



Whispers of the Magical Forest (Midlife Witchery #17)

Author: *Brenda Trim*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Just when you thought it was safe to go back to sipping merlot surprise! The Backside of Forty uncorked a peaceful wine-tasting weekend only to be poured into a multi-car pileup in a blizzard. So much for a relaxing girlfriends getaway

Before you can say cabernet, Fiona, Violet, and Aislinn stumble upon a corpse buried in the snow, and its buzzing with that unmistakable eau de supernatural. Turns out, the scenic village is more crime scene than picture postcard, with ritualistic killings that make ordinary weekend plans look downright boring.

The local mundie police think they can actually handle this mess, but spoiler alert: they cant. Its up to the coven, armed with trusty magic (and a bottle opener or two), to locate the killer before any more bodies supernatural or otherwise pile up.

That will be easier said than done one a dark-magic-loving shifter decides to kidnap Aislinn and hide her away deep in the forest. The battle to save her just might push these magical midlife mamas over the edge, nearly wrecking their favorite boots in the process.

Once theyre out of the woods (literally), a new discovery leaves the girls aghast, and as the last of the snow settles, the real battle is just beginning. And in this magical world, survival is never the finish line. Its just the signal for the next round of chaos to start. Cheers to that, right?

Total Pages (Source): 21

CHAPTER 1

FIONA

"I can't believe we actually managed to get away," Violet said from the back seat. Her voice was filled with proper wonderment.

I caught her eye in the rearview mirror and smirked. "That's because I'm just that awesome." I wasn't, but I believed in faking it till you made it. The notion had gotten me this far in life. Why stop now? Besides, someone had to be the confident one in our little trio.

"Remind me again how you convinced Bas to let you out of his sight for an entire weekend?" Violet leaned forward between the seats, her dark curls bouncing with the movement. "Last time I checked, he was being particularly clingy after our trip to the Amazon."

"First of all," I said, keeping my eyes firmly on the road, "we had no choice but to go and save the Garden. He knows that. Second, Bas doesn't 'let' me do anything. I'm a grown witch who can make her own questionable life choices, thank you very much."

"We did manage to contain the Garden with minor injuries," Aislinn conceded, though she was still checking her mobile for what had to be the hundredth time since we'd left. Probably making sure Argies hadn't fed Kalli takeaway curry for breakfast again. "If anything happens to me, Argies will never forgive the lot of you. And don't give me that look, Fi. You know our track record."

"For crying out loud, we're wine tasting. Not challenging a dragon to a duel," I said. "Something you would win since you're mated to one and survived giving birth to one." I shot her a grin to let her know I was joking. Being a mom—sorry, mum—had turned my formerly adventurous friend into such a worrier. "Though I have to admit, the dragon might be easier to handle than hangovers. Remember when I brought Grams back?"

"That was well worth consuming so much," Aislinn replied with a smile. "Though I still maintain that Grams' hangover cure is actually worse than the hangover itself. I swear I tasted colors for a week after."

"Better than the time we tried that 'foolproof' potion Violet found on WitchTok," I reminded them, switching lanes to pass a lorry that was moving slower than snot. "My tongue went numb for three days."

"In my defense," Violet piped up, "the witch who posted it had five stars and over a million followers."

"Yes, and now we know why you shouldn't trust social media witches who call themselves 'That Healing Witch Girl' and use too many emojis in their posts," I said dryly.

The quaint village of Hambledon sprawled out before us. Holy mother of magic was it perfect. Like, suspiciously perfect. Snow covered everything from the rolling hills to the neat rows of grape vines standing at attention like tiny soldiers waiting for orders. The whole scene looked like something out of a tourism brochure, which immediately set off my Spidey senses. In my experience, perfect usually meant "run the other direction as fast as possible."

"It looks like someone took every British Christmas card ever made and smooshed them together," I muttered as I squinted through the windscreen at the picturesque

scene. "Are we sure this place is real and not some fairy glamour?"

"I did my research," Violet assured us as she pulled out her itinerary. "Hambleton's completely legitimate. They've been making wine here since before the Norman Conquest. Though..." She paused and looked around. "There might be a few local legends about the original vintners making deals with the Fair Folk for better harvests."

"Brilliant," Aislinn groaned. "Just brilliant. Why can't we ever go somewhere normal?"

"Because normal is boring," I reminded her as we carefully navigated the narrow village streets. "And let's be honest. Trouble finds us whether we're looking for it or not. Might as well embrace it and get some good wine out of the deal."

The vines were dormant under their snowy blankets. But something about them made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Like they were guarding secrets. Magical secrets. The kind that usually ended up trying to kill us. I kept my mouth shut about all that. I didn't want Aislinn fretting over a feeling. Although, I had to acknowledge it was unlikely we could go wine tasting without stumbling into something potentially lethal.

Violet was a romantic at heart and did a little spin that would have looked ridiculous on anyone else. "It's absolutely lovely. I feel like we've stepped into another world. The snow makes everything look so pristine."

I snorted. "Yeah, pristine until you're face-down in it wondering where your dignity went. Then it's just cold, wet, and embarrassing as hell."

"Speaking from experience there, Fi?" Aislinn teased.

The village was tiny. Just a handful of buildings clustered around an ancient church that probably hadn't seen action since before electricity was invented. Every cottage looked like it belonged in a Jane Austen novel. They all had thatched roofs and ivy-covered walls. Even the pub looked like it had been serving ale since Henry VIII was busy collecting wives.

"Look at that church," Violet said. Her witch senses were clearly tingling as much as mine. "Those wards are ancient. Someone's been maintaining them though. See how the protection sigils are worked into the stonework? Proper clever, that is."

"As long as we don't have to deal with any more angry ghosts," Aislinn muttered.

"The ghosts went south for winter," I assured Aislinn.

"This is exactly what we needed," Violet said. She was practically bouncing with excitement. "The vineyards here are meant to be some of the finest in Britain. And the wine-"

"-better be worth freezing my ass off," I finished, rubbing my gloved hands together. "Otherwise, someone's going to hear about it. Possibly at volume."

"Bloody hell, Fi," Aislinn chuckled. Her breath was visible in the cold air. "You're always threatening someone. It's rather become your signature, hasn't it?"

"It's gotten us this far, hasn't it?" I glanced at the small signpost pointing toward our first winery. "Besides, without wine, this place would just be a really pretty ghost town. And we've dealt with enough actual ghosts to last a lifetime."

"That we have," Violet agreed as she twined one arm through mine and the other through Aislinn's.

We crunched through the snow toward the winery. Our boots left trails of footprints that looked almost too perfect against the pristine white. My stomach growled as we passed a bakery that smelled like heaven itself had decided to do some baking. "We ought to get some mince pies," Violet said as if she'd read my mind. She eyed the bakery with more longing than I had.

"Wine first," I reminded her. Though, warm pie was starting to sound pretty damn good. "Let's maintain some semblance of priorities here. Besides, you know how you get around pastries."

"That was one time!" Violet protested.

"You cleared out an entire patisserie in France," Aislinn reminded her. "The poor baker looked proper gutted."

"He didn't believe a dainty woman like myself could eat that much. He should never have challenged me," Violet pointed out.

"That's a surefire way to be proven wrong," I agreed.

We chuckled and continued to our first destination. Heat engulfed us like a hug when we entered. The winery was everything a wine snob could dream of. It was a rustic stone building with ivy-covered walls and windows glowing with warmth. It looked like it had weathered more British winters than I'd had hot dinners. No doubt, it had better stories to tell.

"Is it just me," Aislinn whispered, "or do those vines look like they're moving?"

I squinted at the ivy. "Probably just the wind. Though..." I lowered my voice, "I'm picking up some interesting energy signatures. Nothing dangerous, mind you. More like old, protective magic?"

"The kind of old that means we should run away, or the kind of old that means really good wine?" Violet asked, already shrugging off her coat.

"Let's find out, shall we?" I replied with a grin. "Just remember. No magic. We're trying to blend in for once."

"You say that every time," Aislinn muttered. "And every time, something explosive happens anyway, and we have to have memories erased."

"Name one time-" I started to protest.

"The festival downtown," both Violet and Aislinn said in unison.

"That was not my fault," I defended. "How was I supposed to know that imps were going to attack at a mundie event?"

We wandered closer to the massive stone fireplace that crackled in the corner. My favorite were the wooden beams that stretched across the ceiling. We beelined right for the long, polished bar before we reached the flames. Violet was practically vibrating with excitement as we approached the older gentleman behind it. The whole place smelled of oak, spices, and wine.

He greeted us with a smile and was already pouring what looked like liquid ruby into glasses. "Welcome, welcome." His Hampshire accent was thick as treacle. "Come in, warm yourselves by the fire. Let me introduce you to some of Hambledon's finest."

I noticed the subtle symbols carved into the bar's woodwork. They were small and subtle enough that most visitors would mistake them for decorative flourishes. I had to squint to get a better look. Protection runes. That was interesting. I wondered if they were left by a previous owner. Or if this one knew about magic.

"Now, this is what I'm talking about," Violet said as she shed her coat and claimed a spot at the bar like she'd been born to it. "How long have you been making wine here?"

The owner, who introduced himself as George, launched into a fascinating history of the vineyard. As he talked, I noticed how his eyes seemed to linger on Violet's crystal pendant. He seemed to carefully avoid touching any of our hands directly when passing glasses. I swear he knew what we were. Or, perhaps I was looking for trouble like Aislinn said.

"The grapes are particularly special here," he said, with just the slightest emphasis on special. "There's something about the soil, you see. My family has been tending these vines for generations."

While Violet got her wine education on, I took a moment to scan the room. Old habits did die hard. Those habits had kept us alive more times than I could count. The place seemed normal enough. Your average, charming English winery. No obvious signs of supernatural activity. No mysterious energy signatures. No suspicious-looking locals giving us the evil eye. Was the fire in the hearth burning a bit too steadily for a natural flame? Did the shadows in the corners seem just a touch too deep? I really was looking for problems.

I turned my attention to sampling the varieties of wine offered. We listened to tales of vintages past, and at some point, Violet got that look in her eye. The one that usually meant trouble with a capital T.

"Whatever you're thinking, the answer is no," I said preemptively.

"You don't even know what I was going to suggest," she protested.

"I don't need to. That's your 'I have an idea that might get us killed, but it'll be fun'

face. I know that face. I hate that face." I frowned at her.

Violet rolled her eyes. "I fancy visiting a Fae-owned vineyard. It's the one place here where we can properly let our hair down. I found it during my research."

"Is it the place Elowen owns?" Aislinn perked up, then immediately looked worried. "Hang on, isn't she the one who-"

"It is," Violet confirmed quickly. "And she's perfectly safe. Mostly."

"Mostly safe, like that time we went to the mermaid bar underwater?" I asked skeptically. "Because I still can't eat seafood without having flashbacks."

"That was different," Violet insisted. "We were on a case then. Besides, Elowen is a Light Fae. They're all so civilized."

"Right," I drawled. "Because the Light Fae are known for their restraint and reasonable behavior."

"You're mated to a Light Fae, Fi," Violet reminded me. "When was the last time we got to drink proper Fae wine? The kind that makes you see stars and taste moonlight?"

"The last time we did that was after I had the baby," Aislinn pointed out. "And I didn't get to participate. I miss the wines of home."

That did it for me. We paid our tab and ventured to Elowen's place. That's what friends did. They followed each other into potentially dangerous situations involving Fae wine. Thankfully the town was small enough it didn't take long to get to our destination. The Snowy Vine was nothing like the previous winery. Where that had been quaint and rustic, this place looked like something out of a fantasy architect's

fever dream.

The building before us was clearly glamoured. It shifted its appearance depending on who was looking at it. To mundie eyes, it was a quaint country estate. For those of us who could see through the magical veils, it was an elegant Victorian mansion.

"Nice separation spell," I commented as I studied the layers of magic. "It lets the mundies see what they expect while giving supernaturals the full show. It really is beautiful."

"I think it's brilliant," Violet said as we approached the door. "The way they've woven the different perception layers together is master-level work. "

Aislinn and I followed her up the path anyway. Inside, the place was bustling with the kind of crowd you'd expect at a Fae establishment. There was a surprising mix of supernaturals. Looking away from a shifter and his ice demon date, I took the room in. The bar was made of dark marble that seemed to have galaxies swirling in its depths. The chandeliers looked like they were made from captured starlight.

A group of what looked like dryads were giggling in one corner. Their hair was shifting between autumn colors even though it was winter. A pair of what had to be selkies sat at the bar. Their sealskins were draped carefully over their chairs. And was that... yes, that was definitely a pooka trying (and failing) to look inconspicuous while chatting up what appeared to be a very unimpressed water nymph.

That's when we met Elowen. Holy shit. If the building was impressive, she was breathtaking. She wore a silver gown that moved like liquid moonlight. Her platinum blonde hair was braided in a way that defied gravity. Her eyes were an impossible shade of lavender.

"I know that look," Aislinn whispered to me. "That's your 'trying to figure out if

someone's dangerously attractive or just dangerous' face."

"Can't it be both?" I muttered back, earning an eye roll from both my friends.

"Welcome to The Snowy Vine," Elowen said in a voice as melodic as wind chimes in a gentle breeze. "What may I offer you on this fine winter's day?" She glided toward us. Her feet never quite touched the floor. Show-off.

"We've heard your vineyard is the best in the region," Violet said, smiling. "We're rather keen to try the house special."

"Ah, you must mean Winter's Embrace," Elowen said. Her smile widened as she reached for a bottle that looked like it had been crafted from frozen starlight. The wine inside was the color of garnets held up to the sun. I swear I saw snowflakes dancing in the liquid as she poured.

"Careful with that one," a voice behind us warned. I turned to see a satyr in a surprisingly modern bartender's outfit, complete with an artfully tied bow tie. "It's got quite a kick. Last week, a bunch of pixies had three glasses each and ended up trying to redecorate the ceiling."

"I rather liked what they did with the constellations," Elowen mused as she gestured to the ceiling where, sure enough, entirely new star patterns twinkled. "Though the dragon constellation breathing actual fire was a bit much. Anyway, this is made from grapes kissed by the first frost," she explained. "It carries a touch of winter's magic. We harvest them at midnight during the first full moon after the autumn equinox."

"Of course you do," I said, trying not to sound as impressed as I felt. "Let me guess. You do it using silver shears blessed by a winter sprite?"

"Actually, we use golden shears blessed by the Moon herself," Elowen corrected with

a slight smirk. "The silver ones leave an aftertaste."

I took a sip and holy mother of magic. It was like drinking liquid warmth. It made you feel as if you were sitting by a fire while a blizzard raged outside. It made you forget about all the trouble you'd left behind. A second later, images flickered through my mind. I recalled snowball fights from my childhood, the first time I saw the Northern Lights, and that perfect moment of silence after a fresh snowfall.

"We need to take some home," I declared. "Bas would love this."

"Argies too," Aislinn agreed, already reaching for her handbag. "He's been talking about taking another trip back to Eidothea so he can help his brother and see his family."

I could understand that. My children lived in the United States, and I didn't see them as often as I wanted. They didn't get much time off from classes. "Now that we've been warned, you should plan it soon. Before shit goes sideways again."

"Speaking of warnings," Elowen said. She'd produced a contract that sparkled suspiciously. "There are a few... terms and conditions for purchasing bottles."

"That sounds rather ominous," I sighed. "Let me guess. We have to give you our firstborn. No, wait. We can't drink it during a blue moon. And we have to dance with the Winter Court if they come calling?"

"Nothing so dramatic," Elowen laughed. The sound was like icicles tinkling. "Just the usual. Don't serve it to mundies. Don't use it in potions without consulting the brewing guidelines. And please don't try to replicate it. The last witch who tried that ended up with a vineyard full of singing grape vines. It took months to quiet them down."

We spent the next hour sampling different wines. Each was more magical than the last. The conversation flowed as freely as the wine. Though, I kept my intake minimal. Someone had to keep a clear head. With our track record, it was probably a good thing I was driving.

"Oh, try this one," Elowen said as she produced a bottle that seemed to be made of twilight. "It's called Midnight Harvest. It pairs wonderfully with lasagna."

"Does everything here have to be so dramatically named?" I asked, accepting a glass that swirled with what looked like actual stars.

"We're Fae," Elowen shrugged elegantly. "Dramatics are part of the job description." I wanted to argue with that. My mate was the exact opposite of that. I thought better of saying anything. Bas was unique, and I loved his grumpy demeanor.

"Remember Rome?" Violet asked. She grinned as she sipped something that made her hair temporarily turn silver. "When Fiona tried to haggle with that vendor and ended up with enough pasta to feed an army?"

I groaned. "In my defense, my Italian was rusty."

"Rusty?" Aislinn laughed. "You asked for a scarf and got ten pounds of spaghetti! Proper mental, that was."

"Hey, we ate well that week!" I protested. "And none of you complained when Grams was cooking all those meals."

A group of frost sprites drifted by. They left trails of delicate ice patterns in the air. One winked at me, and my wine briefly frosted over before melting back to normal temperature. "Show-offs," I muttered with a smile. There was something rather magical about being in a place where we didn't have to hide what we were. No

carefully concealed words. No pretending we couldn't see the magical creatures that lived in the margins of the mundane world. The tension that had overcome me while walking through a town of mundies eased up. We needed to let our hair down like this.

After the tasting, we decided to explore the town. The snow was falling and making everything look like it had been dusted with diamond powder. We window-shopped, admired the Christmas decorations, and managed to avoid any magical incidents. It was a new record for us.

The massive Christmas tree in the town square sparkled with ornaments and lights. The former looked like they'd been passed down through generations. They caught the light and threw rainbow reflections across the snow. "Is it just me," Aislinn said as she squinted at the tree, "or are there fairies playing chicken with the star on top?"

I looked up. Sure enough, a group of tiny lights were darting around the top of the tree. They zoomed dangerously close to the oversized star before veering away at the last second. "Ten quid says one of them crashes within the next five minutes," I offered .

"You're on," Violet replied, then immediately groaned as one of the lights bounced off the star with a tiny 'ping' and spiraled dramatically down before recovering.

We couldn't linger because the weather turned. What had been a picturesque snowfall became something out of a horror movie. The wind picked up. Visibility dropped. Suddenly, it felt like trying to navigate through a snow globe in a tornado. We raced for my car and hopped inside.

"I thought England was supposed to be all mild winters and Jane Austen gardens," I muttered as I headed toward the Bed and Breakfast. "When did we take a wrong turn into Narnia?"

"This doesn't feel natural," Violet said from the passenger seat. She was gripping the oh-shit for dear life. Her witch senses were clearly tingling as much as mine. "The magic in the air is all wrong."

"Wrong how?" I asked. She knew more about witchy stuff because she'd practiced it her entire life. My Grams had locked my magic away to keep me from being hunted, and my parents moved us away. I had no idea I was a witch until recently. I squinted through the windscreen at what might have been a road. Or possibly just a slightly flatter patch of white hell.

"Like..." Violet frowned, concentrating. "Like when you try to mix incompatible potions. That feeling right before everything goes spectacularly pear-shaped."

"It was rather charming an hour ago," Aislinn said from the back seat. "Now I feel we've stumbled into the wrong sort of fairy tale. We cannot die in a snowstorm. We've faced down demons and demigods and won."

"Nobody's dying," I assured her. The car chose at that moment to fishtail like it was auditioning for Fast and Furious. "I am starting to wish we'd bought more wine. You know, for survival purposes when we get stuck."

"I knew we should have accepted Elowen's offer of a room at her place," Violet muttered before she cast a quick stabilizing charm on the car. It helped, but not as much as it should have. "But no, someone had to insist we stay where we'd reserved."

"We already had a room," I reminded her as I fought with the steering wheel.

Brake lights glowed ahead like evil Christmas decorations through the snow. Dammit, there was an accident ahead. We should have known this day couldn't just be about wine and relaxation. "Bloody hell," I muttered as I carefully pulled over. "Looks like we've got ourselves a situation."

"Please tell me we're not going to get involved," Aislinn pleaded. She clearly knew better because she was already pulling her emergency potions from her bag. "Just once, can we not get involved in every crisis we stumble across?"

"We're the Backside of Forty," I reminded her. "Getting involved is basically in the job description."

