratch behind one of his big, furry ears as we canter down the road. “On our way home, I swear I’ll give you free rein.”

“I’m a little worried you’ll toss me over for that horse,” Argos says.

“Orion is castrated, love. You don’t have anything to fret over.”

Argos shuts his eyes and shakes his head. “You’re killing me, Witch. But really, can you talk telepathically with that horse?”

“No. I can with some animals, as you’ve seen with Lady Owl. But not with all. I don’t know why some are open to me and some are not. It’s a mystery that we might never have an answer to.”

“Hmm.”

“Oh no. Don’t get that look. I’m not participating in any experiments with animals. I have a life, you know. I can’t just be sciencing with you all day long.”

“Sciencing.” He takes two apples from his pack and throws one to me.

I catch the fruit. “Shhh. Just eat your food and hush, Minotaur.”

Orion tosses his majestic mane and snorts.

Scratching him again, I whisper, “Thanks for the backup.”

I eat half the apple, then use my wand to magic the rest of the fruit to Orion. Argos holds up the last third of his apple and I bespell the treat to hover at Fernie’s mouth. The horses chomp happily, and we ride through the town’s open gate.

Mytilene appears much larger than Leafshire Cove. Shops and homes are laid out in straighter lines, too. The buildings are two and three stories high rather than one or two. It’s packed full of humans, but there are several minotaur families, a few fairies here and there, and shrub gryphons everywhere.

“You have an infestation, Argos. I can help with that.”

One of the small menaces flies through a hedgerow at the end of a curving lane. The creature attacks the green growth, dislodging the snow on top and creating a little storm.

“They need to be driven back into the wild forest,” I say. “When they eat anything but the starleaf trees, they get sick.”

“I had no idea. We were always so focused on the crops and the creatures that we shared them with. Deer and the like.”

“When we are finished with your business, I’ll cast a lure for them at the forest’s edge.”

“A witch!” A smiling smithy in a leather apron calls up to us as we ride past his forge. “And is that...”

Argos raises a hand, and we both rein in our mounts. “Hello, Tythan.”

“I hope you’re here to set things to rights.”

Argos turns on his saddle to smile at the smith. “I will certainly try.”

It looks like the smith wants to say more, but is hesitant because of my presence. “Who is your friend?”

“This is Mistress Tully of Leafshire Cove, a powerful witch and my intended.”

Tythan gasps and comes forward to take my hand and kiss my knuckles. I try not to grimace at being smooched on by a complete stranger.

“Such a pleasure to meet you.” He faces Argos. “You best hurry on or the whole town will know before your mother.”

“She wouldn’t like that.” His tone is jovial, but sadness pulls at his eyes.

We ride on, and Argos greets several more townsfolk. They all seem to adore him.

“I’m glad they don’t fault you for anything,” I say.

He rubs the back of his neck and his jaw muscles clench. “Aye, they’re kind people. It hasn’t been easy on them. First, we had a poor harvest so food was short. Then the

weather decided it wasn't done with us and I couldn't afford to keep enough hands on the grounds to harvest the winter wheat quickly enough. After that, the king's collectors began claiming our farm machines and tools. Most of these folks have to travel to the next three towns just to have enough to eat. Many have left to find work or open shop in a more prosperous place."

"The town still looks well tended."

"It's only been a year and a half. If you hadn't saved my arse," he says, patting the sack of money tied to Fernie's saddle, "we would have started seeing caved-in roofs, poor on the streets begging, and crime rising. Thank you again, Tully. I will never deserve your kindness."

"As Laini and Kaya have taught me, you don't have to deserve kindness to receive it. We all deserve it just by being alive."

"You have very wise friends."

"I guess. They have a nice outlook on life, anyway. I'm trying to embrace it."

Argos gives me a grin that warms me from head to toe and makes me wish I had him all to myself. Perhaps after we give the good news and get this estate back in his family's hands.

"You already do embrace that life," Argos says. "You show kindness every moment I'm with you. Gathering this money. Helping your townsfolk with no request of being paid for your magical services in times of great need. Laini told me how you helped her in the past. You might wear a scowl and have a blunt way of communicating, but you're the best person I've met in my entire life."