The scene was utter chaos. Cars were scattered everywhere like somebody had played vehicular pickup sticks. People stumbled around looking dazed and confused. We got out to help, because that's what decent people do, even when they're freezing their assets off. My magical senses picked up something else too. There were traces of magic scattered across the scene like broken glass. Fresh magic. Nothing like the ancient protective spells we'd felt at the wineries.

"Anyone else picking up on the magical residue?" I asked quietly as we picked our way through the snow.

"Yep. It feels like a spell gone wrong," Violet confirmed. "Or very, very right, depending on what they were trying to do."

That's when Aislinn yelped behind us. I turned just in time to see her go down like a tree in a forest. "What the hell did you trip over?" I asked. Something told me I wasn't going to like the answer. Nothing good ever came from mysterious lumps in the snow.

"Please be a log, please be a log, please be a log," Violet chanted under her breath as we made our way back to where Aislinn was scrambling backward through the snow. Her face had gone pale as milk.

Aislinn's hands were shaking as she pointed at what she'd stumbled over. "Bloody hell... I think... I think I've found a dead body."

"Fan-fucking-tastic," I muttered as I looked at the shape in the snow. The dead man was wearing what looked like expensive hiking gear. However, something was off about it. It looked like he'd gotten dressed in the dark. Or like someone else had dressed him. "What's a girls' weekend without a corpse?"

I crouched down, careful not to disturb any potential evidence. Magical or mundane. My witch sight picked up traces of something familiar. "Anyone else getting déjà vu?"

Violet knelt beside me and probed the scene. "This magical signature is similar to what we felt at The Snowy Vine, isn't it?"

"Fae magic," I confirmed grimly. "Yet, it's not."

Aislinn pursed her lips. "Someone tried to replicate Elowen's magic without knowing what they were doing. How did our weekend go off the rails so fast? The guys are never going to let us live this down."

Violet shrugged as she continued to examine the scene. "At least we managed to try the Winter's Embrace first."

She had a point. If we were going to deal with a dead body in the snow and what looked suspiciously like magical fraud gone horrifically wrong, at least we'd had some really good wine first. Sometimes, that's all you can ask for. "Right then," I said, standing up and brushing snow from my knees. "I suppose we should call the mundie authorities first. Then maybe have a chat with our new friend Elowen about who might be trying to copy her magic."

"And here I thought the worst thing we'd have to deal with today would be a hangover," Aislinn sighed, already dialing nine, nine, nine.

"Look on the bright side," I offered. "At least no one's turned into a toad yet."

"Don't," both my friends said in unison.

"Right, sorry." I pulled up my magic and began casting subtle detection spells to figure out what had my magical senses uneasy. We'd have to keep those involved in the accident from wandering over.

"We should probably check those bottles we bought from Elowen. Just to make sure they haven't been tampered with," Violet suggested.

I nodded as my mind raced through possibilities. "We should also see if she knows anything about unauthorized copycat vintners in the area. Someone could have been trying to recreate her wine and it went wrong."

"Can we maybe focus on the dead body first?" Aislinn suggested. "This doesn't feel like magical wine fraud."

"You're right," I agreed, then grinned despite the situation. "You have to admit this beats another boring weekend at home."

"I hate that you're right," Aislinn muttered. "Just promise me one thing?"

"What's that?" I asked.

"Next time, I suggest we go to a normal, non-magical spa for our girls' weekend. Don't talk me out of it?" She shot me a rueful smile.

"Deal," I said, knowing full well we'd probably end up finding trouble there too. It was just our luck. "Now, let's see what other secrets this snow is hiding, shall we?"

So much for our normal, mundane wine tasting adventure. Then again, I supposed ‘normal’ and ‘mundane’ were never really our style anyway. At least we had some excellent Fae wine to look forward to once we solved this mess. Assuming, of course, we survived whatever we'd just stumbled into.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

CHAPTER 2

FIONA

I knelt in the snow beside our unexpected corpse. Nausea churned in my stomach as I tried to focus past the throbbing headache the strange magic was giving me. The energy signature pulsed like a bad techno beat. There familiar hint of Elowen's elegant Fae magic was confusing me. This was twisted and unnatural, like someone had taken pure magic and put it through a metaphorical wood chipper. It was nothing like her natural flow.

"We need to search him," I said. Grimacing, I reached for his coat pockets. "Whatever caused this might leave traces. I'd rather find them before the mundies do. And before Gadross shows up and gives us shit for not covering our bases. Speaking of, we will need to call Gadross. I want him aware from the beginning."

"Careful," Violet warned. She turned to cast a quick deflection spell to keep the accident victims from wandering our way. "That magic feels unstable. Like a potion about to go spectacularly wrong."

"Story of our lives," I muttered and carefully patted down the victim's expensive coat. "Though I gotta say, this is quite the outfit for someone to end up dead in a magical incident. These are designer labels. Like, 'my wallet hurts just looking at them' designer."

"Because rich people can't have magical accidents?" Aislinn asked, then immediately grimaced. "Sorry, gallows humor. I'm picking up your bad habits, Fi."

"Hey, my habits are awesome," I protested as I fished a wallet from the inner pocket. "And look what we have here. Mr. Fancy Pants has a name. Charles Blackwood. He's fifty-six and lives in Kensington. That fits."

"Proper posh, then," Violet observed. She scanned the guy's belongings. "The magic signature is indeed odd. It reminds me of Elowen's work, but that's not quite right. It's like hearing a familiar song played in the wrong key."

"Anything could be causing that resonance," I said as I continued my search. "Although I have to admit, finding traces of Fae magic this far from their usual haunts is weird. Okay, he has the usual. Credit cards, receipts from some seriously expensive restaurants, and a membership to something called 'The Vintner's Society'. Maybe he's Elowen's rival. Hello, what's this?"

I pulled out a small business card. It was deep purple with silver writing that seemed to shimmer in the snowy twilight. The text moved like liquid mercury across the surface. It was reforming itself depending on how you held it. There was no doubt this guy was some sort of supernatural. He wouldn't be carrying a magical card otherwise.

"The Midnight Cellar," I read aloud. "Where dreams are bottled and wishes flow freely." I shared a look with my friends. "Well, that's not ominous at all."

Violet's eyes widened. "That's impossible. The Midnight Cellar was shut down decades ago. My gran used to tell stories about it. According to her, they were experimenting with some seriously dangerous magical stuff. It ended badly."

"How badly?" I asked, though I had a feeling I knew the answer.

"After some catastrophe, there were seven dead, three turned into various types of shrubbery, and one poor bloke who ended up speaking in arcane equations for the rest

of his life," Violet explained. "Apparently, his last words were, 'The fundamental forces converge at the point of ultimate entropy'."

"Charming," I tucked the card into my pocket. "And now someone's connected to it again. Though how does that tie into this mess?" I gestured at the strange patterns forming in the snow around the body.

"Woah! Look at these markings," Aislinn pointed to faint traces in the snow. "They're like nothing I've seen before. They're similar to runes, but aren't them."

I studied the patterns. "They're not melting either. Normal snow doesn't do that. Something's preserving them."

"This is beyond anything in my experience," Violet said. She went as pale as the snow all around us. "These are energy patterns, and they're complex. Like someone's woven together different types of magic that were never meant to mix."

"I'd bet they did it while drunk," I added as we watched new symbols appear as the snow shifted. "And blindfolded. In a hurricane."

A particularly strong gust of wind cut through us like a knife. It carried with it the distinct scent of winter roses and frost. Having mated to the most handsome Fae ever to live, I recognized Fae magic. Underneath it was something else. Something that made my teeth ache and my stomach turn. The magic was spreading.

"Shit," I scrambled back from the body. "Everyone back up. Now."

We barely made it three steps before the corpse started to glow with a sickly purple light. Ice crystals formed in the air around it. Instead of the delicate patterns we'd seen before, these were jagged and rough. It reminded me of frozen lightning.

"What the bloody hell?" Violet gasped, throwing up a hasty protection barrier. The air crackled with competing magical energies. "This isn't like anything I've ever seen. The magical signatures are mutating somehow. What the hell is going on?"

Just my freaking luck. We were dealing with whatever magical nightmare had killed a person and caused a multi-car pile-up. The corrupted magic lashed against our shields like it had a personal vendetta. Given our track record, it probably did.

"For the love of all things caffeinated," I muttered as I pushed more power into the shield. Next to me, Violet's face was scrunched in concentration. Her magic wove with mine in familiar patterns. "Aislinn, call Gadross. Tell him to get his bureaucratic backside here before this gets any worse."

"I can't get through." Aislinn jabbed at her phone with increasing frustration. Her nose was red from the cold, and ice was starting to form on her scarf. "It's like hitting a wall. The calls won't connect, texts won't send, and my weather app thinks we're in the Bermuda Triangle." Maybe that was where the magic came from.

"Keep trying." I gritted my teeth as another wave of magic slammed into our defenses. The taste of copper filled my mouth. That was never a good sign when working with questionable spells. "Something about this magic is messing with communications. Which means whatever we're dealing with really doesn't want us calling friends."

"Shocking," Violet drawled. Her posh accent somehow made the sarcasm even sharper.

"There's no signal at all now," Aislinn reported as she held her phone up like she might catch a rogue bar of reception. "It's completely dead."

"Perfect." I blew out a breath and watched it crystallize in the frigid air. "The

universe decided we weren't having enough fun already."

The corrupted magic pressed closer. It had some kind of intelligence. It was testing our defenses like a predator looking for weakness. We were officially up the creek without a paddle, a boat, or even a rubber duck. The body's glow intensified, and I caught clearer glimpses of the symbols etched into the snow beneath it. The magical patterns were unlike anything I'd seen before. Yet there was an undercurrent of familiar magic.

"These symbols," I mused. I was diligently trying to make sense of them. "Some of them almost look like traditional brewing runes. Although, they feel like someone tried to create their own magical language."

"Without understanding the grammar," Violet added, looking sick. "This is the magical equivalent of throwing random ingredients in a pot and hoping for the best."

A high-pitched whine filled the air. It made my teeth vibrate. The strange energy was spreading as fast as the bullet train. And it was creeping through the snow like purple veins. If it reached the accident victims, we would have a whole other set of problems.

"We need to contain this," I said as I drew power for a spell. "Any purification spells in your arsenal that might work on whatever this is, Vi?"

"A few," she replied grimly. "But they're meant for standard magical contamination. Not whatever this is. It's like trying to clean up an oil spill with paper towels."

"Better than nothing," I said and then positioned myself on one side of the body while she took the other. "Aislinn, add your runes to keep that barrier up. If this goes sideways, I don't want any mundies getting a face full of unknown magic. That won't be covered by their insurance."

"Remember when I said I wanted a normal girls' weekend?" Aislinn asked as she reinforced our protective shield. "Next time, we're going to a spa in Eidothea where Argies's family can ensure we won't be bothered by magic, mysteries, or dead bodies."

"You say that now," I grinned despite the situation, "but you know you'd be bored within an hour. Besides, think of the story we'll have to tell Grams and the guys when we get home."

"Yes, because this is exactly what I want to share during dinner," Aislinn muttered. "'What did you do this weekend?' 'Oh, you know, just dealt with some mysterious death and tried to keep the magic from spreading from the corpse to the mundies. Pass the butter, would you?'"

Violet and I began the purification spell. We kept our voices low and murmured the harmony as we wove magic through the air. The strange energy fought back. It sent jolts of power up my arms like electric shocks. Each pulse carried fragments of something. Memories maybe? The taste of winter frost, the sound of breaking glass, screams that might have been pain or ecstasy, or both. It was all of those and more.

"It's working," Violet said through gritted teeth. "Just a bit more... bloody hell, do you feel that?"

The magic began changing. It shifted under our attempts to purify it. Where before it had been chaotic and wild, now it felt almost intentional. Or as if something was waking up. A sound like breaking glass mixed with screaming wind broke the moment and made me jump.

My wide eyes flew to Violet and landed on the crack that appeared in the air above the body instead. "What the..." my voice trailed off as we watched it spread like a spiderweb. Through the cracks, I caught glimpses of somewhere else. It was a dark

cellar filled with bottles that glowed with the same sickly purple light.

"Oh, that's not good," I managed before the crack exploded outward, sending us all sprawling in the snow. The surge of unknown magic felt like being hit by a truck made of solid steel.

When my vision cleared, the body was gone. I dropped to my knees and moved my hands through the snow while Aislinn and Violet scanned the area. It was as if it had never been there at all. The only evidence anything had happened was a perfect circle of melted snow and the lingering taste of twisted magic in the air.

"Well," I said as we picked ourselves up, "I guess we can scratch 'quiet weekend' off our plans."

"I hate you so much right now," Aislinn groaned, brushing snow from her coat.

"No you don't," I replied cheerfully. "You love me because I make your life interesting."

"That's one word for it," Violet muttered. "Right then, what do we know? We've got unknown magic that somehow echoes Fae energy. Plus, those strange symbols, a missing body, and a mysterious club that's supposed to be long gone. Plus, whatever that portal thing was at the end."

"Don't forget the winter storm that came out of nowhere," I added, squinting at the still-falling snow. "Want to bet that's not natural either?"

"No bet," Aislinn started to say, but her words cut off in a sharp intake of breath. "Oh hell. Fi, Vi. Look."

Through the curtain of snow, I followed to where she pointed at a cluster of cars

ahead. A woman in a bright red coat was peering under one of the vehicles. Her face became horrified. "There's someone under there!" she called out. "I think they're hurt!"

"Bloody hell," I muttered, already moving forward. "How do we keep the mundies back from this?"

As we got closer, I could see why the woman was worried. A pair of expensive leather shoes stuck out from beneath the car. They were attached to legs that were far too still. The snow around them was stained with something darker than melted slush.

"We've got another one," Violet murmured, her voice low enough that only Aislinn and I could hear.

I pulled out the purple business card. The silver text shimmered and reformed. Now it showed a countdown timer that definitely hadn't been there before. "Right. First priority is getting these civilians clear before they notice anything weird. Then we figure out what The Midnight Cellar has to do with all this, and why people keep dying in the middle of this very unnatural snowstorm. Oh, and it seems as if we're under a time crunch." The woman in red was already pulling out her phone to call emergency services. We had maybe minutes before this scene got a lot more complicated.

CHAPTER 3

VIOLET

I really hate it when Fiona was right. Just once, I'd love to have a proper normal weekend without stumbling across dead bodies or supernatural mayhem. But when she held up that business card with its ominous magical countdown, I knew we were well past the point of normal. "Twenty minutes," Fiona announced as she waved the thing. "That's how long we've got before something else happens. Oh, don't give me that look. Mounting deaths and mysterious magical timers are always brilliant news."

"Dare I ask what happens when it hits zero?" Aislinn's expression suggested she already knew the answer wouldn't be pleasant. She might be a worrier, but she faced crises head-on.

"With our luck? It'll involve more bodies or magical mayhem," I muttered as I pulled my scarf tighter. My fingers were practically numb despite my best warming charms and thickest winter mittens. Whatever corrupted magic lingered from our vanishing corpse seemed to be interfering with even the simplest spells. "Anyone else wondering if we're actually cursed? "

"If we are, it's likely Fiona's fault," Aislinn said, stamping her feet to keep warm. Her nose had gone quite red from the cold. It made her look younger than usual. "She's the one who attracts trouble like bees to honey."

"Hey!" Fiona protested as she watched the activity. "I prefer to think of it as having an exciting life. Besides, you can't blame me for this one. I was totally content just

drinking wine and acting normal for once."

"Normal?" I scoffed. "The last time we tried to be normal, we brought back Grams. And after that was the incident with the Dark One."

"Grams was not my fault," Fiona insisted as she closed her fist around the card. "How was I supposed to know that spell would interact with one Grams cast and bring her back from the dead?"

"That's actually a good point. However, you also went through a portal to Eidothea before you knew how to conjure fire," Aislinn pointed out. "Honestly, Fi, for someone who grew up without magic, you have an uncanny knack for finding the most dangerous magical situations in Britain."

"It's a gift," Fiona grinned. Her expression quickly sobered as she glanced at the card again. "Eighteen minutes now. Whatever's coming, we should probably-"

A whisper, so faint it might have been the wind, stopped me in my tracks. Wind didn't usually call your name. Or speak in Latin. The words were familiar but distorted, like listening to Radio 4 with poor reception.

" Violet. .. veni ad nos ... tempus est ..." The whispers seemed to curl around my consciousness like smoke.

The weather had turned properly grim since we'd first arrived at the accident scene. It had transformed what had started as a picturesque snowfall into something rather more menacing. It was the sort of weather that usually preceded very bad things in horror films. Of course, in our experience, reality was often worse than anything Hollywood could dream up.

"The temperature's dropping," Aislinn noted, checking her mobile. "It's gone down

five degrees in the last ten minutes. I think we can safely say the storm is not natural."

"Neither is that," I said, pointing to the way the snowflakes were falling. They weren't drifting anymore. They were moving purposefully and forming patterns in the air that looked suspiciously like the same symbols we'd seen on our vanished corpse.

"We need to get closer to that body before the mundies contaminate the scene," I muttered as I eyed the growing crowd around the car. The woman in the red coat was still there with her mobile in hand. No doubt she was talking to emergency services. Through the falling snow, I could just make out familiar-looking symbols beginning to form in the slush around the victim's feet. "Those sigils won't stay visible long."

I managed to get close enough to see that the victim's hand had fallen palm-up in the snow. Based on the fingernail polish, I was guessing it was a woman. There was something tattooed on her wrist, but before I could get a proper look, the flash of blue lights through the snow made my heart sink like a stone.

"Bloody hell," I muttered. Police cars carefully navigated the icy road towards us. Their lights painted the falling snow in alternating colors. It created a beautiful light show. "This is proper awful. I hope this body doesn't do a disappearing act as well."

"You think?" Fiona said as she quickly checked the card again. "What gave it away? The police or the fact that we're about to lose our second body before we can figure out if they're even human?"

"Both of you, shut it," Aislinn hissed as she put on her most innocent 'just a mum out with friends' expression. Her mum-powers were legendary. She could convince a room full of sugar-high five-year-olds that naptime was brilliant. "Let me do the talking. I've got practice explaining away Kalli's magical accidents at school."

"Like when she sneezed and singed her teacher's eyebrows?" I teased in an attempt to

lighten the mood. "Or that time in the cafeteria when she got upset and turned all the puddings into smoke rings?"

"Don't remind me," Aislinn groaned. "I had to convince everyone the smoke alarms were malfunctioning. And then there was that incident with her scales showing through during PE." She shuddered. "Do you know how difficult it is to explain why your daughter suddenly looks like she's wearing sparkly purple body paint?"

"'It's a new fashion trend' was actually quite brilliant," Fiona quoted with a grin. "I thought it was rather inspired, personally."

"You weren't the one who had to explain to twenty sets of parents why their children were now begging for 'dragon skin' makeup," Aislinn muttered.

The whispers grew louder and began pulling at me like invisible threads. They were coming from the woods to our right, where a dark mass of trees seemed to loom closer despite the falling snow. Something was very wrong here. The magic felt ancient and hungry. My mind conjured a horrifying image of a predator that had just woken from a long sleep.

"Vi?" Fiona murmured. She'd noticed my distraction. After a lifetime of friendship, she could read my expressions like the Sunday papers.

I gave her a subtle nod toward the trees. Her eyes narrowed, and I knew she got the message. We barely needed words anymore. We couldn't investigate because the first officer approached us. He had a notepad in hand and suspicion written all over his face. He was young, probably fresh out of training. He had the sort of earnest expression that said he still believed everything could be solved by following proper procedure. Poor bloke had no idea what he was walking into.

"Ladies. Bit of a nasty accident we've got here. Mind telling me what you're doing

standing about in this weather? It doesn't appear as if you were involved." He gestured to Fiona's vehicle.

"Officer," Fiona said, smoothly inserting herself between the policeman and me, "I saw what happened and thought it might help with your accident report." She launched into an elaborate story about black ice and a mysterious lorry that may or may not have existed. She told the tale with such conviction that even I almost believed her.

The whispers were becoming more insistent. Taking advantage of Fiona's distraction, I edged toward the tree line. The magic pulling me forward wasn't anything to be trifled with. It made me think of a record playing off-key. It made my skin prickle with goosebumps that had nothing to do with the cold. Given what had happened, I didn't think we could ignore it.

"Tempus fugit ... momentum est ..." The whispers were clearer now. They were also urgent and compelling. I recognized the phrases from ancient grimoires. Time flies, the moment is here. The question was what it was talking about. I had to know. My feet carried me forward.

I shouldn't have gone alone. That's what any sensible witch would tell you. However, someone had to keep the police occupied. Between Fiona's gift for creative storytelling and Aislinn's concerned mum routine, they had that sorted. Not to mention, I was part phoenix and would regenerate from my ashes should the worst happen. That made me far braver than was wise.

The trees swallowed me like a hungry mouth the second I stepped off the road. Ten steps in, and the accident scene disappeared behind a curtain of snow and branches. The whispers led me deeper. They grew clearer with each step. The woods were unnaturally quiet. I didn't hear any birds or small animals. There was nothing but the soft crunch of snow under my boots and those damned whispers. That could have

been the cold. Yeah, keep telling yourself that .

The magical energy grew stronger as I walked. My head began to spin. It was familiar somehow. Yes, it carried echoes of Fae magic, but that was only a small part of it. This felt old and dark. It also spoke of forgotten rituals and forbidden knowledge. I stumbled to a stop when I came across three more bodies. They were arranged in a perfect triangle. Unlike our friends by the road, these hadn't been hidden. The display seemed ceremonial. There were also strange symbols carved into their exposed skin. The snow around them was pristine and undisturbed. They hadn't been killed there. They'd been placed there by magic rather than carried or dragged in.

"Bloody hell," I breathed as I pulled out my mobile to text Fiona. My fingers shook as I typed. Three more. Ritual arrangement. Get rid of bobby ASAP. And maybe grab that bottle of Winter's Embrace. We might need it.

The scene before me was like something from a dark fairy tale. The bodies lay on beds of frost-covered pine needles. Their positions were too precise to be accidental. The symbols carved into their skin glowed faintly in the dim light. They also pulsed in time with the whispers that still echoed through the trees.

I crouched down to examine the nearest victim. It might have been stupid to go out there alone, but I was careful not to touch anything. The symbols weren't like the others. These were a bizarre mix of ancient runes and what looked like mathematical equations.

One victim appeared to be in his mid-thirties. He was dressed in posh hiking gear that looked brand new. His watch had stopped at precisely midnight. That had to be significant. Ritual magic loved its symbolism. There was also a small tattoo on his wrist. It caught my attention because it was similar to the one on the woman beneath the vehicle on the highway. I saw the entire thing on this victim. It was a complex

sigil. I think I saw it somewhere in Eastern Europe.

I wracked my brain for what I knew about it. "The Binding of the Seven," I murmured when it finally came to me. I traced the air above the tattoo. "He was part of the Old Guard." This wasn't just some random bloke who'd stumbled into supernatural trouble. He was one of us. A magical being and practitioner of the old ways. This wasn't done by whoever killed the guy. This was protective. This guy should have been able to fight off whoever attacked him.

When my mobile buzzed, I realized we had service again. I hadn't even thought about it when I sent my message to Fiona. It was a relief to see her reply. Gadross ETA 30. Keep area clear. DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING. And no, we're not opening the wine yet. Stop asking. A smile spread across my face. I didn't feel so alone anymore.

"Wasn't planning to," I muttered. The urge to trace the symbols was almost overwhelming. Something about them seemed familiar. It was like when you have a word on the tip of your tongue but can't voice it. I turned on the camera in my phone and started snapping pictures of everything. Years of magical training had taught me the value of proper documentation, especially when dealing with potentially lethal runes.

The second victim was older. She looked to be in her sixties. She had silver hair and an aura that spoke of a lifetime of working with magic. Her fingers were stained with various potion ingredients. I'd bet she was a kitchen witch. And judging by the feel of her rings, she was powerful. I could feel the enchantment on each one, though the spells had died with her.

A glint of metal caught my eye. Around her neck was a pendant I recognized. It was the mark of the Hearthstone Guild. This was the guild of kitchen witches devoted to preserving the magic of hearth and home, weaving spells into potions and foods to heal and protect their communities. The pendant looked relatively new, which was

odd. The Guild hadn't admitted anyone in over a decade. Not since...

"Oh, bloody hell," I whispered as the pieces clicked into place. The pendant, the strange resonance in the air that hinted at Fae magic, The Midnight Cellar. It all traced back to a scandal from nearly twenty years ago. A group of kitchen witches tried to harness primal magical forces that should have been left untouched. It had gone about as well as you'd expect.

The third body made my blood run cold. She was young. Barely out of her teens. She was wearing the distinctive robes of a student from Blackwood Academy. It was one of the most prestigious magical schools in Britain. Her robes bore the silver trim of a seventh-year student. Pinned to her collar was the symbol of the Advanced Alchemy Society.

"What were you doing here, love?" I murmured. There were fresh ink stains on her fingers and an experimental potions kit still strapped to her belt. "Wrong place, wrong time? Or were you part of this?"

The symbols carved into their skin formed a pattern when viewed together. It made me think of a complex circuit board designed to channel magical energy. But channel it where? And for what purpose? There were elements from various magical traditions. Celtic knots were intertwined with Egyptian hieroglyphs. Sanskrit mantras were woven through Nordic runes.

The overall pattern was familiar. It resembled the theoretical frameworks for immortality rituals I'd studied during my time at university. This was more complex. Whoever had done this was trying to harvest immortality from others. They were using innocents to pay the prices of eternal life so they could steal it without having to experience the repercussions. The gods were the only beings capable of giving that particular gift. The cost for mortals to try it was too high to pay.

I heard footsteps crunching through the snow and whirled around. A defensive spell was forming on my lips. Fiona and Aislinn appeared through the trees. They both looked grim. They had their hands raised slightly as well. Fiona was no doubt ready to cast. Aislinn looked ready to unleash her elements.

"Police are dealing with the accident victims," Fiona said as she brushed snow from her hair. She scanned the scene with the kind of focused intensity that reminded me why she was usually our leader in situations like this. "We've got maybe ten minutes before they start widening their search area. Please tell me this isn't as bad as I think it is."

"It's worse," I said, gesturing to the bodies. "Look at the arrangement. This wasn't random. Someone knew exactly what they were doing. The symbols, the positioning, and even the timing. It's all part of something bigger. And these aren't ordinary folk. They're practitioners."

"Brilliant," Aislinn muttered. "Just brilliant. Because magical murder is so much better than regular murder."

"That's not even the worst part," I said, pointing to the Guild's pendant. "Remember that scandal with the experimental magic twenty years ago? The one my gran used to warn me about?"

"The one where they tried to use the primal forces of magic?" Aislinn's eyes widened. "But that was shut down. The Guild made sure of it. Half the people involved either disappeared or ended up in St. Mungo's Psychiatric Ward for Magically Induced Madness."

"Well, someone's trying something similar," I said. "And they're using blood magic to speed up the process and avoid the cost to themselves. Look at these symbols. They're designed to harvest magical essence. They're using these people to obtain

immortality and then taking it from them"

"Setting aside the news that there is a magical psych ward, and this is the first I'm hearing of it, I understand the gist of what you're saying. Why do this now?" Fiona asked, though her expression suggested she didn't really want to know.

"If I'm right," I said, "they're trying to create immortality potions on steroids without the cost to them. These equations and the way they're structured makes me think they're trying to distill the essence of magic."

The wind picked up suddenly. It whipped the snow around us in a frenzy. The whispers returned and were louder now: " The old ways return... the price must be paid... "

"Tell me you both heard that," I said, not really hoping for a no.

"Unfortunately," Fiona confirmed. She looked sick to her stomach. "Come on. Help me hide this before Detective Constable Nosy decides to take a nature walk."

I joined her, and our magic wove together to form a formidable glamour. Aislinn kept watch. The concealment spell was complex. We had to hide an entire ritual setup complete with active magical signatures. "Bloody hell," Aislinn whispered suddenly. "The temperature just dropped ten degrees in the last minute."

She was right. The cold had taken on a sharp, aggressive quality that had nothing to do with normal weather. Ice was forming on the trees around us and spreading in patterns that looked suspiciously like the symbols carved into our victims. Fiona pulled out the business card again. The countdown had nearly reached zero. Additional text was appearing beneath the timer. The first phase is complete. The vessels are prepared. The harvest begins at midnight.

"Right," Fiona said decisively. "New plan. We finish the concealment spell, get back to the road, and call Gadross again. This just went from 'magical murder mystery' to 'potentially apocalyptic ritual site', and we're not dealing with that without backup."

"Or wine," I added, which earned a snort from Aislinn.

"We're going to need something stronger than wine," she muttered as she watched the ice spread. "Maybe that vodka we got last Christmas?"

"The one that amplifies your magic but leaves you with the worst magical burnout?" Fiona shook her head. "Let's save that for real emergencies."

"Three dead magical practitioners arranged in a ritual circle isn't an emergency?" I asked as I added the final touches to our concealment spell.

"For us?" Fiona grinned, but it didn't reach her eyes. "This is an average day."

The spell settled over the scene like a blanket. It hid the bodies and supernatural elements from mundie eyes. The symbols faded from view, though I could still feel them pulsing beneath the magical camouflage. I cast a magical marker so we could find the victims again. As we headed back toward the road, I couldn't shake the feeling that we'd stumbled into something much bigger than a few dead bodies in the snow. The magic in the air felt expectant. Like the pause before a thunderclap. The whispers had faded, but their words still echoed in my mind: The old ways return... the price must be paid...

"So," Fiona said as we emerged from the trees, looking perfectly innocent for any watching police officers, "anyone else thinking we should have gone with Aislinn's spa weekend suggestion?"

"Don't," Aislinn warned. "Just don't."

I pulled my coat tighter, trying to ward off a chill that had nothing to do with the weather. "Hey, Fi?"

"Yeah?"

"Remember when you said at least it wasn't demons this time?"

"Yeah?"

"I rather think I might prefer the demons."

The wind picked up, driving the snow harder. In the distance, I swore I could hear laughter that sounded nothing like human amusement. This laughter made me want to run and hide under my bed with a protective circle and my strongest wards. "Next time," Aislinn said in a voice barely audible over the wind, "we're definitely going to that nice spa in Eidothea."

"Speaking of time," Fiona interjected. She pulled out the business card again. The countdown had reached zero. New text was flowing across the surface like mercury.

"The Midnight Cellar welcomes worthy seekers. The path opens at the witching hour." Below that, coordinates began to appear one number at a time. It was some sort of macabre treasure map.

"Those coordinates," I said, peering over her shoulder. "They're for somewhere in the South Downs. There's an old network of wine cellars there, dating back to..."

"Let me guess," Fiona sighed. "The same period as our friendly neighborhood immortality-seeking alchemists? "

"Got it in one."

The card shimmered again, revealing one final message: The price must be paid.

Brilliant. Just bloody brilliant. The cryptic invitation was almost certainly a trap. But then again, when had that ever stopped us before? "Well," I said, "at least we brought that bottle of Winter's Embrace with us."

"Yeah," Fiona agreed as she tucked the card away. The whispers in the woods had faded to a soft murmur. Their promise lingered in the air like frost. Whatever we'd stumbled into was far from over.

CHAPTER 4

AISLINN

I absolutely hate it when Fiona's right. Standing in the freezing cold, watching mundane police officers examine what I knew was far from a mundane crime scene was brutal. My thoughts drifted to my warm, cozy home where Argies was probably trying to convince Kalli that pizza wasn't an appropriate breakfast food. How had our relaxing wine-tasting weekend turned into this mess?

"Ma'am?" The young officer's voice pulled me from my musings. "Could you please describe again what you saw?"

I put on my best concerned-mum face. "Of course, Constable. We were driving along when the weather turned absolutely dreadful. That's when we noticed the accident ahead."

Constable Peterson, according to his badge, scribbled in his notepad while I told him everything that had happened. Fiona and Violet added details here and there as well. My heart skipped a beat when I recognized the subtle shimmer in the air around them. Violet was weaving a spell. Knowing her it was a mild suggestion that would encourage him not to look too deeply into the death .

"And the bodies? Did you notice anything... unusual about them?" Peterson's hesitation made me wonder if he'd sensed something off about the scene. Even if his mundane mind couldn't quite process what it was seeing, he had some suspicions.

"I was only aware of the one victim?" I kept my voice steady, channeling every ounce of motherly concern I could muster. "It was rather dark, and the snow made it difficult to see much of anything clearly. Were more seriously injured?"

Peterson looked over his shoulder. "The couple in the first car claim the reason they swerved into oncoming traffic was because they saw a man in the road. And it wasn't the woman under the vehicle."

"That's terrible but I don't know anything about a man being in the road," I said honestly. I had no idea who he had been, or what had killed him.

Violet caught my eye from where she stood, examining the body under the car. Fiona had positioned herself between Peterson and the rapidly forming magical symbols in the snow. The corrupted magic was spreading faster now and creating patterns that no mundane police officer should see.

My phone buzzed. Gadross had finally gotten through to us. "Excuse me," I said to Peterson as I held up the device, "I need to take this. It's about my daughter." He nodded and shifted his attention to Fiona. The mom card worked every time.

I stepped away, careful to stay within sight but out of earshot. "Gadross, please tell me you're close."

"I'm ten minutes out," he replied. His voice crackled as if there was significant interference. Was it the weather? Or something else? "The magical disruption is making travel difficult. What exactly are we dealing with?"

I filled him in quickly about the bodies, the symbols, and everything we'd learned. "And there's some sort of countdown involved. The magic feels malevolent, Gadross. Like someone's taken perfectly good spells and twisted them into something they were never meant to be."

"Do not, I repeat, DO NOT let the mundane authorities remove those bodies," Gadross instructed. "The magical signature you're describing matches a series of similar incidents we've been tracking. If it's the same perpetrator..."

"Let me guess. It's going to be a massive headache for everyone involved?" I finished for him.

"Worse. The last time we encountered something like this, three agents ended up shades. It took me weeks to finally find their bodies and put them to rest so they could move to the other side. It was not pretty." I shuddered at the mention of shades. Static crackled across the line, and Gadross's voice became urgent.

"Aislinn, listen carefully. If your phones start acting up worse than this, if the temperature suddenly drops enough to crystalize your breath get out. Don't wait, don't investigate. Look for people moving too smoothly. They'll look like they're floating. If you see dark veins through pale skin, that's confirmation. I'm going as fast as I can, and-" The line crackled again. "Dammit. Just keep the others safe until I get there. And whatever you do, don't look them in the-" The call dropped.

A sudden gust of wind carried the smell of winter roses and something else. It was metallic and made my Fae blood stir uneasily. The temperature was dropping and I swear my breath was going to crystalize. That could have been my active imagination given Gadross's warning. The symbols around the bodies were starting to glow with a faint purple light that the mundane constables somehow hadn't noticed yet.

I rejoined Fiona and Violet. The young officer was still taking notes. His writing had slowed, and his eyes had taken on a slightly glazed look. Fiona's suggestion spell was working its magic. However, the growing cold seemed to be making it harder for her to maintain it.

"The symbols match," Violet whispered as she pretended to examine her now-dead

phone. "All three sites have the same basic runic structure. It's like they're pieces of a larger pattern." She rubbed her arms against the increasingly unnatural chill.

"Three sites?" Peterson perked up when he heard that. His pen was poised above his tablet.

"Three car crash sites," Fiona smoothly interjected. "We passed two other accidents on our way here. The weather's absolutely treacherous." She gestured to the snow and ice all around us.

I felt a familiar tingle at the base of my skull. My Fae senses were warning me of approaching danger. The magic in the air was becoming more concentrated. My phone screen went completely black, and the symbols around the bodies began to pulse in sync. It was like a heartbeat made of corrupted magic. Every electronic device within thirty feet was failing. That included dashboard cameras, phones, and even Peterson's digital watch.

My wandering gaze caught on the wrist of the body under the car. While Peterson was distracted by both Fiona's creative storytelling and his malfunctioning equipment, I crouched down for a closer look. There, partially hidden by a sleeve, was a tattoo. I recognized it from my studies of ancient runes. She had a binding rune on her arm. However, this wasn't just any binding rune. It was specifically designed to contain a connection. And it was fresh, still glistening like it had been applied moments before death.

"Fi," I murmured, fighting to keep my voice steady as I noticed the dead person's skin becoming unnaturally translucent, "we've got a problem. We need to get Peterson out of here. Now."

Fiona glanced my way, keeping her expression neutral even as her magic probed the area around the body. "Well, that's just fantastic," she muttered. "We didn't have

enough problems already."

The wind picked up again, driving needles of ice-cold snow into our faces. The magical energy was building to a crescendo and giving me a headache. Whatever was happening, it involved old magic. Something told me it predated modern magical theory.

"Ladies," Peterson said, closing his notebook, "I think we have everything we need for now. Though we may need to contact you for further questions."

"Of course," Fiona smiled, slipping him a business card that I knew would become conveniently illegible the moment he tried to read it later. "We're happy to help."

As soon as Peterson walked away, Violet dropped to her knees beside the body. "This is mental," she whispered, tracing the air above the binding mark. "These markings aren't just for creating shades. They're harvesting the death energy, too."

My stomach turned. The metallic taste in my mouth grew stronger, and the air felt thick with despair. "That's not possible. The energy from a forced shade creation is too volatile, too corrupted to contain." The words felt ashy in my mouth. I'd seen what happened when someone tried to control too many shades at once. Their mind fractured, and their humanity eroded with each new binding.

"Unless," Fiona mused, her breath visible in the freezing air, "you had some way to stabilize it. Something that could handle that kind of raw power without shattering."

"Like Fae wine cellars?" Violet suggested.

The pieces clicked together with a sickening thud. The Midnight Cellar, the corrupted magic that felt like twisted Fae energy, the bodies with their strange runes. It was all connected. Someone was trying to use the natural properties of Fae wine cellars to

stabilize the volatile energy of mass shade creation. To bind more souls than should ever be possible.

A familiar black SUV pulled up. Its windows were tinted against more than just sunlight. Gadross stepped out, looking as impeccably dressed as ever despite the weather. His expression, however, made me wish for something stronger than the Winter's Embrace waiting in the car.

"Right then," he said as he approached us, "show me what we're dealing with."

We led him to the body under the car first, then described what we'd found in the woods. His face grew progressively darker with each detail. When we showed him the business card with its mysterious countdown and coordinates, he actually swore. Something I'd never heard him do before.

"This is worse than we thought," he said, pulling out what looked like a normal mobile phone but was actually a highly sophisticated magical scanner. That was new thanks to Phi, one of the six Twisted Sisters. She'd created the first magical tech devices and had shared them with the paranormal police a couple of weeks ago. The thing would change investigations for the better.

The screen flickered ominously and Gadross held it away from his body as if it might explode on him. "I have to thank you again for getting me one of these. It's proven invaluable and it's the only reason I can tell you the energy signatures match a series of similar incidents across Europe. Someone is systematically creating shades, but not just any shades. They're using the death moment to forge stronger connections, binding the souls before they even realize they're dead. "

"But why?" I asked, though the cold pit in my stomach already knew the answer.

"Power," Gadross replied grimly. "An army of perfectly controlled shades, bound so

tightly they can't even attempt resistance. It's the kind of force that could change the power structure of the magical world."

"Bloody hell," Violet muttered. "They're trying to become gods."

The wind howled around us, and for a moment, I swore I could hear screaming in it. I'm not talking about the warm, friendly kind. This was the sort that makes your soul want to curl up and hide. "We need to get to those coordinates," Fiona said, already pulling out her car keys. "Whatever they're planning, it's happening tonight."

"Not so fast," Gadross held up a hand. "This is now officially beyond what I can ignore. I'll have a team here in twenty minutes to secure the scene and remove the bodies before the mundane authorities can examine them too closely. We can leave after that."

"With all due respect," I said, channeling my best 'don't argue with mum' voice, "we can't wait for that to happen. We have the magical expertise, and quite frankly, your teams tend to be about as subtle as a banshee at a funeral."

Gadross looked like he wanted to argue, but months of watching us succeed against all odds had taught him better. "Fine," he sighed. "But I'm going with you. And you need to follow my lead. And for the love of all things magical, try not to blow anything up this time. It draws too much attention."