I swallow, and my eyes burn. "I was taught to be stoic unless anger was required to

accomplish a goal. My grandwitch used to say that feelings were like holes in a dam, and if I didn't patch them closed, soon I'd be drowning."

"Gods, Tully, that's awful."

An archway of blue and black stone leads us out of the town and into the rolling fields of what I'm guessing is part of Argos's family estate. Three tall hills—almost mountains—stand beyond the fields. A waterfall plumes with mist and the shimmering moisture creates a rainbow. Beside the stubbled fields, a ring of wooden fencing encloses a small herd of unicorns. The creatures gallop and kick, excited to see our horses.

"Well, this isn't pretty at all."

Argos grins. "It has always been my favorite place in the world."

"I can see why."

Our horses trot up a rise that leads to a stone manor house.

"But now," Argos says shyly, "my favorite place in the world is wherever you are."

"Stop it. You'll soften me so much that none of my friends will recognize me."

Laughing, we ease our horses to a stop outside the double set of entry doors and dismount.

Argos moves the reins over Fernie's broad head, then ties her to a post shaped like a tree bared for winter. "Tully, I want to say... I'm sorry you were raised in such a cold environment."

“It wasn’t all bad.” I tie Orion next to Fernie. “Grandwitch fed me, taught me, and told me wonderful stories.”

Argos takes his satchel and the sack of money from the saddle. “I guess like most folks, she was complicated.”

“Good and bad,” I say. “But maybe a little more bad than is good.”

He opens the door, which seems very odd to me. A place like this usually has a liveried guard or at least a staff member to announce visitors. I suppose he wasn’t exaggerating that all the staff had gone.

The entry hall boasts a wide hearth on the far wall, a long table like the one at Rustion’s, and painted murals of minotaur history. Swords flash in silver thread, minotaur horns are like spears in the chaos, and a castle with rounded turrets covers the background.

“This is amazing.” My voice echoes off the high ceiling.

A female minotaur walks out of a shadowed corridor. She wears her white hair in a twist that sits between her horns. Her clothing looks three sizes too big.

“Argos?”

He hurries over and pulls her into a gentle hug. Her thin fingers grip his cloak and she shuts her eyes, obviously overwhelmed at his unannounced visit.

“Mother, I want you to meet my intended, Mistress Tully of Leafshire Cove.”

I give her a respectful nod and smile. “Nice to meet you.”

She comes forward and takes my hand. Her fingers are like ice. “Hello. I’m Mathilde. When did you two meet? How long has it been? Forgive me. My head is foggy all the time.”

“You aren’t eating enough.” Argos digs in his satchel and produces a hunk of what appears to be Kaya’s pumpkin bread. “Eat this while I tell you everything.”

She complies and we take a seat at the long table. The room is colder than the outside, so I start a fire with my wand. It won’t do much though because I can’t produce wood to burn out of thin air and there are only two sad logs stacked inside.

Argos tells his mother everything about the khymeia, the mirror, how we met, and so forth. At his conclusion, he lifts the sack of money I gathered onto the table and loosens the tie to show the gold, copper, and silver inside.

Mathilde’s hands go to her mouth and her eyes shine. “Tully, you did this?”

Chapter 29

Tully

I remove my hat and smooth my hair, trying not to picture this grief-stricken female alone in this all-too-quiet manor house. The ghost of her past has to be stealing her appetite.

“It was the whole town,” I explain. “I kept your privacy and didn’t explain the situation, but they gave anyway. I live in a special place.”

“You must. I can’t even...” She touches the tiny treasure trove and then meets Argos’s gaze. “The king’s collector is set to come today at sundown.”

“That’s perfect,” I say, glad that this family is finally having some good luck.

There’s a brisk knock at the door. Argos and Mathilde rise as an orc in the king’s livery walks in—all confident stride and no polite requests to enter like he owns the place. Not too far off, I guess, but he doesn’t need to act like such a dick about it.

Crossing my arms, I discreetly bespell his belt to come loose. He stops and grabs at the buckle with a grunt. Redoing the belt, he straightens and glares.