"That was one time!" Fiona protested.

"I have incident reports suggesting otherwise," Gadross replied dryly. "Is your sensitivity to death magic picking up anything useful?" He asked Violet.

Her head jerked and she shook her head. "I don't have a sensitivity to that."

Gadross's sigh sounded as if he was suffering greatly. "The phoenix in you does. It might be diluted but you should be able to pick up on more than others."

"Oh. I had no idea," Violet admitted. "I'll give it a try." She closed her eyes and went to work. She opened her eyes a few silent minutes later. "I can't pick up a whole lot, but they are definitely creating shades and building toward something big. The energy patterns remind me of what happens before a major magical convergence."

"Like the one that nearly destroyed London a hundred years before?" Gadross asked.

"I'm not sure. I wasn't alive then. My gut says it's going to be bigger," she replied. "This isn't just about creating shades. They're trying to create something worse."

Gadross pulled out his phone. We were all fighting against the increasing interference. "I'm calling in every available agent. If this is heading where I think it is, we're going to need all the help we can get."

Fiona yelped and pulled the business card from her pocket. It had suddenly burst into purple flames. We watched as new text appeared: "The gathering begins. The vessels are prepared. At midnight, the old ways return."

"Well," Fiona said with forced cheerfulness, "at least we know when everything's going to go to hell. Saves us having to guess."

"We need to move," Violet said, already heading for Fiona's car. "Those coordinates point to a network of old wine cellars in the South Downs. It'll take us at least an hour to get there, and that's assuming the weather doesn't get worse."

"It'll get worse," I said grimly. The metallic taste in my mouth was getting stronger. "Whatever they're doing, it's affecting the natural order of things. Magic this dark and corrupted has consequences. "

"Aislinn's right about that," Gadross said as he straightened his already impeccable tie. "You three head for the coordinates. I'll coordinate with my team here and meet you there. And please, try to be subtle for once."

"Us? Subtle?" Fiona grinned as she twirled her car keys. "Have you met us?"

"That's what I'm afraid of," Gadross admitted ruefully.

As we headed for the car, I sent a quick text to Argies before my phone died completely. We might be late. Found some bodies. Investigating possible apocalyptic shade ritual. Don't let Kalli have pizza for breakfast.

His reply came just before Fiona took off down the road. Again? Be careful. Love you. PS: Too late on the pizza.

I smiled despite everything. Sometimes, it was the little bits of normalcy that kept you grounded when everything else was going mad. Even if that normalcy involved our daughter having pizza for breakfast while her parents dealt with magical mayhem.

The snow was falling harder now. Although, it wasn't natural snow anymore. Each flake carried traces of that corrupted magic. They were also forming patterns in the air. It was difficult to get a good look at them, but I thought they were the same binding symbols we'd seen on the bodies.

"Fi," I said as I broke the silence, "remember when you said at least it wasn't demons this time?"

"Yeah?" She looked up at me in the rearview mirror.

I grimaced and put a hand over my upset stomach. "I think we might be dealing with

something worse."

"How much worse are we talking?" Fiona asked. Her knuckles were white on the steering wheel as she navigated through the increasingly treacherous weather. "Because I distinctly remember the last demon encounter involved actual hellfire and things trying to eat us."

"At least demons play by rules," I said as I tried to ignore how the temperature in the car was dropping despite the heater running full blast. "Ancient, twisted rules, yeah, but they dictate their behavior. Whoever's doing this is trying to break the fundamental laws of death itself. You don't mess with those without consequences. They've got to have some serious magical chompers."

"Or a big set of brass balls," Fiona countered.

"Lovely," Violet muttered from the passenger seat. "Just what I wanted to hear. Any other cheerful observations?"

A ghostly whisper brushed past my ears, carrying echoes of screams that hadn't happened yet. "Yeah," I said grimly. "The killing is going to continue."

"Bloody hell," Fiona swore.

The wind howled as if it was mocking us. It also carried with it the promise of chaos to come. Just another normal day in the life of the Backside of Forty crew. At least we had that bottle of Winter's Embrace for after. Assuming, of course, we survived whatever was waiting for us in those ancient wine cellars.

Fiona's car struggled through the worsening weather. The windscreen wipers were working overtime against the magical snow. It was determined to form unsettling runes all around us, even as it was swept away. Did the perpetrator know we were

coming? My gut twisted into knots. We would be driving into a trap if that was the case.

"Anyone else notice how the temperature keeps dropping?" Violet asked. She was examining photographs of the runes on her phone. "It's well below freezing now, and my warming charms aren't doing jack."

"That's because the unnatural cold is following us," I explained, watching frost patterns spread across the passenger window.

"This is shade cold," Violet replied. "It's seeping into my bones and trying to freeze my soul. Magically sensitive people feel it worst."

"I was trying not to think about the discomfort," Fiona muttered as she squinted through the windscreen. "Thanks for that."

"Well," I pretended to think about it, "at least we know we aren't losing our minds."

"That's debatable," Fiona teased. "We lost it months ago when we were stuck in those caves with the giant spiders."

My phone buzzed with a message from Argies. Be safe, love. Kalli says your special job better not make you miss story time. She's got the dragon book ready.

Tell her she'll get extra cookies if she's good for daddy , I typed quickly before the screen died again. And keep her away from my workroom this time !

"Your husband's too soft on her," Violet chuckled as I told her what he said. "Remember Greece last summer? He was worse than we were about sneaking into those ruins."

"Don't remind me," I groaned. "I thought he was going to expose us to the mundies."

"To be fair," Fiona called from the driver's seat, "at least he didn't start a food fight in the school cafeteria like someone I know."

"That wasn't my fault!" Violet protested from the back seat. "I told you I was dared to put the firecracker in Tommy Miller's pudding. How was I supposed to know he'd throw it at Jessica?"

"Because he was a teenage boy, and she'd just dumped him?" Fiona snickered. "Grams insists that the best part was Ms. Harrison's face when the custard hit her new blazer."

"I had detention for a month! And my mum grounded me until Christmas," Violet whined.

"You said it was worth it," Fiona reminded her. "You got back at the stupidest boy in class." We all laughed at what was important to teenagers. That was a lifetime ago. If only life were that easy now.

Our laughter died as we passed another accident site. This one showed the same magical signatures we'd seen before. It even had the purple glow, the binding symbols, and the feeling of malevolent magic in the air. I sent another message to Gadross letting him know about the new accident.

"We should stop," Violet said, already reaching for her door handle.

"No time," Fiona replied, though I could tell it pained her to drive past. "Whatever's happening at midnight, we need to be there to stop it. Gadross's team can handle this scene."

"I've already sent him an alert," I told them. I had to admit it felt wrong to leave potential victims behind. Sometimes being a responsible adult meant making difficult choices.

"Speaking of midnight," I said as I checked my watch, "we've got less than two hours. Anyone want to place bets on what we'll find in those wine cellars?"

"Ten quid says it's a cult," Violet offered.

"That's a sucker bet and you know it," Fiona snorted. "It's always a cult. Twenty says they're wearing dramatic robes and chanting in Latin."

"Thirty says we find out someone we know is involved," I added. "That's usually how these things go."

"Oh god," Violet suddenly sat up straighter. "You don't think... I mean, Elowen seemed nice enough, but..."

"It could be her. The Fae aren't exactly known for their straightforward dealings," I finished. "That doesn't apply to all of them, mind you. Argies's brother is making drastic changes that will minimize the coup by Vodor ever happening again." Argies had helped his brother start reestablishing the Fae courts. At one point my family belonged to the Autumn court. I had no idea what life was like under that system because Vodor had abolished it long before I was born. When we went back for our next visit, I would get my first glimpse of what that would be like.

Fiona shook her head. "My money's on someone else. Did you notice how that young officer kept asking about unusual details? And his notepad – I caught a glimpse of what he was writing. Those weren't normal police notes."

"Bloody hell," I muttered. "Peterson's involved?"

"It would explain why he was so difficult to manipulate," Violet mused. "And how he got there so quickly after the accident."

The car's heater was losing its battle against the supernatural cold. Frost was creeping across the interior now and forming those same disturbing binding patterns we'd seen at the crime scenes. I pressed my hand against the window, pushing back with my elemental magic. The frost retreated slowly. It was reluctant. Like something was fighting to keep it there.

"Anyone else wondering about The Midnight Cellar?" I asked. "If it was shut down decades ago, how is it suddenly active again?"

"And why wine cellars?" Fiona added. "I mean, I get that they're good for storing magical energy, but there have to be easier ways to bind shades."

"Not if you're working with mass quantities," Violet said thoughtfully. "Think about it. Fae wine cellars are naturally equipped to handle and stabilize various magical energies. They're like magical batteries, but better because they can actually refine and enhance the power they store."

"Like aging wine," I realized. "The longer it sits, the more potent it becomes."

"Exactly. And if someone figured out how to modify those storage properties..." Violet's words trailed off.

"They could use them to strengthen the bonds between controller and shade," Fiona finished. "Bloody hell, that's clever. Evil, but clever."

My watch suddenly frosted over. The hands spun wildly before stopping at midnight. A moment later, Gadross's voice crackled through the car's radio. "More bodies were found with the same bindings. Get to those coordinates FAST."

Fiona pressed down harder on the accelerator. Magic was shimmering around the car in kaleidoscopic patterns. Violet was reinforcing the protective spells that were keeping us on the road.

"Anyone else feeling like we're driving straight into a trap?" I asked, watching the shadows between the trees grow darker and more menacing. I swear they wanted to swallow our souls.

"Oh, it's definitely a trap," Fiona agreed cheerfully. "The question is, are we walking into their trap, or are they walking into ours?"

"Since when do we have a trap?" Violet asked.

"We don't. But they don't know that." Fiona sounded so confident that I almost believed her.

"Brilliant plan," I drawled. "Really inspiring confidence here, Fi."

"Hey, my plans usually work out... eventually." She lifted a shoulder.

"Like that time in Egypt?"

"We saved the city, didn't we?"

The banter helped ease the tension. We all knew what we were heading into was serious. "You know what really bothers me?" Violet said after a moment. "The timing. Why now? Why these specific victims? There has to be a pattern we're missing."

"The winter solstice is coming up," I pointed out. "Magic tends to peak around then. "

"And it's a blood moon this year," Fiona added. "Perfect time for binding rituals."

"Plus, there's an old prophecy about the alignment of the spheres," Violet mused. "It talks about the convergence of powers during the darkest night." We all fell silent, considering the implications. If someone was trying to create an army of shades during a solstice blood moon while the spheres were aligned... well, that was either going to end in godhood or catastrophe. Knowing our luck, probably both.

The coordinates led us deeper into the South Downs. Fiona drove down roads that became progressively narrower and more treacherous. The snow was falling so heavily that it was like driving through a tunnel of binding runes. Finally, we turned onto what might have been a driveway in better weather. Now it was just a slightly flatter patch of white leading into darkness. Ancient trees loomed on either side. Their branches were heavy with unnatural snow.

"Well," Fiona said as she parked the car, "this looks properly ominous."

"Should we wait for Gadross?" Violet asked as she checked her protection charms.

A distant sound caught my attention. It was something between a scream and a whisper that carried on the winter wind through the forest. It was the sound that only the recently dead should make. I shouldn't be able to hear it at all. It made my skin crawl with the proximity of so many trapped souls.

"No time," I said as I reached for the door handle. "Whatever's happening down there, it's starting now."

"Right then," Fiona grinned. The familiar light of adventure was in her eyes. "Let's go crash an apocalyptic shade-raising ritual and show them not to mess with the Backside of Forty."

"Sometimes I really hate that name," I muttered as we stepped out into the magical storm.

"You love it, and you know it," Fiona replied. "Besides, we've earned it. Not many people our age regularly save the world from supernatural disasters."

"Not many people our age regularly need to," Violet pointed out.

I shook my head. "The need is there. They choose to ignore the obvious and leave the heavy lifting for us or our friends."

We made our way toward what looked like an old stone building. It was half-buried in the hillside. The magical energy was practically visible now. Purple light pulsed from behind frosted windows. The wind carried fragments of chanting. It was Latin, just as Fiona had predicted.

"I believe you owe me twenty quid," she whispered as we crept closer.

"Let's survive this first," I replied. "Then we can settle all bets."

"Deal. Ready?" Fiona asked as she paused with her hand on the ancient wooden door.

"No," Violet and I replied in unison.

"Perfect," she grinned. "Let's go save the world. Again."

The door creaked open, revealing stone steps descending into purple-lit darkness. As we started down, my heart stopped along with my watch. It felt like we were freezing solid. The door closed behind us with an ominous thud. We descended into whatever chaos awaited below. Something told me we were going to need more than one bottle of Winter's Embrace when this was all over.

CHAPTER 5

FIONA

The staircase felt endless. Each step took us deeper into what had to be the most cliché evil lair I'd ever seen. And trust me, I've seen plenty. Purple light pulsed against the weathered stone walls. As you guessed, it cast eerie shadows that seemed to move of their own accord. Why does all evil magic involve shadows? Likely because there were few things scarier. They'd been used so much, I barely gave them a second look.

"Ten quid says there's a pentagram," I whispered to Aislinn, trying to ignore how the temperature kept dropping.

"Twenty says it's drawn in blood," she muttered back, her breath visible in the unnatural cold. The banter helped remind me we'd been through enough to be able to predict what we would see. It would take away the fear when we eventually reached the bottom.

"You're both terrible," Violet hissed, but I could hear the smile in her voice. Sometimes, gallows humor was all that kept us sane in situations like this.

The narrow staircase opened suddenly into a chamber that would have made any wine connoisseur weep. The space was massive. It was easily the size of a small cathedral. It had vaulted ceilings held up by ancient stone pillars. Rows of enormous oak barrels lined the walls. Their surfaces were carved with intricate Fae runes that stored and enhanced magical energies. Now, they pulsed with that sickly purple light,

corrupted by whatever ritual was taking place. The air was thick with the scent of winter roses and something metallic that made my stomach turn. And speaking of rituals. I won the bet. Again.

At least thirty robed figures stood in a circle around an enormous pentagram that dominated the center of the chamber. It wasn't drawn in blood. I almost smiled when Aislinn grumbled something about owing me money. Rather, it was carved deep into the stone floor and filled with what looked like liquid darkness. It flowed against gravity and formed shapes I couldn't make out. The chanting grew louder as we crept closer.

Aislinn pulled me into the shadows cast by the massive wine barrels. "That's not Latin," Aislinn breathed. "It's something else."

"And much older," Violet agreed. "It's pre-Roman. It might even be pre-Celtic. The cadence reminds me of those texts we found in that tomb in Wales."

I was about to suggest we call Gadross for backup when one of the robed figures turned slightly. There was a familiar notebook tucked into his belt. "Peterson," I mouthed to the others. Well, that confirmed our suspicions about the overly curious constable. His hood was pushed back just enough to reveal lips moving in the ancient chant. His skin was showing the telltale pale translucence of someone who'd been working with death magic.

The chanting reached a crescendo and the liquid darkness in the pentagram began to swirl like a whirlpool of concentrated shadow. Again with the damn shadows. Ghostly faces emerged from the surface. They were twisted in eternal screams. We were looking at the souls of the dead. They'd been bound and corrupted. And now they were being forced into servitude. The temperature dropped even further. Ice crystals formed in the air around us. Each one contained tiny reflections of the trapped spirits.

Behind the circle of chanters, I spotted something that made my blood run colder than the supernatural chill in the air. Three bodies lay on stone altars. Their skin was marked with the same binding runes we'd seen at the accident sites. Purple energy pulsed through the markings in time with the chanting. Dark veins were spreading across their pale flesh like ink through water.

"Now?" Violet asked. Her hands were already glowing with protective magic.

"Now," I agreed and stepped out from behind the barrels. "Evening, folks! Lovely weather for a bit of illegal soul binding, isn't it?"

The chanting stuttered to a halt as thirty hooded heads turned our way. I cast a protective bubble around us. At the same moment the leader, who was taller than the rest and wearing robes trimmed with purple (because this guy was a walking cliché), raised his hands. Purple energy crackled around his fingers like dark lightning. "Kill them," he commanded in a voice that seemed to echo from all around us.

"Really?" I called out as I deflected the first blast of corrupted magic with a shield spell that turned the air blue with force. "That's the best you've got? 'Kill them'? No monologuing about your grand plan? No villainous exposition?"

"Fi," Aislinn warned as she threw up a barrier of pure energy that sparkled like frost in sunlight, "maybe don't antagonize the evil cultists?"

"Where's the fun in that?" Snark was how I dealt with assholes in situations like this. As an added bonus, it usually threw the bad guys off.

I lobbed magical bombs like I was playing fetch with an enthusiastic dog. Except these toys went boom, and the recipients weren't nearly as cute. The resulting chaos sent robed figures scrambling in every direction. Their dignified cult aesthetic was completely ruined as they tripped over each other like drunk penguins at last call.

Most of them scattered faster than roaches when the kitchen light flicks on. Guess Evil Overlord School skipped combat training day. There's always that group that didn't get the 'run-away' memo, and about ten of them stood their ground. That illustrious group included Peterson and Mr. Purple-Robes-Are-My-Personality.

They hurled spells at us with all the precision of a toddler food fight. Purple lightning crackled, black energy sizzled, and darkness writhed through the air like angry snakes. Our defensive spells met their attacks in a light show that would have given a rave DJ an inferiority complex. The chamber lit up like a disco ball in hell. It was all strobing purples and blacks with occasional bursts of 'oh shit, that almost hit me' blue.

"Is this really the best the forces of evil can do?" I shouted as I ducked another wildly aimed spell. "I've seen better coordination at a headless horseman party!"

I ducked and rolled as a blast of shadow magic sizzled past my head. It left a trail of frost in the air. The stone where I'd been standing crystallized and shattered. Damn that was close. I couldn't dwell on that when two cultists rushed me. Their hands were wreathed in that sickly purple energy. I reached for my magic and let it flow through me like wind through trees. The air around me began to shimmer with power.

"Hey, discount Voldemorts!" I called out as my spell gathered force between my palms. "Let's see how you handle this!"

I released the built-up energy in a wave that sent them flying into a rack of wine barrels. The ancient wood splintered, which released spurts of something that definitely wasn't wine. It moved like liquid shadows and smelled of decay.

Violet's phoenix-enhanced magic blazed golden as she used her fire to disrupt the binding circle. Her flames cut through the corrupted energies like sunlight through fog. The trapped souls rose from the liquid darkness like a tornado of spectral energy.

Their screams of rage shook dust from the ancient ceiling. The temperature fluctuated wildly as they swirled around the chamber. Ice formed and melted in rapid succession.

"The vessels!" the leader shouted, gesturing toward the bodies on the altars. "Protect the vessels!"

I ducked behind a fallen barrel as another blast of dark magic ripped through the air. "Anyone else wondering why the vessels are important?"

"Less wondering," Aislinn grunted as she deflected another attack with a wall of crystalline energy, "more fighting!"

She was right. I focused my power. I allowed it to build like a storm about to break. "Hey, Mr. Purple Robes!" I called out, gathering force between my hands until the air itself seemed to vibrate. "Catch!"

I unleashed a wave of pure force that sent several cultists flying into the walls. Their leader stood firm, though. He simply lifted his hands to catch my spell. The energy twisted in his grasp and was quickly corrupted into something darker. He rebounded with purple lightning, but Violet was ready. Her shield spell flared golden and absorbed the corrupted force in a display that lit up the entire chamber.

Peterson chose that moment to make his move. He slipped behind a pillar and emerged with hands full of what looked like black fire. He hurled it at Aislinn, who responded with a blast of water so cold it turned the ebony flames to ice. The frozen fragments hit the ground and shattered. Each piece contained tiny screaming faces.

"You cannot stop what has been set in motion," the leader intoned as he gathered power. His hood had fallen back slightly. I caught a glimpse of a neck that was so pale it was almost translucent. His face remained in shadow. It was hidden by magic

older than any we'd encountered before.

"Watch us," Aislinn snarled. She stepped forward. Her Fae heritage was evident in the way she wielded the elements.

The leader actually laughed at us. The sound was like breaking glass. "Your power is nothing compared to what we will achieve. The old ways will return. The barriers between life and death will?—"

"Oh, shut up," I interrupted and used my magic to fling a barrel at his head. He dodged it. But not quickly enough to avoid Violet's binding spell. Golden chains of energy wrapped around him. A snarl of rage echoed from beneath his shadowed hood.

"Now!" Aislinn shouted.

We combined our magic. My nicotisa power, Aislinn's elements, and Violet's magic and phoenix fire. We channeled it into a single devastating attack. Our combined power broke through the leader's defenses. He screamed as our magic struck him. His robes smoldered with golden flames as he staggered backward. I caught glimpses of ritual implements and ancient scrolls tucked into his belt. "This isn't over," he spat in a voice distorted with power. "The vessels are already prepared. At midnight—" We increased the energy we funneled into our spell. An explosion cut off his words, filling the chamber with light bright enough to blind us. When it cleared, the leader was gone. Along with Peterson and the other cultists. The bodies on the altars had vanished, too. Frost patterns and the lingering scent of winter roses were all that was left behind.

"Why do they always have to be so dramatic about leaving?" I muttered as I leaned against a barrel. The adrenaline began to fade. My hands were shaking slightly from channeling so much power.

"Says the woman who asked for villainous exposition," Violet teased in a voice that was tight with exhaustion.

I straightened up, eyeing the corrupted barrels. "We should strip this place. Take out all the dark magic before they can use it again. Like magical pest control, but for evil."

"Right now?" Aislinn raised an eyebrow. "You can barely stand."

"I'm standing just fine, thank you very much." I demonstrated by pushing off the barrel and promptly stumbling. "Okay, maybe I'm a little wobbly. But come on. When do we ever get the chance to be proactive instead of reactive?"

"Usually right before everything goes spectacularly wrong," Violet pointed out.

"Five minutes," I insisted. "Quick cleansing, in and out. No muss, no fuss, no more evil wine cellar of doom."

Aislinn sighed that special sigh she reserved for when I was both right and annoying about it. "Fine. But we do this fast."

We formed a triangle, each taking a point around the chamber. We'd done enough cleansing spells to write a book about them (not that anyone would read it). This was different. The corrupted magic had seeped into every stone and every barrel, like mold in a bathroom. It was persistent and would be really annoying to get rid of.

"On three," I called out. "One... two..."

We raised our hands in sync. Violet's magic combined with mine, and it met Aislinn's elemental magic in the center of the room. The energies twisted together. They formed a spiral of light that expanded outward like a shock wave. We were the

first ones to successfully combine witchcraft with Fae magic. And we'd only been able to do it because I had shared my nicotisa powers with them. I could only do that with Aislinn because I was part Fae as well. We'd since taught the Six Twisted Sisters how to combine both sides of their heritage to create a more powerful force.

Where our spell touched, the purple glow retreated. It hissed like angry cats being sprayed with water. The barrels creaked and groaned as the dark magic was forcibly extracted. One actually exploded, showering us with fragments of wood and the last remnants of whatever evil juice they'd been storing. Gross. It was going to take a Silkwood shower to get clean after this.

"Next time," Violet panted, "let's check for exploding barrels before we start."

"Where's the fun in that?" I grinned, even as I wiped something suspiciously slimy off my jacket. "Besides, look. No more creepy purple light."

The cellar did look better. It was still creepy as hell. But in a normal abandoned-wine-cellar way rather than an evil-cult-headquarters way. The air felt cleaner, too. Although, that might have been because we'd just magically pressure-washed the place.

"That's going to leave a mark," Aislinn muttered, looking at the scorch marks our cleansing had left on the floor.

My phone buzzed, interrupting what would have been a brilliant comeback about home improvement. The message was from Gadross. Need you at the morgue. More bodies. Must contain situation before mundane authorities arrive. Hurry.

I showed the message to the others. "Well," Aislinn sighed as she rubbed her arms where frost still clung to her jacket, "at least we won't have to worry about finding parking?"

"Small mercies," I agreed, giving the now-cleansed barrels one last suspicious look. "Think they have coffee at the morgue? I could murder a latte right now."

"Terrible choice of words," Violet said as we climbed the stairs. Her golden magic still flickered around her hands, refusing to settle after channeling so much power. "Also, you still owe me ten quid from the robes bet."

"I'll buy you a coffee instead?"

"Deal."

Behind us, the cellar stood clean and quiet, free of its purple corruption but still holding echoes of what had happened there. The leader's words about vessels echoed in my mind, mixing with memories of those bodies on the altar. We'd stopped whatever was coming at midnight and made sure they couldn't use this place again. That didn't mean they wouldn't regroup and try somewhere else. I had a feeling we were going to need something stronger than coffee to deal with it. The morgue was going to be fun. At least we still had that bottle of Winter's Embrace waiting in the car. Something told me we'd need it before this night was over.

CHAPTER 6

FIONA

The medical examiner's office looked exactly like you'd expect. It was sterile, cold, and about as welcoming as my mother-in-law on a bad day. Which, given that she's a socialite with a perpetual stick up her ass, was saying something. The gray concrete building loomed against the winter sky like a tombstone. I supposed that was fitting given what went on inside. We'd left the wine cellars after finding more questions than answers. Now here we were. Trying to piece together this mess before more bodies dropped.

The wind carried the scent of dying leaves and something that made my Fae senses tingle with warning. Magic lingered in the air. It was faint but unmistakable. Like the metallic taste before a storm. My power responded to the residual energy and stirred restlessly under my skin.

"I still think we should have tried to follow those assholes," Violet muttered as we approached the entrance. "We might have been able to lock onto their energy signature. This feels like a waste of time when we could be tracking them down and kicking their asses. "

The sentiment was pure Violet. She was all action with minimal planning. Usually, I'd be right there with her, ready to crash through whatever stood in our way. But something about those bodies in the wine cellar had set off every warning bell I had. And I had a lot of them, courtesy of solving countless supernatural cases.

"Knowledge is power," I reminded her, channeling my inner Grams. My grandmother had drilled that into my head often enough. Usually, after I'd done something monumentally stupid, and called her to complain. "Besides, we need to know what we're dealing with before we go charging into a trap. They'll be expecting us this time. We won't scare them off as easily."

"Since when are you the voice of reason?" Aislinn asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Since we found ritualistic murder victims with creepy runes carved into them. I may be reckless, but I'm not stupid. At least not most days," I smirked at her, though the expression felt forced. The weight of what we'd encountered in those wine cellars still sat heavy in my gut. The bodies had been bad enough, but the magic lingering around them had been worse.

Gadross was waiting for us in the lobby. He looked decidedly out of place and completely unbothered by that fact. The dwarf's perfectly tailored charcoal suit couldn't quite disguise his stocky frame. It probably cost more than my monthly mortgage. His meticulously groomed beard – now streaked with more silver than auburn – caught more than a few curious glances from passing staff. Not that he seemed to notice or care.

He was rolling something between his fingers. It was a small copper disk that seemed to shift and shimmer in the fluorescent lighting. Its surface was etched with spiraling patterns. Power emanated from it in subtle waves. They were barely noticeable unless you knew what to look for. Which, unfortunately for my curiosity, I did.

"You're late," he said by way of greeting. His dark eyes held that keen intelligence that always made me wonder just how much he really knew about any given situation. In my experience, the answer was usually 'way more than he was telling us'.

"Traffic was hell," I replied, which wasn't entirely a lie. There had been traffic. "We had to cleanse the cellar so the cult can't use it again."

"Mhmm," he hummed, clearly not buying it. "I've already laid the groundwork with the staff. Amazing what a little Third Age artificing can do. The receptionist thinks we're from the NHS, investigating a possible new strain of influenza. The security guard believes we're with MI5's special taskforce. The custodian is convinced we're making a documentary for the BBC about modern mortuary practices."

The receptionist barely glanced up as we passed. Her eyes glazed over like she'd had one too many tequila shots at happy hour. At least I knew why. Gadross's relic was working its magic and spreading through the building like ink in water.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" he said, catching my scrutiny of the disk. "The copper holds the magical resonance better than silver would. The artificers who created this understood that copper's natural conductivity could be enhanced through specific runes. Quite brilliant, really. They were doing things with metal harmonics that we're only beginning to understand now."

My fingers twitched with the urge to snatch the disk and examine it more closely. The way it pulsed with each rotation was fascinating. The subtle variations in its energy signature were like catnip for my inner magic nerd.

Gadross must have caught my expression because he added, "And no, you can't examine it right now. We have work to do. Though I suppose I could be persuaded to give you a proper lesson sometime. Provided you stop trying to reverse-engineer every artifact you come across."

I felt my cheeks warm. "It's not every relic. I've given all of the dangerous ones to the proper authorities. Improving on what came before is part of being a witch. Besides, you can't blame a girl for being curious."

He shook his head at me as we walked down the too-bright corridor. I kept stealing glances at how the relic pulsed with each rotation of Gadross's fingers. The magic it emanated was subtle but effective. Employees milled around without giving us a second look. My magical senses picked up how it bent perception around us like a silk veil and made people's eyes slide right past. It was far more elegant than any glamour I could have managed. My magic tended to be about as subtle as a brick to the face.

"We couldn't do our jobs without the Third Age. It doesn't injure the minds in the process," Gadross explained as we walked. "It doesn't force the mind to accept our presence. That would scar and leave traces. It would also cause resistance. Instead, it suggests that we're simply not interesting enough to notice. Like background noise in a crowded room. The human mind is remarkably good at ignoring things it doesn't want to deal with."

"How does it maintain the effect across multiple targets?" I asked. "The power requirements alone should be massive. And the interference patterns between different consciousness streams?—"

"Focus, Fiona," Aislinn murmured at the same time I caught her stealing curious glances at the disk.

"I am focused," I protested. "I'm focusing on potentially useful magical theory. If we could create something similar, it could help us."

"That would come in handy, but face it. You're focusing on shiny magic things instead of dead bodies," Violet pointed out with a wrinkled nose. "And I can't blame you."

We reached the medical examiner's office. Dr. Harrison was exactly what you'd picture when you thought of a medical examiner. He was in his late fifties with salt-

and-pepper hair and reading glasses perched on his nose. He had the kind of expression that said he'd seen it all. Or thought he had, anyway.

His office was cluttered with medical texts and odes to his greatness on his walls. He sure had a lot of degrees and certificates. I grimaced when I caught sight of a half-empty cup of coffee that sat forgotten on a stack of files. I wondered how long it had sat there. It looked like at least three types of mold were growing inside it.

Gadross stepped forward. The copper disk was now dancing across his knuckles like a coin trick. The motion should have looked absurd coming from someone of his stature. Somehow, he made it seem elegant. Like everything else about him, it was probably the result of centuries of practice and an ungodly amount of patience that I definitely didn't possess.

"Dr. Harrison," he said smoothly, "thank you for making time for us. Are you ready to show us the unusual aspects of these cases?"

The doctor's eyes fixed on the spinning disk. I watched in fascination as Gadross's relic worked its magic. The artifact's influence was different from my persuasion spells. Where my magic was like pushing against a wall, this was more like finding a door and simply turning the handle. My magic stirred in response. I had to concentrate to keep it from reaching out to investigate the relic's workings. The last thing we needed was my power deciding to play 'poke the ancient artifact' while we were trying to maintain a cover story.

"Yes, of course," Harrison replied as he stood woodenly and led us into the cold storage room.

The sharp smell of disinfectant couldn't quite mask the underlying scent of death. He pulled open three drawers. Each slab contained a sheet-covered form. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead and cast harsh shadows across the metal surfaces. It made

everything look slightly surreal.

My attention kept dividing between the horrific evidence before us and the way Gadross manipulated the relic with practiced ease. Each time the doctor's focus seemed to waver, a simple twist of the disk brought him back to the task at hand. I found myself analyzing the subtle variations in the artifact's energy. I was astonished by how it adapted. It wove its suggestions into the natural flow of thought which would take too much of my focus to pull off.

"These marks here," Harrison said after he pulled back the first sheet, "are unlike anything I've seen in twenty years at hospital." He gestured to what looked like claw marks to mundane eyes but looked like mangled shade runes to us. They formed precise patterns across the victim's torso, each line was precisely placed. Not to mention how the magic residue around them made my skin crawl. "They're far too regular to be animal attacks, yet too irregular to be man-made weapons."

The body belonged to a young man, probably in his early thirties. He had an athletic build. He wasn't the kind of person you'd expect to find on a morgue slab. The runes carved into his flesh told a story of careful preparation and meticulous execution. This wasn't a crime of passion or opportunity. It was methodical, planned, and precise.

"And the tissue damage?" Gadross prompted. The disk caught the light as he adjusted its spin. A new pattern emerged on its surface.

"That's the truly peculiar bit," Harrison continued. His professional curiosity temporarily overwhelmed even the relic's subtle influence. "The tissue shows signs of being frozen from the inside out. Yet there are also burn marks, as if the victims were simultaneously freezing and burning. Rather goes against every principle of forensic science I know."

I exchanged glances with Violet and Aislinn. It was shade magic. It corrupted energy and consumed both heat and life force. The magical residue around the wounds glowed like bruises to our enhanced sight. It told a story of power torn forcibly from unwilling vessels.

"The crystallization patterns in the tissue are unlike anything in the literature," Harrison continued, as he pulled out several slides. Under the harsh fluorescent lights, I could see the telltale shimmer of crystallized magic. It was pure power that had been forcibly extracted and preserved. The process would have been excruciating. "And then there's the cellular damage. It's as if something was systematically breaking down the very structure of the tissue."

"We've had about three similar cases over the last year," Harrison explained. The relic regained control. "Each post-mortem showed comparable anomalies. One of the bodies vanished from the mortuary before we could complete our PM reports." He pursed his lips, adjusting his glasses. "It was the most peculiar thing, actually. They all presented with similar markings. Rather like ritual brands. Could have sworn they moved a couple of times, though I expect that was just working too many nights on call."

Gadross's expression tightened almost imperceptibly. I knew that look. I thought it was significant as well. His fingers stilled momentarily on the copper disk. A second later, I felt a subtle shift in its energy pattern. "The missing body," he said carefully. "When exactly did it disappear?"

Harrison's brow furrowed as the relic's influence encouraged him to answer. "It must have been about six months ago. It just vanished between shifts. The security cameras showed nothing but static for about three minutes. When the feed cleared, the body was gone." He shook his head.

That tracked with what we'd seen at the accident scene. The first body had

disappeared without a trace. It had left nothing but residual magic and unanswered questions. Were they the bodies on the altar at the cellars?

The doctor moved to the final body, pulling back the sheet with practiced efficiency. "This one's particularly interesting. This is the woman found under the car today. Her DNA showed some unusual markers. They are similar to the case from six months ago. Only hers are more complex."

"How so?" I asked, though I had a feeling I knew what he was about to say. The magical signature around this body was different. There were intricate layers to her magic. It made me think someone had taken two different types of power and woven them together into something new.

"Well, it's as if her cells were caught between two different states of being. The proteins are unlike anything I've ever seen. And there are compounds that, quite frankly, shouldn't exist according to any biology textbook I've ever read." He pulled out another slide and held it up to the light. "See these structures here? They're not quite organic. It's as if the cellular matrix was trying to exist in two states simultaneously."

It hit me then. The woman was a hybrid. Like how I was both witch and Fae. The magical signature around her wounds was more complex than the others. It spoke of power that had been carefully extracted and contained. There was something that made my magical senses itch like a mosquito bite you can't quite reach.

I leaned closer and studied the patterns carved into her skin. The runes were similar to those on the other victims. Hers were more refined and precise. Had they perfected their technique?

"These markings," Gadross whispered so no one else could hear. "They follow the major energy meridians perfectly. Someone knew exactly what they were doing." He

traced a pattern in the air above the body. "See how they flow? Each sequence builds on the last, creating a kind of resonance."

"Like they're trying to harmonize different types of power," Aislinn whispered. "The runes are modifying the energy somehow."

Violet's jaw tightened. "That's why they're targeting hybrids. We're natural bridges between different types of magic. Our power already knows how to exist in multiple states."

I felt sick. Being a hybrid myself, the implications hit a little too close to home. Someone was specifically hunting people like me. They were using our unique magical nature against us. And they were doing it right in an area that wasn't exactly known for its supernatural population. Hambledon wasn't as popular for magical people as Cottlehill Wilds.

As Harrison finished his explanation, Gadross made a final pass with the disk. "You'll file these as resulting from accidents. There's nothing unusual to note. Just another sad day in the morgue."

"Yes, quite right," Harrison nodded dreamily. "Accidental death. Nothing unusual at all. Though it is rather dreadful. They were all so young."

Once we were safely in the corridor, Gadross pocketed the relic before I could get a better look at it. His expression was troubled as he stroked his beard. "The energy signatures are stronger than they should be," he said quietly so only our small group could hear. "These victims are holding more power than should be possible. Why here, when Cottlehill Wilds has a far larger supernatural population to choose from?" He shook his head. "There has to be a reason. Something about this location is significant."

"Could it be the ley lines?" I suggested as my mind raced through possibilities. "This area does have some weird energy patterns." And by weird, I meant the magical equivalent of a drunk spider trying to weave a web while high on caffeine.

"No," Gadross said firmly. "The ley lines here are actually quite weak compared to other areas. Cottlehill Wilds sits at a major convergence point. If they were just after raw power, that would be the logical choice. There has to be something else."

"The wine cellars," Aislinn said suddenly, her eyes widening. "They were modified using Fae magic. What if this whole area has similar modifications? Ancient workings we can't see?"

Gadross's eyes sharpened. "Now that's an interesting thought. The Hambledon archives might have answers. There are records there of similar wounds from the Second Age. And more importantly, documents about why certain locations were chosen for ritual work."

"The Second Age?" Violet asked as her eyebrows shot up. "That's what, three thousand years ago?"

"Three thousand, four hundred and twelve years, to be precise," Gadross corrected. "There was a period of significant magical experimentation then. Particularly in combining different types of power. Most of the records were lost in the Great Burning. Hambledon's archives survived."

"And you're just mentioning this now because...?" I let the question hang in the air.

His expression grew grave. "Because I had no idea what we were dealing with until I saw these bodies. The rune patterns, the way they're preparing the vessels... it's too similar to be coincidence." He glanced back at the morgue doors. "And I think it would be a good idea to visit the archives before more bodies turn up."

"Right then," I said, fishing my car keys from my pocket. "To Hambledon. Though I still want to know how that relic of yours works."

We made our way out of the building. The winter wind whipped around us with renewed vigor. The sky had darkened while we were inside. Heavy clouds gathered overhead, and a few fat raindrops splattered against the pavement. It carried the metallic scent of an approaching storm.

"Priorities, Fi," Violet muttered, though I caught her eyeing the disk with curiosity.

"Indeed," Gadross agreed. "The archives first. Artifact lectures later."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I agreed with a wave of my hand. "We'll handle it like we have countless other sensitive cases." And pray no one else fell victim before we figured it all out.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:34 am

CHAPTER 7

AISLINN

The Hambledon town archives smelled exactly like you'd expect. I inhaled musty paper, aging leather, and centuries of carefully preserved history. After our disturbing visit to the medical examiner and our earlier confrontation with the cult, we needed answers about what we were really dealing with. The lingering sensation of that corrupted magic still made my skin crawl. That wasn't what made me want to groan though. The place was smaller than the closet in the room Argies and I had at the Fae palace in Eidothea. How could it possibly have what we needed?

"Remember," I whispered as we followed the ancient archivist through towering shelves, "no magic unless absolutely necessary. Some of these documents are old enough to have their own magical signatures. We don't want to trigger anything nasty."

The archivist, Mrs. Pembroke, looked exactly like central casting's idea of a librarian. She had grey hair tied back in a neat bun. She also wore wire-rimmed glasses and a cardigan that had probably been old when Queen Victoria was young. Something about her made my magical senses tingle. She wasn't entirely what she seemed.

"The historical records you're requesting are quite sensitive," she said as she gave us a look that suggested she thought we were going to be trouble. "Are you sure you want to disturb them?"

"We're sure," Fiona replied as she pushed a persuasion spell toward her. "It's rather

important that we learn about the history of the area. Particularly anything that can tell us about the concentration of magic in the town."