“I am Sir Cessair and I represent King Raulfian. If you don’t have the funds today, I will move in tomorrow to run the estate for His Majesty.”

Argos’s eyes widen and he looks to Mathilde. “Today?”

Mathilde pulls her shawl tight around her bony shoulders. “He has been saying that for a month.”

“Well, this is it,” Cessair says, his tone haughty. Blessed Stones, this male’s mere voice could incite violence. “Your head tenant farmer and estate manager are out of arguments.”

Mathilde touches Argos’s arm briefly. “Hamish has been doing his best.”

Argos nods and points to the money sack. “Will this pay our debt?”

He details the type of coins included and the amounts while Cessair sets every piece on the table. The orc is nothing if not well organized. He inks the amounts on a small roll of parchment, which he stuffs into his vest when he is finished.

I’m holding my breath as Cessair stands and eyes each of us in turn.

“It’s not half of what you owe and you know it, Argos.”

Mathilde bows her head and steadies herself by placing her palms on the table. Argos lets out a frustrated breath.

“But this must buy us time to find more funds,” he says.

Cessair’s eyes are as frosty as the day after Yuletide. “No. As I said, this is your last day. At sundown, it’s over. I’m sorry for your loss.”

I snort. “Sure you are.”

He glares my way and I scowl right back.

“Please vacate the premises and I’ll take those keys,” the orc says, his tone promising action if we don’t comply.

With a labored movement, Mathilde removes a set of large skeleton keys from her dress pocket and holds them out. Argos looks gutted. I have to do something...

“Not so fast, Lady Mathilde of Mytilene.”

We spin to see Rustion striding in with his wife, Nisa, at his side. The tall lion shifter and sunset-hued sprite make quite a pair as they approach Cessair.

Cessair dips his head a fraction to show respect for Lord Rustion’s rank. “My lord.”

Rustion is well known throughout the Veiled Kingdoms because he was the first one to welcome a human into his town.

Nisa hands over a wax-sealed scroll and her wings begin to glow—a sure sign she’s happy. What is going on?

Cessair cracks the seal and reads the contents, his face darkening.

“Share the news with all of us, if you don’t mind,” I say, dropping a nice dollop of snark into my tone.

The orc’s lip lifts around his tusks and Argos starts forward, his great horns lowered as if ready to attack.

I slide between them. “Just tell us already, Orc. Enough with the theatrics.”

Rustion grins, eyes twinkling. “It’s my job to know the troubles of those who live in Leafshire Cove. I have contacts even here in Mytilene. They told me what was

afoot.”

Nisa leans in. “And I heard you, Tully, were gathering funds. We put two and two together.”

Cessair’s hand flexes as if it would love to be around my throat in a decidedly non-sexy way, but he seems to gather himself. “The lord and lady have paid your debt. The estate is yours, Lady Mathilde and Lord Argos.”

Cessair tosses the sack of my gathered money on the table. He turns on his heel and leaves us to our cheering.

Argos sweeps his mother into a hug and she laughs and cries, thanking Nisa and Rustion over Argos’s head. Then he grabs me and kisses me soundly while Mathilde takes Nisa’s hands in hers.

Argos’s tongue slips over mine and my core heats immediately. I melt into his huge body and kiss him back. His hands brace the small of my back and he nips at my ear.

“I love you, Witch.”

“I love you, Minotaur.”

The evening progresses into ale around a fire built from two broken chairs, and songs about the coming spring. Eventually, Argos and I locate a delightfully private room in the south wing and try all sorts of new ways to explore knotting.

I can’t believe I’m getting married. But then again, I can. The mate’s mark on my chest promises this is the real thing.

It took true love to melt this witch’s cold heart and I couldn’t be happier that Argos

was the one to do it.

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:08 am

I barge into Argos's room at my pub and he is still fussing around in front of the mirror. "Come on, Argos. You're worse than any female. You look fine."

Just seeing another big mirror honestly gives me chills. That whole dark magic situation was scary as hell. Argos told me even more about it and the whole draining thing last night over drinks. Thankfully, Rustion had the thieves sent to the king's bench for sentencing. Those two won't be getting free time any time soon and I'm very glad about that fact.