Mrs. Pembroke's eyes narrowed slightly. "I'm immune to persuasion magic, dear. Been working with magical texts too long. But I'll help you anyway. Something's wrong with the town's magic, and I suspect you three are here to fix it."

Well, that was unexpected. I shared a look with Violet, who shrugged. "How did you know?" I asked.

"Please," Mrs. Pembroke snorted. "I've been guardian of these archives for longer than you've been alive. I know trouble when I see it. And you three practically radiate magical chaos."

"We prefer to think of it as enthusiastic problem-solving," Fiona grinned.

The archivist led us to a heavy wooden door marked "Historical Records - Restricted Access." The lock clicked open at her touch. The scent of old magic washed over us. The air was thick with centuries of accumulated power. Okay, maybe I'd misjudged what the archives could offer.

"Everything related to the town's magical history is in here," Mrs. Pembroke said. "Including the records you're looking for about the concentrations of power. There is also information about the Midnight Cellar. Gadross called to give me a heads up," she explained before we could ask. "I have to warn you. Some knowledge comes with a price."

"Story of our lives," Violet muttered as we entered .

This room was bigger than it should have been. It was magic at play that expanded the space beyond its physical boundaries. Shelves stretched up into shadows. Glass

cases held artifacts that hummed with old power. But what caught my attention was the massive table in the center. It was covered in maps and documents that seemed to have been recently disturbed.

"Someone was here before us," I said as I ran my fingers over the papers. I could feel traces of that same corrupted magic we'd encountered in the wine cellars.

"Yes," Mrs. Pembroke confirmed. "About a week ago. A young man came in. He was very polite and interested in the town's wine-making history." Her forehead crinkled, and her eyes widened. "He was particularly interested in the old cellars."

"Let me guess," Fiona said dryly. "He was especially interested in anything related to The Midnight Cellar?"

"Indeed. Though he seemed disappointed when I wouldn't show him certain restricted documents." The relief on her face spoke volumes. She had good instincts. She hadn't known his true intention, but she held back anyway.

"But you'll show us?" Violet asked.

The archivist's eyes gleamed. "Like I said, I know trouble when I see it. And sometimes trouble is exactly what's needed."

She pulled out a heavy leather-bound volume. Its pages crackled with age and residual magic. "This is the town's true history. The one that records everything the mundane books don't have. Including deaths that couldn't be explained."

I was on alert for any magical traps as I carefully opened the book. The pages were filled with precise, neat handwriting. It documented centuries of supernatural activity in Hambledon. To my horror, there were accounts that made my blood run cold that were scattered throughout the years.

"Look at this," I said, pointing to an entry from eighteen-forty-seven. "A body found with binding runes, described as 'patterns that pulled at the soul itself'. The victim had markings that match the ones we found in the wine cellar."

"Here's another from nineteen-twenty-three," Violet added, flipping forward. "Three victims were arranged in a triangle. The report mentions 'shades bound so tightly they couldn't even scream'."

"And again in nineteen-fifty-six," Fiona continued, tracing the words with her finger. "A series of disappearances. The victims all showed signs of magic, so either witches or warlocks. They were found weeks later. Their bodies had been prepared just like the ones we saw on those altars."

"Bloody hell," I muttered as I saw the pattern emerge. "This has been going on for centuries. But why here? What's so special about Hambledon?"

"There's a book that might shed some light on the matter," Mrs. Pembroke said before she moved through the stacks with the kind of grace that spoke of centuries of practice. Each step seemed precisely measured, as if she was navigating invisible wards. Given the magical energy I could feel humming through the shelves, she probably was.

"You know," Fiona whispered as we followed the archivist, "I'm starting to think our wine tasting weekend might have been hijacked."

"What gave it away?" I replied dryly. "The cultists, the dead bodies, or the fact that we're now sneaking through magical archives instead of sampling vintages?"

"I was really looking forward to trying that sparkling rosé," Violet sighed. "The one with fairy dust that makes your mind shut off for a few hours."

"I could use that right about now," Fiona muttered in agreement.

"Focus, you two," I chastised them. Although, I couldn't help smiling. Gallows humor was all that kept us sane in situations like this.

"You know what really gets me?" Violet said as we navigated another row of towering shelves. "The timing. We just happened to be here when all this is going down?"

"Nothing 'just happens' to us anymore," I pointed out. "Remember Paris?"

"That was different," Fiona protested. "How was I supposed to know that pastry shop was a front for a necromancer's guild?" At least we hadn't run into any major problems on that little venture. Being friends with the Twisted Sisters and Phoebe had given us a more open view of necromancers. Thank the gods for that because Kalli was with us. We'd gone on the short trip because we had no supernatural crisis on our plates at that moment.

"The croissants were glowing, Fi." Violet gave her a look and shook her head.

"I thought they were supposed to do that! It was France. They're artistic about everything," Fiona countered.

Mrs. Pembroke cleared her throat, silencing our banter. "Ladies, if you're quite finished." She gestured to a heavy wooden door. Its surface was carved with protective runes that shifted subtly in the dim light. She pressed her palm to the center and the sigils lit up in a sequence. A series of clicks echoed as if bolts were sliding back in non-existent locks.

Stale air hit us in the face as she pulled open the panel. The room beyond felt older than time itself. Dust motes danced in beams of light that shouldn't have existed in

the windowless space. The air tasted of ancient magic and forgotten secrets. The inside was small. There were enchanted bookshelves on three of the walls

"I don't like this," Violet muttered. "These documents are alive. Touching them will be dangerous for us."

She was right. Each page seemed to pulse with a heartbeat made of stored experiences. I could feel them trying to share their stories. They pressed against my mental shields with increasing urgency.

"That's why most researchers don't last long here," Mrs. Pembroke said, carefully lifting a leather-bound volume that looked like it might crumble at any moment. "The power can be overwhelming."

"Lovely," Fiona drawled. "Any other warnings you'd like to share? Secret curses? Ancient prophecies? Temperamental ghost librarians?"

"The ghost librarians only work Tuesdays," Mrs. Pembroke replied without missing a beat. "Though Herbert can be quite helpful if you catch him in a good mood."

I couldn't tell if she was joking. Given our track record, there probably was a Herbert. We proceeded to examine the book while she held it. None of us wanted to risk starting another magical catastrophe. It was filled with increasingly frantic entries. Some described dreams of beings that existed before time. It also talked about powers that could reshape a person. The monk's handwriting grew more erratic with each entry. I swear the knowledge itself was driving him mad.

"The last entry just says 'They're coming back' over and over," Violet read aloud.

"Cheery fellow," Fiona commented, but I could see the tension in her shoulders.

The shadows between the shelves seemed to deepen as we continued our research. They took on shapes that made me shudder. They had to be the guardians Mrs. Pembroke had mentioned. They were growing restless. Our presence was stirring up things best left undisturbed. As usual.

"I've got something," Violet called out, her voice tight with excitement or fear. Possibly both. "A detailed account of a seventy-seven-year cycle. It describes the entire ritual process."

We gathered around as she read, the words seeming to echo in the ancient space. "The vessels must be prepared in precise order. Each one should be tuned to resonate with specific energies. Shades must be used to keep from contaminating the chosen. Use binding runes to create containers to collect power until there is enough for transformation. When the circle is complete and all the vessels are in harmony, the barriers between worlds will weaken enough for Those Who Came Before to reach through."

"Well, that's properly terrifying," Fiona muttered.

"It gets worse," Violet continued. "The final vessel is the key. It has to be powerful enough to stabilize the entire circuit. It must handle the combined energies of all other vessels without shattering."

"Which explains why they're so particular about their victims," I said, thinking of the bodies we'd seen in the cellars. And at the accident scene. Not to mention the ones in the woods. They needed a variety to get the right ones. "They're building a magical circuit made of shades."

Mrs. Pembroke nodded gravely. "The First Ones cannot fully manifest in our realm. The barriers between worlds are too strong. But they can influence those willing to listen. That's how they get them to help prepare for their return."

"And let me guess," Fiona said, "they're not coming back to spread peace and harmony?"

"They want to remake the world as it was before the separation of realms," the archivist replied. "When magic was raw and unchecked. When you could move between the fire demon realm as easily as going to the market." Their comment that things would go back to the old ways suddenly made sense.

"That sounds..." I started and shivered.

"Apocalyptically bad?" Violet suggested.

"That works." I wrapped my arms around my middle.

The business card in Fiona's pocket pulsed again. It cast purple light that made her look like she was a cast member of Wicked. The text had changed. The vessels sing of their purpose. The circle nears completion.

"Anyone else really tired of this thing's cryptic messages?" Fiona asked, glaring at the card.

"At least it's keeping us updated," I pointed out. "Though I could do with less dramatic flair."

Her response was interrupted by a sudden shift in the room's energy. The shadows cast by the shelves began to move with purpose. They formed patterns that matched the binding runes we'd seen on the victims. The guardians were no longer content to simply watch. Were they going to make us pay for the knowledge?

"They're trying to show us something," Mrs. Pembroke said in a voice barely above a whisper.

The shadows coalesced into a map of the town. It showed the locations of all the vessels we'd found. They highlighted lines of power connecting each point. It formed a pattern that made my elemental powers cut out. It felt like a loose wire that created a weak circuit. Not something I wanted when facing great danger.

"Is that a key?" I asked.

"Looks like it," Violet agreed.

"A key to what?" Fiona asked, though I think we all knew the answer.

"To everything," Mrs. Pembroke said softly. "To the barriers between worlds themselves."

The shadow map pulsed once and then dissolved. It plunged us into relative darkness. The image was burned into my memory. The pattern of vessels, the flow of power, and the precise positions that would allow ancient beings to reach through into our world.

"Right," Fiona said, straightening up. "So, we know what they're planning. We know how they're doing it. And we know when they're going to try again."

"We just need to stop them," Violet added. "Simple, really."

"About as simple as teaching a troll ballet," I muttered.

"I vote for trying that next time. It would be easier," Fiona replied.

The shadows stirred again, more urgently this time. The guardians were trying to hurry us along. "Take what you need," Mrs. Pembroke said, already gathering specific scrolls and books. "The knowledge here might help you prevent the ritual's

completion."

We left the room with the living books and headed back through the rest of the hidden section when a thought occurred to me. "Who do you think looked through this stuff?"

"I bet it was Peterson," Fiona confirmed, examining the log book. "He's the leader's go-to guy. He's thorough."

I stopped, and we looked over what he had been reading. Violet tapped a page. "Look at the dates. He's been researching more than just the victims of previous attempts."

"I'd bet anything he was looking for precise information on what the vessels need to be. The book said they had to have specific qualities," Fiona suggested.

The implications were chilling. How deep did this conspiracy go? How many others were working to bring back beings that should never return to our world? We left the archives with arms full of ancient documents and heads full of disturbing revelations. The sun had almost set and was painting the snow-covered town in shades of blood and shadow. It felt appropriate, given what we'd learned.

"So," Fiona said as we loaded our findings into her car, "who's up for stopping an apocalyptic ritual and saving the world?"

"Again," Violet added with a small smile.

"Just another Saturday night," I agreed, though my attempt at levity felt hollow.

As we drove away from the archives, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were missing something important. The pieces were all there. The vessels, the binding runes, and the seventy-seven-year cycle. Something about the pattern nagged at me.

CHAPTER 8

VIOLET

The circle awaits its completion. The vessels call to their purpose. The words from that bloody business card kept echoing in my mind as we left the archives. Something about this situation felt pointed. Like we were being targeted. If I was right, it could mean we were being led to where the leader of the cult wanted us. I hoped the ancient texts about binding magic and shade creation would offer us some insight that could inform me one way or another. It seemed like a long shot.

The sun had nearly set and was painting the snow in shades of crimson. It felt entirely too appropriate given our situation. The weight of this case grew heavier on my shoulders as we loaded the ancient texts into Fiona's car. My fingers tingled where they touched the spines of the books. Old magic recognizing old magic. The sensation reminded me of the time my gran had let me help organize her grimoire collection. Each tome hummed with power as we carefully arranged them in the boot.

"Careful with that one," I warned as Fiona hefted a particularly ancient volume bound in what looked suspiciously like dragon skin. "We don't want to find out what happens if we drop it."

Aislinn nodded in agreement. "I think that's dragon skin which means it could melt us into puddles of goo."

"I do not want to know how they managed to get their hands on something so rare," Fiona replied as she gingerly placed the book among its fellows.

"My mind keeps going back to the question we asked Gadross." I said as I looked down the street. "Why Hambledon? I mean, yes, there's the ley lines and the ancient wine cellars, but as we discussed before there are other places with more magical convergences. We are no closer to finding answers."

"Location, location, location," Fiona quipped, though her expression was serious. "I've been thinking about it too. It's a small town with little oversight. It also has the perfect cover with the various energies of the wineries. Who's going to notice a few more mysterious magical signatures?"

"Plus," Aislinn added, "it's far enough from London that Gadross and his Department can't keep as close an eye on things. Well, usually."

"The Department," I snorted, wondering why Britain's officially unofficial magical oversight committee doesn't expand their numbers. "I've heard they're a bunch of stuffed robes who wouldn't know real magic if it tap-danced on their desks wearing a top hat."

"Based on that disc Gadross has, I would call bullshit on that assumption," Fiona pointed out. "That is a powerful relic designed to be used by any supernatural being."

"True. Making something that works so well by someone without witchcraft isn't easy. It has to work with Gadross's elemental magic when its nature would be to fight it," I explained .

"We've got company," Aislinn interrupted as she nodded toward the road.

"What are they after?" I muttered as we watched the police cars pulling up to the curb. Their blue lights painted the snow in alternating patterns that made the magical residue shimmer like oil on water.

Three police vehicles had arrived. Fiona closed the boot of her car and moved closer to me and Aislinn. The nametag on the guy who stepped out of the lead car said, Detective Inspector Matthews. He looked like he'd been sucking on particularly sour lemons.

"Ladies," he called out as he approached with that measured stride coppers use when they're trying to look non-threatening while actually being very threatening. His coat flapped in the bitter wind, and his breath fogged in the freezing air. "Quite the coincidence, finding tourists at our accident scene."

"Is it?" Fiona asked as she channeled her best innocent American tourist voice. The effect was somewhat spoiled by the ancient tome she was trying to hide behind her back. "We're just doing some local history research. Fascinating stuff about the wine industry."

"You know," Matthews said in a deceptively casual tone, "I've been doing this job for twenty years. I've seen all sorts of strange things. Things that don't quite add up." He pulled out a small notebook that looked worn and well-used. "Like what happened at the accident site today."

"Stumbling on that was awful," Aislinn lamented. "We're just here for the wine tasting and came across that tragedy."

Matthews raised an eyebrow. His weathered face creased with suspicion. "Do you know anything about the strange marks in the snow that vanished before our forensics team could photograph them? The witnesses who saw them seem to have forgotten crucial details. Although they all mentioned speaking with you three? They also mentioned you wandered into the woods where we found faint traces of blood. Those are just coincidences too, are they?"

"Memory can be tricky in traumatic situations," Aislinn pointed out. She was the

picture of confused concern. "That's why eyewitness accounts of an incident can vary, right? As for why we wandered into the woods, I thought I heard someone calling out. We didn't find anything."

While she spoke, I wove a subtle forgetting charm into the air around us. I wanted to make our presence seem less noteworthy with each passing second. I doubted he would let this go otherwise. The magic settled like frost, delicate but persistent.

"There's something not right about all this," Matthews insisted. It was difficult to bite back my smirk when his voice had lost some of its certainty. He pulled out his notebook, flipping through pages of observations. "The strange marks in the snow, the witnesses who can't quite remember what they saw... and these temperature fluctuations that no one can explain."

"I know from the hospital I worked at for twenty years that people see all sorts of odd things when they're stressed. It might be nothing," Fiona insisted.

I reinforced the forgetting charm and watched as Matthews' expression grew increasingly vague. But something caught my attention. One of the officers behind him, a young woman, was fighting the magic much harder than she should have been. Her resistance wasn't natural. It felt more like... "Fi," I whispered and nudged her slightly. "The one in the back. By the second car."

Fiona glanced over and narrowed her eyes. "Well, shit," she muttered. "That's not what we needed right now."

The officer's eyes had taken on a familiar purple tinge when she looked directly at us. It was the same shade we'd seen in the wine cellars. Someone had gotten to her. Just like they'd gotten to Peterson. The binding magic practically radiated from her. Would she be a shade soon? My gut told me the leader wasn't telling his minions everything because this woman looked like she was well on her way.

"Perhaps we should continue this discussion down at the station," Matthews was saying when I turned my attention back to him. Though he seemed to have forgotten exactly why he wanted us there. His notebook had disappeared back into his pocket, and his stern expression had softened into mild confusion.

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary," I said, pushing more power into the forgetting charm. The magic swirled around him like invisible smoke. "We've told you everything we know about the accident. I'm sure you have more important things to do. Probably loads of paperwork waiting, yeah?"

Matthews blinked slowly and looked around as if he'd forgotten where he was. The charm had taken full effect. "Right... yes... carry on then. Enjoy your wine tour." He turned and walked back to his car.

My gut twisted into a knot when I noticed how the female officer remained. She was watching us with those unnaturally purple-tinged eyes. She didn't move until Matthews called her name. Even then, her movements were too smooth, too controlled. Exactly, like a puppet being guided by invisible strings. When the other officers began clearing the scene, she drifted away from the group. Unlike her colleagues, who headed west toward the station, she slid into her patrol car and turned east. Her movements were still unnaturally precise.

"Ten quid says she leads us to something interesting," Fiona murmured as she opened the driver's door. "Come on, while she doesn't notice."

Aislinn grabbed her sleeve. "Following a police officer who's acting like a marionette? That's somewhere between stupid and suicidal."

"Exactly why we should do it." Fiona grinned. "When have the obviously bad ideas ever steered us wrong?"

Aislinn snorted. "I'm not going to answer that."

I chuckled. "Good choice. Though perhaps we should follow with a bit more subtlety than usual?"

"I'm always subtle!" Fiona protested as we piled in. The ancient texts in the boot rattled ominously as she started the engine.

"You challenged the evil Fae Queen at Pymm's Pondsides before we even had a proper plan," I reminded her. "In your own garden, no less."

"And won!" Fiona's eyes gleamed at the memory. "Though having home-field advantage helped. All those years of my family laying protective wards paid off when I took her out. But really, she was asking for it. She was threatening me and everyone I love."

"You kicked off a war with the Fae King in the process," Aislinn muttered from the back seat. "He put a price on your head, and you had to close the portal for a time."

"But we beat him in the end, too. Which opened the spot for Argies's brother and saved all of Eidothea from destruction." Fiona grinned.

The police car ahead of us turned onto a side street. Fiona carefully followed at a distance. "Anyone else wondering why there's another possessed police officer in this quaint little town?"

"Having two of them is too much to be random," I mused. "It has to be connected to the reason the leader chose this area."

"Agreed. Nothing's random," Aislinn added quietly. "Whatever's happening here, that officer's involvement isn't a coincidence. "

"Story of our lives," Fiona sighed, keeping her eyes on the vehicle ahead. "We just wanted a nice wine tasting holiday. Was that too much to ask?"

"We already know the answer to that." I smiled grimly as we followed Carter's police car at a discrete distance.

Magic slithered toward us. It was oily and wrong and had me fighting the urge to gag. Aislinn was already reacting. Magic poured from her hands as it grabbed the falling snow like it was her personal toy box. The flurries thickened into a miniature blizzard behind Carter's car. They did double duty. They kept our asses hidden while marking her like a giant 'follow me' sign.

The effect was like something out of a weird Christmas movie gone wrong. Carter's patrol car pushed through the darkness with its own personal snow cloud. It was like a demented version of Rudolph. This glow was more 'potentially lethal' and less 'festive holiday cheer.'

"Do you think the leader is slowly making his minions shades?" I asked as we turned onto a less populated street. The purple tinge in Carter's magical signature pulsed in time with her heartbeat. "It's similar to what we saw in Peterson's magical signature at the wine cellars."

"I'm not sure, but speaking of Peterson," Fiona said as she carefully navigated through the worsening weather, "anyone else wondering where he disappeared to after our little cult encounter? Because, I'm thinking he's probably not filing his incident report like a good little cop."

"He's probably groveling at the feet of the guy who's really running this show," Aislinn suggested. "The kind of power we saw in those cellars took serious magical juice. He would need people to continuously feed him power. Taking from a handful wouldn't keep it going long. He also needed someone to teach them how to use those

Fae wine cellars for storing corrupted energy."

"About that," I said, frowning as I recalled something from the archives. "One of those books mentioned something about 'vessels of power' being used to store and amplify magical energy. I don't think it was talking about wine cellars or physical containers."

"Let me guess," Fiona said grimly. "It meant people."

I nodded. "I think you're onto something, Aislinn. Living vessels would offer more. Especially if they are willing and bound by a series of rituals. The text was pretty vague about the details, but it mentioned something about emptying the vessel to make room for power."

"Well, that's properly horrifying," Aislinn muttered.

Carter's car veered onto one of those creepy-ass back roads that screamed 'potential dismemberment ahead.' Where every horror movie victim's last words are, 'I'm sure it's perfectly safe out here.' The fields on either side stretched forever. They were covered in pristine white snow that was just begging for a body or two to mess up its perfection. Yeah, that's how my brain worked now. Thanks to the supernatural shit-show that was my life.

That nasty energy from before? It was back with a vengeance and hitting us like a wave of rotted magic that made my insides do the cha-cha. The corruption in it felt like someone had taken normal magic and let it sit in a dank basement for a few centuries, growing all kinds of nasty. My skin broke out in goosebumps. And not the fun kind you get from watching hot guys at the gym. No, these were the 'something really bad is about to try to eat us' kind. Again.

"I know this road," I said, recognizing the ancient stone walls that lined the way. The

sight sparked a memory from childhood. It was one of my gran's many warnings about places better left alone. "It leads to the old Blackwood estate. It's been abandoned for years after some sort of tragedy. Gran used to say the place was cursed. Something about the original owner dabbling in powers he shouldn't have."

"Maybe that has to do with why this area was chosen," Fiona muttered as she squinted through the windscreen at the deteriorating road conditions.

"Your gran mentioned this place?" Aislinn asked as she leaned forward between the seats. "What else did she say about it?"

"Not much," I admitted. "Just that old Blackwood was obsessed with immortality. He spent years researching ancient magic and collecting artifacts. Then, one night, some kind of ritual went wrong. The whole family disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Fiona asked. "Or disappeared?"

"Bit of both, probably. The police found evidence of a ritual circle in the basement. They confiscated a lot of ceremonial implements and that sort of thing. But there were no bodies. I believe Gadross swooped in and confiscated everything. Last I heard, the Department sealed up the house."

"And now someone's unsealed it," Aislinn observed. "It sounds like the perfect place for storing corrupted spirits and prepared vessels. Especially if it already has the right kind of magical infrastructure."

The Blackwood house squatted in the Hampshire countryside like a middle finger to good taste and proper British sensibility. Some Victorian-era twat had clearly gone nuts with their inherited fortune. They'd built the kind of place that made the local historical society weep into their tea. It was red brick and soot-stained stone. There were enough pointy spires and gargoyles to make Notre Dame look understated.

Most of the windows were dark. Many of them were straight-up broken. Ivy had gone to town on the facade. It was probably trying to do the neighborhood a favor, and hide the whole mess. The place looked like it had been lifted straight from one of those penny dreadful novels. Minus the charm with a healthy dose of "dear god, why?"

The aesthetic disaster wasn't what had my magic doing the macarena under my skin. No, that honor went to the energy oozing from the place like toxic waste from a badly sealed drum. Obviously, this night needed more nightmare fuel.

"Bloody hell," I breathed as we parked a discrete distance away. "Look at those wards. I've never seen anything quite like them."

The house was surrounded by layers of protection spells. They weren't the usual kind meant to keep things out. These were designed to keep something in. The magic pulsed with that same sickly purple light we'd seen in the wine cellars. Sticking with the cliché, the shadows around the building moved in ways shadows shouldn't.

"Those are containment wards," Aislinn observed as we carefully approached on foot. Our boots crunched in snow that seemed unnaturally dark. "They make me think of those used for holding powerful spirits. But there's something odd about them. Are they inverted?"

"Looks that way to me. They're doing double duty," I added as I studied the complex magical patterns. "They're corrupting the spirits as well. No doubt, changing their very nature." The realization made me feel slightly ill. "This could be where they're keeping the shades between ritual attempts."

"And probably where they're 'preparing' new vessels," Fiona said grimly. "Which would explain why the bodies keep disappearing. They're bringing them here."

We huddled behind what was probably once a fancy wall but now looked like someone had played Jenga with the stones. And lost. Badly.

Carter's car crept around the back of the house like a mouse sneaking past a sleeping cat. A really big, probably murderous cat. That was the kind of night we were having.

The snow had dropped right out of existence about twenty feet from the building. It was falling everywhere but close to the place. Like it hit an invisible 'screw this, I'm out' barrier. Even nature knew better than to mess with whatever corrupted magic was oozing from this place. And yet, we were going to go inside.

The magic here writhed around us like a nest of pissed-off snakes. It carried that special kind of tension that usually meant someone was about to try to murder us in creative ways. You know, the kind that makes your shoulder blades itch and your fight-or-flight response start packing its bags for a tropical vacation.

My mouth filled with the taste of copper. It was like I'd been sucking on pennies while licking a battery. It was always a fantastic sign when your taste buds decided to join the 'something's wrong' party. Really. It was just peachy. This night needed more warning signals that we were about to do something monumentally stupid.

"Is it just me, or is anyone else's magic doing the supernatural equivalent of drunk-dialing an ex?" I whispered. My power kept hiccupping like it had knocked back one too many shots of tequila.

"Containment wards," Fiona said, as if that explained everything. When I just stared at her, she added, "They're sucking up magic like a middle-aged divorced dad with a Dyson. And guess who's getting the power boost?" She jerked her chin toward the house. "I bet 'I-wear-fancy-robcs-to-feel-special' is in there taking what he needs to get past the blow we dealt him at the cellars."

"That energy..." I shuddered, recognizing the ancient resonance we'd felt in the cellars. "It's like dinosaurs-were- babies old."

"Fan-fucking-tastic." Fiona's eye roll could have won Olympic medals. "This isn't how I planned to spend my Saturday night. I had a date with a bottle of wine and that new serial killer documentary."

"Well, technically, we might still see a murder," I offered helpfully. "This one will have more potential for world-ending consequences."

"Gods." Aislinn pinched the bridge of her nose. "We really need to revisit our definition of weekend plans. Normal people go to brunch. We track down ancient horrors with a body count."

"Don't forget the part where we save the day and no one ever knows," Fiona pulled out her phone and checked the time. "Three hours until midnight. Any brilliant ideas for getting past those wards without dying spectacularly?"

"I might be able to create a temporary breach," I said, studying the magical patterns more closely. "See how the binding runes overlap there? It's creating a weak point. If we time it right..."

"We could slip through between pulses," Aislinn finished. "But we'd need a distraction. Those wards will alert someone the moment we start tampering with them."

"Leave that to me," Fiona grinned. That look usually preceded property damage. "I'm great at distractions."

"The thing with Grams doesn't count as a recommendation," I warned her.

"Hey, taking Grams skydiving totally worked! And the wings thing was completely accidental."

"Things are always accidental with you," Aislinn muttered. "Don't do something like telling a magically de-aged ninety-something to 'think happy thoughts' mid-freefall. Shit always goes sideways for us."

"Details," Fiona waved dismissively. "The point is, I can get their attention while you two work on the wards. Just... maybe stand back a bit when I do."

"How far back are we talking?" I asked. "Regular 'oops' distance or 'Fiona's getting creative' distance?"

"Just regular distance," she assured us as she began pulling various items from her pockets. "Simple stuff. A bit of transformed matter, a touch of kinetic enhancement, and maybe a small temporal displacement..."

The business card in her pocket pulsed again, casting purple light that made the shadows dance. New text appeared. The vessels gather. The circle nears completion. We will succeed.

"Anyone else really tired of this thing's cryptic messages?" Fiona asked as she glared at the card. "Would it kill them to be more specific? Like 'Hey, we're going to do the apocalyptic ritual in the basement in one hour. Bring snacks'?"

"At least it's keeping us updated," I pointed out. Although, I had to agree. The dramatic messages were getting old. "Even if it does sound like a particularly pretentious fortune cookie."

"Remember the rules," Aislinn said as we prepared to move. "No unnecessary risks, no solo heroics, and absolutely no challenging ancient entities to any kind of contest."

The wind picked up and carried with it the sound of chanting from somewhere inside the house. The words were in that same ancient language we'd heard in the wine cellars. "Right then," I said, gathering my power and preparing to breach the wards. "Everyone clear on the plan?"

"Create a distraction, break through the wards, find out what's going on inside without getting killed or possessed by ancient spirits," Fiona recited. "What could possibly go wrong?"

"Don't," Aislinn warned. "Every time you say that, something explodes."

"Usually," Fiona agreed cheerfully. "But hey, at least we brought that bottle of Winter's Embrace. You know, for after."

"We're going to need something stronger than wine after this," I muttered, watching as more figures arrived at the house. Their movements were too smooth and coordinated, like pieces being moved on a game board. "Look. More victims of the head arsehole. Maybe we can take out all of his people."

"If only we were that lucky. The vessels gather," Aislinn quoted from the card with an eye roll.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Fiona sighed. "I'm all for stopping an apocalyptic ritual, but do we have to do it without hurting a bunch of possessed idiots?"

"Not necessarily. They volunteered for this, which means they're willing to cause problems," Aislinn pointed out.

"Next time," I said as I started to weave the spell that would breach the wards, "we're definitely going to ask Artemis to help ensure we get our spa weekend. We'll go somewhere nice and boring, where the biggest threat would be an overly enthusiastic

masseuse."

"If only," Fiona said as she threw something toward the front of the house. It was now or never. I cast the spell to widen the gaps enough that we could fit through. Whatever waited inside, whatever ancient horrors and bound spirits lurked in its shadows, we'd face it together. We always did.

CHAPTER 9

FIONA

We crouched behind the crumbling stone wall. Magical energy crackled around my fingers as I prepared my distraction. The corrupted wards pulsed with sickly purple light against the darkening sky. My earlier bravado about explosions aside, even I had to admit this situation called for something special. The kind of special that usually ended with Aislinn giving me that worried look she'd perfected.

"Ready?" I whispered to Violet and Aislinn. They nodded, their faces grim in the unnatural light. My magic stirred restlessly under my skin. It was responding to the ancient power that saturated the Blackwood manor. It felt like being too close to a live wire. I had the distinct sensation that touching the wrong thing would end very badly.

"Try not to bring the whole place down," Aislinn murmured as she scanned the perimeter for any sign we'd been noticed. "We still need to search it for clues."

"No promises," I replied with a wink, though my heart wasn't really in the humor. The weight of what we were dealing with pressed against my chest like a physical thing. The cult, the shades, the First Ones. It was the kind of mess that made me wish I'd stayed in bed that morning. Or at least had another glass of that Fae wine first.

The magic formed into spheres of pure kinetic force. They were grenades made of condensed chaos. Perfect for creating the mother of all distractions. Each orb pulsed with a different frequency. They were designed to mimic wildlife and hide our

presence. It was the kind of complex spell work that Grams taught me. She'd been trying to cram a lifetime of learning into the last couple years. She had to keep our magic from me my entire life after she and my mother discovered I was a nicotisa.

"Three." I counted down as the power built. "Two." The wards pulsed again and created a window of opportunity. The timing had to be perfect. "One."

I released the spell and sent multiple orbs of magical energy arcing through the air. They struck the ground around the house in a carefully orchestrated sequence. The resulting explosions were honestly rather beautiful. If you were into that sort of thing. Which I am. The blasts sent snow and debris flying in all directions, created a spectacular light show. It drew the attention of every minion in the vicinity.

"Subtle as a brick through a window, aren't you?" Violet muttered before she moved forward. Her magic reached out to probe the weakened wards.

"Hey, it worked, didn't it?" I grinned as we avoided the minions investigating the disturbance.

"Now!" Violet whisper-hissed as she finished working on the wards. Her magic was enhanced by her phoenix heritage and blazed golden against the purple corruption for a split second. Aislinn's Fae power joined hers and her wind held the temporary breach open. The combination of their magic was like watching an artist paint with light. It was beautiful and terrifying in equal measure.

We slipped through the gap and into the house. The foyer looked like something out of one of those gothic horror films Violet loves so much. There was dusty furniture, cobwebs, and that distinct feeling that we really shouldn't be there. "Well," I whispered as we moved deeper into the house, "this is creepy. Anyone else expecting the portrait eyes to follow us?"

"Don't even joke about that," Aislinn shuddered. "Remember that haunted gallery in Bath?"

"How could I forget? My hair didn't lie flat for a week after that ghost tried to possess me." That had been our last attempt at a relaxing outing. Even our day trips ran into problems.

The walls were covered in symbols that matched those we'd found on the victims. They pulsed with that same sickly purple light. The corrupted magic made it hard to breathe. It was incredibly unpleasant to continue the journey through the house. But that didn't stop the Backside of Forty. We were stubborn like that.

"These markings," Violet said, examining one particularly complex pattern. "Is the whole house one big ritual space?"

"I really hope not," I muttered. "It's probably to keep up the aesthetic. Nothing says 'evil cult headquarters' like turning your entire house into a magical circuit board." Aislinn snorted and Violet smiled as we continued in silence.

"This way," Violet murmured after a moment. She was pointing toward a corridor that seemed darker than the others. My magical senses were going crazy and picking up traces of shade energy everywhere. "Something powerful is down there. Can you feel it?"

I nodded. The magic was like a weight pressing around me. It made each step feel like walking through molasses. "Yeah," I replied. "I'm getting some seriously bad juju vibes."

"Must be Tuesday," Aislinn quipped while her hand was tight around the protective amulet she wore.

We followed Violet's lead. I cast a silencing spell so our footsteps made no sound on the ancient floorboards. The corridor led us to what must have been a study. Books lined the walls. Their spines were decorated with symbols that moved. It was the massive oak desk dominating the center of the room that caught my attention. Its surface scattered with papers and ritual implements.

I walked over and scanned the items. "Anyone else feeling like we just walked into the evil version of Grams' study?"

"Grams doesn't keep bloodstained ritual daggers next to her paperwork," Violet pointed out as she gestured to the implements on the desk. Fresh stains marked their surfaces. I really didn't want to think about what – or who – they'd been used on.

Notebooks filled with cramped handwriting detailed the process of 'preparing vessel' in clinical, horrifying detail. The author's enthusiasm was evident in the way certain phrases were underlined multiple times. 'Perfect resonance achieved' and 'successful separation of essence from vessel' featured prominently.

And there, pinned to the wall, was a map of Hambledon. Locations were marked with push pins. Red strings connected different points and created a pattern that made my magical senses scream in warning. The inverted pentagram was fitting in the situation, given its association with evil.

"Bloody hell," I breathed. "They've been planning this for years. What do you think each mark represents? A potential vessel? Look at how they're arranged. It's like they're creating some sort of magical circuit. "

"Bloody hell, this is disturbing," Aislinn said as she carefully flipped through one of the notebooks. Her face had gone the color of old porridge. "These absolute nutters are building some sort of magical battery using supernaturals."

"Like hybrids," Violet added grimly. "People with multiple types of power that can be harvested and combined. See these calculations? They're trying to find the perfect combination of energies."

"Well, that's not terrifying at all," I muttered as I examined a diagram that showed how different magical signatures could be 'harmonized' through what looked like an extremely unpleasant process.

A floorboard creaked somewhere above us. It was a reminder that we weren't alone in the house. The minions were still out there, searching for whatever had triggered their alarms. We needed to move faster.

"Grab everything that looks important," I said, already stuffing notebooks into my enchanted bag. "And maybe some things that don't. Better safe than sorry."

"Since when are you the voice of reason?" Aislinn asked as she helped gather documents.

"Since we started finding instructions for turning people into magical batteries. Call it personal growth." I smiled at her and then narrowed my eyes. I noticed something odd about the bookshelf behind the desk.

The magical energy flowing through the house seemed to concentrate there. It created a sort of void in the corrupted power. It was like looking at a hole in a sheet. "Hey," I called softly to the others. "Anyone else feel the gap? Because either I'm having a very specific hallucination. Or that bookshelf is doing something weird with the magic."

Violet came over and studied the shelf. "There's a concealment charm here. It feels like it was placed here decades ago. And was recently activated. See how the energy flows around it instead of through it?"

"Can you break it?" Aislinn asked as she kept watch at the door.

"Give me a minute," Violet replied. I joined her as she started weaving counter-spells. "It's complex and has multiple layers of protection. They're tied into the house's wards."

"So that's a yes?" Aislinn clarified.

"That's a 'stand back in case something explodes'," I whispered.

It took us a few minutes to dismantle the magical locks. Each layer we removed revealed another. It was like peeling an onion made of razor wire. Finally, with a sound like a sigh, the shelf swung open to reveal a hidden room. And holy mother of magic. What a room it was.

The walls were covered in photographs and news clippings. They were all connected by strings. These might have been red, but they were glowing brightly with that purple energy. Some of the photos showed familiar faces. At least two were of the victims we'd found in the forest. They had stalked them and identified them as potential targets. There were also several shots of the three of us going about our daily lives. Someone had been watching us for a while. But, why? We lived a few hours away and had never been to Hambleton.

I forced my gaze to move to the artifacts that practically screamed 'dangerous magical item'. They sat on shelves and hummed with power. I recognized a few from conversations with Artemis. They were things that should have been locked away in Nylah's secure vault, not sitting on display like trophies. It was the altar in the center that really got my attention. It was a massive stone slab carved with runes that dominated the space .

"This is..." Aislinn's voice trailed off as she took in the scene.

"A shrine to crazy?" I suggested as I got a closer look at the disturbing array of items arranged on the altar's surface. "Because that's what this looks like to me. The kind of crazy that usually ends with someone trying to resurrect ancient evil or dissolve the barriers between realms."

"Both, probably," Violet muttered as she carefully photographed everything with her phone. "Why are they interested in us?"

"No idea," I replied, but my attention was elsewhere. The ritual tools that were carefully arranged made my magical senses recoil. It was the shifting mass of shadows in the center of them that had my feet shuffling. It sounded like the whispers we heard in the forest.

"Shite," Violet blurted from where she was pawing through personal items like a raccoon at an all-you-can-eat dumpster. She held up what looked like an ID card that couldn't make up its mind about what it wanted to be. Tilt it one way, and you got a respectable businessman with a stick up his ass. Tilt it the other, and you saw something that would make horror movie monsters piss themselves. "Our mystery douche is from the Shadowmere Pack."

"The what now?" I asked. My stomach was already doing the cha-cha of doom. Anything with 'shadow' in the name was about as trustworthy as gas station sushi.

"Bloody hell," Aislinn said. "They're one of the oldest packs in Britain. They used to be guardians until their Alpha got cozy with some dark mage about two centuries ago. Now they're like that one cousin everyone pretends isn't in the family photos. He began thinking that summoning demons was a fun weekend hobby."

"An evil werewolf on magical steroids is behind this? What's next? Secret vampire council? Ancient dragon conspiracy? Girl Scouts selling cookies laced with transformation potions?"

"Don't even joke about that last one," Violet warned. "After what the Shadowmere Pack did to the London Conclave, evil Girl Scouts might be an improvement. I can't see how a member of the pack is the leader behind this. He couldn't perform the ritual. It's more likely the evil mage."

"We have a bigger problem," Aislinn said as she waved a list of names in our faces like a red flag in front of a bull.

My hand flew out, and I snatched her arm. Our names were at the bottom. Each one was written in what looked suspiciously like blood. Regular ink wasn't dramatic enough for these people.

"Well," I said, trying to keep my voice light, "I guess we know why we kept stumbling into this mess. We weren't just in the wrong place at the wrong time. We were meant to be here. Someone's been playing chess while we thought we were playing bingo."

"They're targeting us specifically," Aislinn confirmed in a tight voice. "Back to your earlier question, why? What makes us so special?"

"Besides our charming personalities and tendency to blow things up?" I asked as I scanned the rest of the list. Some names were crossed out. My chest squeezed when I realized they had to be victims and were likely already dead. Others had notes beside them, listing magical abilities and potential resonance values.