"It's not just a looks thing," Argos argues. "The horn chains are tradition, Cyrus. I have to wear them exactly the right way. My mother will gore me if the links are off by even an inch, let alone in number."

"Minotaurs are so odd." I lead the nervous bull out of the pub and toward the gate. "I like that Tully chose to handfast in the forest. Trees are so much better than a stuffy building."

"She said witches have always made their promises under rowans and oaks and she wasn't about to flout tradition."

"So you two have that in common. Two rebels who strangely have a strong attachment to tradition."

Argos laughs good-naturedly. He's a good fellow, and I'm glad Tully found her mate.

"I'm honestly so glad to be settling down."

“I hate that phrase. Settle down.” I shudder.

Shaking his head, Argos follows me through the town gate. The late afternoon clouds skirt over the treetops in the near distance and my wings ache to fly among them. The path toward the dark line of evergreens and newly budding deciduous trees winds like a river.

“I followed this path to its end one time when I was young,” I say, absentmindedly.

“Where does it end?” Argos asks.

The memory of a row of blue-painted shops and homes blinks through my mind. “At a little port town.”

“Were you just curious where you’d end up?”

The path enters the forest. Wrens chirp at one another and the pines sway in the breeze.

“Yes and no,” I say at last.

Some folks would ask for more information, but in the short time I’ve known him, I’ve realized Argos is the scientific sort who is good at studying, at watching and waiting. But he asked me to be his second at the handfasting, so I feel the inclination to share.

I look up into the forest canopy. The evergreens grab patches of the sunset as the light passes through to where we walk far below. “I don’t know anything about my kind.”

“Dragon shifters or pub owners?”

He chuckles, and I punch him lightly in the stomach.

“Arsehole. Anyway, I was raised by the humans who ran the pub before me. Even though they researched dragon shifters at the king’s library, they found nothing. I’ve met a couple of others like me, but they didn’t have any information either. I have always longed to take to the road and see if I can discover the truth about why we exist and if there are more of us somewhere.”

Argos nods. “I get that. Anyone would want to know more about their kind in that situation.”

I tuck my right wing in as we pass a massive oak whose low limbs are like bridges across the forest trail. “It’s not like I don’t have a great community. Leafshire Cove is wonderful.”

“I hope someday you get answers. If you want help looking, I’m here.”

“After the honeymoon, though, right?” I laugh as we walk into the more open area where the rest of the town is gathered for the handfasting because Argos’s jaw is basically on the ground as he stares at Tully.

I grip his shoulder and lean in. “Just remember to say yes when Rustion asks you any questions, pal.”

We walk up the makeshift aisle in the center of the gathering. Tully stands, grinning, next to Rustion. Laini and Kaya are to Tully’s left. Argos’s mother, a kind female named Mathilde if I remember correctly, sits in a dark wicker chair beside Tully. She is practically glowing even though she’s not a sprite like Nisa.

My own gaze is drawn to Kaya and I take an uneven breath. Kaya’s hair is down around her shoulders and her big eyes are trained on her friend. Heat shoots to my cock like it always does when Kaya is around. She’s my friend. I won’t ruin that. I’m a rake, and she’s an upstanding woman of the Cove. But my body has never really accepted that we will never be lovers.

She must feel my gaze on her because her head turns my way. A quick smile dances over her mouth. Blinking like the sun hit her eyes, she focuses once again on Tully.

I swallow and take my spot at the front of the crowd, just behind Argos, who takes a moment to kiss his mother's cheek.

The ceremony goes as planned with the traditional wrapping of the couple's hands, the blessing from the officiant, and the well wishes of the crowd.

Even though Tully casts a fun spell that creates a dazzling show of dark purple sparks in the air above us, I can't stop glancing at Kaya. It's just the hair. I'm not used to seeing it down because she's always working. She works too much. I've told her that time and again. But of course, she won't listen to me. I huff a quiet laugh as we leave the forest and head back to town for the celebration. Kaya is too smart to pay any attention to this rake.