Something shifted in the magical energy around us. The shadows in the corners began to move, and the temperature dropped so rapidly I could see my breath. The whispers from the cluster grew louder and more insistent.

"It's a trap!" Violet shouted just as the first wave of shade energy slammed into us.

I threw up a shield because I still hadn't learned that optimism gets you killed in this business. The corrupted magic chewed through my defenses faster than my Uncle Dave through an all-you-can-eat buffet. And let me tell you, that man can devour. The house decided this was the perfect moment to have an architectural crisis.

Ancient power surged through the walls like the world's worst electrical problem. Stone cracked and wood splintered. Everything started going full earthquake simulator. The only thing missing was the safety warnings. We added the "holy shit, we're going to die" parts. The ceiling joined the party by projectile vomiting dust and chunks of plaster. Obviously, death by falling debris was on tonight's menu of potential catastrophes.

"Time to go!" I yelled and grabbed as many documents as I could reach. "Unless anyone fancies becoming part of the local ghost stories?"

"Been there, done that, got the therapy bills," Aislinn shot back as she snatched up what looked like a particularly important grimoire.

We ran for the door, dodge-rolling under a beam of purple energy that turned a chair into ash. I hadn't realized that death by magical laser beam was on the menu tonight. The corridor looked like someone had taken chaos, multiplied it by crazy, and sprinkled 'there's no way out' on top. The Alpha's minions were hopped up on dark magic and were climbing the walls like reject Spider-Man extras. Their eyes were glowing that special shade of purple that screamed, 'evil overlord approved'.

A thing that used to be human shot across the hall. Its form wavered like a bad TV signal between there and not. It moved like someone had taken all the bones out of its body. It stretched and warped as it tried to clothesline us with arms that reminded me of Mr. Elastic. I dropped and rolled under them. The cold void where its humanity used to be chilled me to the bone.

Violet, being Violet, decided that was the perfect moment to show off. She vaulted through the thing. Her phoenix fire turned its mass into screaming ash. The sound it made? Was like static and a scream had a baby. Two more proto-shades came at us from opposite directions. They probably thought they were being clever. News flash. Trying to attack someone who could manipulate kinetic energy? Not the brightest idea. I redirected their half-formed bodies and let them disperse into each other. The way they merged and split apart like oil in water was deeply disturbing. Violet kicked another that had grabbed hold of Aislinn.

We burst out of the house just as the first floor decided gravity was more of a suggestion. The corrupted almost-shades vanished right before that just like they had in the cellars. The building made the kind of noise usually reserved for horror movie climaxes. Decades of dark magic threw a tantrum and took the structure down like a toddler dropping building blocks. Windows exploded. Each pop was accompanied by purple fireworks. Very festive, in a 'holy shit we almost died' kind of way.

We didn't stop running until we reached my car. We were gasping like we'd just run a marathon. Through lava. While being chased by demon bees. The Blackwood Manor house performed its grand finale, imploding with all the subtlety of a drunk dragon at a fireworks show. Yeah, Argies had a little too much fun last July when we visited my kids in the United States.

"Everyone alright?" I asked as I slumped against my car's hood. My muscles felt like they'd been through a supernatural CrossFit session.

"Define 'alright'," Violet wheezed. She was clutching stolen documents like they were winning lottery tickets. " Because I think my definition needs a serious update after tonight."

Aislinn's silence hit like a lead weight. When I turned to look at her, her face had gone whiter than a ghost at a bleach convention. She was staring at my side with that

special kind of horror usually reserved for British people who've run out of tea. I followed her gaze down to where something warm and wet was doing its best impression of a leaky faucet across my jacket. Oh. Well, that explained the weird tingles. Funny how you don't notice getting mauled by a shade when you're busy trying not to die in other exciting ways. "Well, hell," I said softly.

CHAPTER 10

VIOLET

"For someone who's bleeding, you're being remarkably stubborn about this," I growled at Fiona as I pulled up outside The Cozy Corner café. The neon sign flickered weakly in the growing darkness. She'd drunk a healing potion and wrapped the injury, yet refused to go home to see Zreegy or the local hospital. She insisted she was fine.

"It's just a scratch," she said for the hundredth time. The makeshift bandage we'd fashioned from my scarf told a different story. "Besides, caffeine will enhance the healing potion, right?"

"That is not how it works," I muttered as I got out and went around to help her out of the car. The wound wasn't life-threatening. We'd checked that first. But it was bad enough to warrant concern. Especially given the traces of corrupted magic that I sensed around its edges.

Aislinn trailed behind us. Her worried frown deepened as she watched Fiona try (and fail) to hide a wince. "We should be taking you to the hospital," Aislinn told her.

"And tell them what?" Fiona shot back. "Sorry doc, got a bit scratched up while investigating an evil cult's murder house? Besides, Vi's healing potion has already stopped the worst of it."

The café was nearly empty this late. There were a few locals visiting and deliberately

not looking our way. The subtle diversion and glamour I'd cast probably helped with the latter. It was bloody challenging to make three women covered in dust and magical residue appear unremarkable.

"I still think this is a terrible idea," I said as we claimed a corner booth. "We should be calling Gadross, not taking a break."

"I already texted him," Fiona replied as she eased herself onto the vinyl seat. "He's on his way. He said something about needing to secure a scene first. I don't know about you, but I need to eat."

The waitress approached, wearing the glazed expression of someone who'd been on her feet one too many hours. "What can I get you?"

"I'll have a tea, please," Aislinn said. Her voice carried that musical lilt that always made heads turn. "And a cheese and pickle sandwich on granary."

"I'll have a coffee and a hot chocolate," Fiona ordered with a grin that didn't quite reach her eyes. "And one of those fruit scones from the cabinet. With clotted cream and jam, yeah?"

"Builder's tea for me," I added as I tried not to fidget. The magical residue from earlier was making my skin crawl. "And a bacon butty. Extra brown sauce." My stomach growled at the thought. Fighting Dark magic always left me famished.

After our order arrived, Fiona picked at her scone before pulling a face and gesturing toward the loo. "I need to clean myself up a bit."

"I'll come with you," I said quickly, knowing someone needed to keep her in check. "You're rubbish at healing spells." She stuck her tongue out at me as we got up and headed to the bathroom.

The loo was exactly what you'd expect from a small-town café. Poky and slightly grotty but clean enough. I splashed water on my face, trying to wash away some of the magical residue that still clung to my skin. The corruption from the house had left an oily film that ordinary water couldn't quite touch.

"You look bloody terrible," Fiona commented from where she was cleansing her hands with magic. Once clean, she took off my scarf. "Though probably better than me." She hissed as she began washing her wound.

"Considering you're still actively bleeding, that's not saying much." I started weaving a cleansing spell on myself. It helped clear away the lingering corruption. "Hold still, let me..."

A crash from outside cut me off. Fiona and I shared wide-eyed looks and froze for a split second. The sound of shattering glass mixed with screams from the few remaining patrons echoed through the wall. That broke our surprise and we burst out of the loo. Magic was already gathering around our hands. The familiar weight of power settled into my bones as my witchcraft responded to the threat. My phoenix also rose and burned at the ready.

"Civilians first," I snapped, throwing up a barrier between the mundies and the magical chaos erupting outside. "Get them clear!" My eyes scanned the room frantically searching for Aislinn and the evil minions that had attacked.

Fiona nodded as her magic wove through with a spell to encourage people to hurry toward the back of the cafe while their memories went fuzzy. It was a neat trick she'd perfected over the years of dealing with supernatural disasters in public places. It wouldn't erase the memories. The people could and would eventually recall what happened but that's what we had Gadross and his gadgets for.

"Nothing to see here," she called out, her voice layered with persuasion. "Just a minor

gas leak. Best clear the area!"

The scene outside was pure chaos. Purple energy crackled through the air like corrupt lightning. It cast strange shadows over the snow-covered street. In the middle of it all was Aislinn. She had squared off against a figure that seemed to shift between human and something decidedly not. One moment it was the well-dressed businessman from the house, and the next, it was twisted flesh and fur.

"Well," Fiona muttered as we ran for the door, "guess we found our shifter. Lovely fashion sense you've got."

"Less quipping, more running," I shot back. Although I had to admit his outfit was impressively coordinated for someone currently violating several laws of physics and good taste.

The man moved with unnatural grace. Each motion was fluid like water but sharp as broken glass. His form flickered between shapes and never quite settled on one. The effect was nauseating to watch. Imagine trying to focus on a picture that kept changing every time you blinked.

Aislinn's Fae magic blazed against the darkness. Ice and wind responded to her call. But something was wrong. Her power seemed to sputter and fade where it should have been strongest. It was like a flame struggling to stay lit in a storm.

"The binding runes," I realized with horror as I caught sight of symbols that blazed purple against the pavement. "They're dampening her magic! They've laid a trap!"

"Of course they did," Fiona growled as she pushed herself faster despite her injury. "This night wasn't complicated enough already!"

A vice constricted around my heart as we crawled through the broken window. We

were too far away. Even as we ran, I could see the trap closing. The magic pulsed and shadows wrapped around Aislinn like chains made of condensed darkness. Her eyes met mine for just a moment. They were wide with realization and fear. The sight would haunt me the rest of my life. A second later, both she and the shifter vanished in a surge of purple energy that left afterimages dancing across my vision.

"No!" Fiona's scream echoed through the suddenly silent street. Her magic lashed out. Raw power scorched the pavement where the shifter had stood. Mine erupted from me at practically the same moment. My phoenix burst from me, burning my clothing to ash and leaving me covered in flames. I rose into the air a few feet as my soul raged against what had just happened. There was nothing left to hit except lingering traces of corrupted energy.

I dropped near Fiona and recalled my flames. She hurried me to her car and threw open the trunk. A hole had opened in my heart as I stuffed myself into new clothes. Fiona pulled the business card from her pocket. It had that sickly purple glow I'd come to loathe. New text flowed across its surface like mercury. "The final vessel is secured. The old ways will return. Come and witness the remaking of the world... if you dare. Your friend's power will serve a greater purpose." Yeah, I knew the thing was designed to taunt us and lead us into a trap.

"I'm going to kill them," Fiona said with the kind of calm that preceded extremely violent explosions. "Slowly. And painfully."

"Get in line," I muttered as I reached for my phone when it buzzed. Gadross's name flashed on the screen. I answered quickly.

"What. Happened." His voice was tight with barely controlled fury. I could hear sounds of magical chaos in the background. I didn't care what was giving him trouble. We had a bigger problem.

I explained quickly, watching as Fiona paced like a caged tiger. Her magic crackled around her in dangerous arcs. The wound in her side was forgotten in the face of this new crisis, though I could see fresh blood staining the makeshift bandage.

"The leader's involved with a twisted shifter," I added. "The guy behind this has got some serious magical juice. The binding runes they used, cut through Aislinn's defenses like they weren't even there. There are several mundie witnesses. We need you at the cafe."

"Because they were specifically designed for her," Fiona added grimly. "They've been planning this for months. They were following us. They knew exactly what they needed to counter her abilities."

I grabbed Fiona by one shoulder. "They didn't know everything. She can protect herself because they have no idea she has witchcraft, thanks to our bond. They just see her as an extremely powerful Fae who gave birth to a dragon. She can use that until we find her." I was careful not to say what Fiona was. That wasn't information we wanted out there.

"Search the town," Gadross ordered. "I'm pulling in every agent we've got. And Violet? Try to keep Fiona from burning down anything important. We don't need that kind of attention right now."

"Bit late for that," I muttered. A nearby rubbish bin spontaneously combusted under the weight of Fiona's anger. Or maybe it was mine. The flames burned with her witch flames and mine. "Though to be fair, I'm as pissed as she is."

Fiona growled, and her hands were shaking. Either from blood loss or rage. Possibly both. "We need to find her. Now."

"We will," I assured her, though my own heart was racing with fear for Aislinn. "But

we need to be smart about this. Running around blindly is exactly what they want us to do. That's how they get us, too. And I bet anything that they need us as well. They did this to get us to let our guard down."

"Right. Actually," Fiona said, pulling out some of the documents we'd stolen from the house, "maybe not so blindly. Look at this. It's a ritual diagram. They need specific locations for whatever they're planning. Places where the magical energy aligns just right."

I studied the papers. My magical senses picked up traces of power embedded in the ink. "These markings are like the ones we saw in the wine cellars."

"I'll be right there," Gadross said through the phone. "If you leave, stay in contact."

"I'm going to kill that fashion-challenged bastard," Fiona growled as she studied the scorched pavement where Aislinn had vanished. Her magic left burning footprints in her wake as she paced. The heat of her anger literally melted the snow. Her power was tied to her emotions, and right now, those emotions were running hot enough to melt steel. I could relate but I was trying to keep my cool so we could come up with a plan and rescue Aislinn.

An idea hit me. "We need to try and track the magic to her." I knelt beside one of the scorch marks and tried to parse the magical signatures with a tracking. Something about the residual energy made my phoenix stir uneasily beneath my skin. The corruption seemed deeper than natural darkness could account for.

"Getting anything?" Gadross asked as he appeared beside us with considerably more grace than Fiona's earlier exit from the café.

"Maybe," I replied as my fingers hovered over the tainted snow. "I just need to get a hold of this power. Problem is that it's old. "

"It's not working," Fiona snarled as she slammed her fists into the ground.

A flash of silver caught the streetlight, and I scrambled forward. My heart stopped when I recognized Aislinn's bracelet. It was the one her daughter had made for her last Christmas. It lay in the gutter like an accusation. The charms Fiona and I had enchanted to enhance her protections pulsed weakly against the corruption surrounding it.

"Found something," I said as I scooped up the bracelet. The protection runes Aislinn had carved into it were cracked and leaking power. It created tiny auroras in the air around it. "I'm getting a trail."

Hope lifted the weight on my chest and eased the throbbing pain enough that I could finally breathe. They weren't physical tracks. They were magical traces, like breadcrumbs left by the corrupted power the shifter wielded. They wove through the streets in complex patterns. I closed my eyes and tried to follow them. Some led nowhere, others doubling back on themselves. "It's not giving me a location."

"Shite," Gadross cursed as he pulled something from his pocket. It was another of those copper disks. This one pulsed with a different kind of energy than the last one. It was more focused than the one he'd used at the morgue. "This one is designed specifically for penetrating magic and tracking corrupted energy signatures. It can't get through everything, mind you. But it's the best we've got."

"And you haven't used it yet because...?" I asked as I eyed the disk with eagerness. The runes etched into its surface were unlike anything I'd seen before.

"Because using it will alert every magical being within fifty miles that something's happening," he replied. "We'll lose the element of surprise."

"Pretty sure that ship sailed when they kidnapped Aislinn in front of a cafe full of

mundies," Fiona pointed out. She was back to pacing. Fresh blood seeped through her bandage. She either didn't notice or didn't care. Knowing her, probably both. "Besides, subtlety isn't exactly our strong suit."

Gadross caught her arm, forcing her to stop. "We need a plan. They chose this area for a reason. The town's old magic will work against us. These streets have guarded darker secrets than most people know exist. This device might not work. I'll give it a try," he said as he held up the copper disk. Ancient runes flickered across its surface as he activated it. Their light cast shadows over his weathered face. The disk hummed to life and its copper surface took on an otherworldly glow. As the power built, something went wrong. The runes began to twist and bleed together like melting wax. A high-pitched whine filled the air.

Gadross's face contorted in pain. Blood began to trickle from his nose. It had to be the town's old magic fighting back against his device. The disk's glow turned sickly. It pulsed erratically like a dying heartbeat. His hands shook as he tried to maintain control. The power was too strong and too ancient. Veins stood out on his temples as more blood dripped onto his silver-streaked beard.

"Gadross!" I moved to steady him as he swayed.

He wiped the blood away with his sleeve and deactivated the disk with shaking hands. "The old town's defenses are as strong as I anticipated."

"They knew that," Fiona said grimly. "You're right about why they picked this town. These defenses are only part of what they need. They need me and Violet, too."

"What do you mean?" Gadross asked. His face was still pale.

Fiona pulled crumpled papers from her coat. "We found these at the house earlier. Look at the diagrams. They need specific power types for the ritual. Royal Fae blood

to open the way, which they have now with Aislinn. But they also need a phoenix's primordial fire and..." She hesitated, glancing at me.

"And Fiona's particular brand of magic," I finished. "They've been studying us. They thoroughly tracked our power signatures. They knew exactly what they were looking for."

"And Aislinn's witchcraft enhancement?" Gadross asked as he examined the papers with growing concern.

"They don't know about that," Fiona said as a vicious grin spread across her face despite her pallor. "They think she's just an extremely powerful Fae who gave birth to a royal dragon. Their research missed a few key details."

The wind picked up. It carried more of the whispers in languages too old for human tongues. Magic rippled through the streets, making the sodium lights flicker and spark. "Bugger," Gadross muttered as his gaze shifted toward the café. "The mundies are starting to come out of their hidey-hole. I need to deal with them before they see too much."

"Go," I said, watching as dark shapes began to coalesce in the deepening shadows. "We'll try the emergency beacon. Someone has to notice half the town going dark, right?" Turning to Fiona, I said, "We need backup. Lots of it. The kind with serious firepower and razor-sharp teeth."

My chest tightened as I thought of Aislinn, somewhere in this maze of ancient streets. Was she being prepared for a ritual that would literally tear her apart? We'd already wasted too much time. Every second we delayed was another second they had to prepare. Another second closer to her ultimate doom. Another second closer to losing her forever. The pain of that thought nearly brought me to my knees.

I glanced at Fiona and saw my own anguish reflected in her eyes. We both knew what they could do to Aislinn in the time we spent standing here. What they would do to her. And we both knew that if we didn't find her before that ritual started, there wouldn't be anything left of our friend to save.

CHAPTER 11

AISLINN

A wareness came back slowly. Trying to open my eyes was like wading through treacle. Not the golden syrup kind either. I'm talking the dark, bitter stuff that clings to everything it touches. The last thing I remembered was eating at the café with Fiona and Violet. Then all hell broke loose. There was purple light and then it felt like I was falling.

Now, there was cold stone beneath my back and vile magic humming through my bones. My head throbbed with the unmistakable hangover-like feeling of being magically knocked unconscious. Bloody brilliant way to end what was supposed to be a relaxing day spent wine tasting.

Kalli would be beside herself. I'd promised to bring her back one of those fancy biscuits from the café's display cabinet. The thought of my daughter made me think of my mate. Argies would raze the world trying to find me. A vice constricted around my heart. I had to get out of here and get back to them. And Fiona and Violet. Those two were probably going mental.

My heart began racing when I tried to move. Panic threatened to drown me. I was bloody well bound to some sort of stone altar. Magical restraints held me spread-eagled like a sacrifice in one of those dodgy horror films they show late at night on BBC Three. The position made every muscle scream in protest. Pulling against the bonds did absolutely nothing except make pretty purple sparks dance across my skin. Each spark felt like a tiny electric shock. The magic was corrupted in a way that

made my Fae blood recoil.

The chamber around me gradually came into focus. Massive stone walls stretched up into darkness. Their surfaces were covered in pulsing runes that somehow managed to look both beautiful and wrong. They reminded me of the protection sigils in Eidothea's great halls. The big difference was that these weren't made from Light magic. Where Fae runes normally flowed like water, these jerked and sputtered like dying lights at a grotty underground station. Purple light oozed between the symbols. I was beginning to hate the color. Another sin I would pin on the asshole behind this. My Kalli was a lovely purple dragon and I would be pissed if I couldn't adore her the same way I always had.

"I wouldn't bother," a cultured voice said from somewhere to my left. "Those restraints were designed specifically for your Fae power. It's quite fascinating, really. You developed a dual heritage after giving birth, yet you have no dragon. It requires such... precise containment."

I turned my head - about the only movement I could manage - to find a man watching me with unnatural amber eyes. He was tall and lean. Of course, he was dressed in an expensive suit that somehow managed to look perfectly pressed despite the dank underground setting. Dark hair swept back from aristocratic features that might have been handsome if not for the cruel twist to his mouth. Everything about him screamed old money and even older magic.

"Marcus Blackwood," he introduced himself with a slight bow that managed to be both elegant and mocking. He was a member of the family that had gone missing so long ago. How? Where had he been hiding? "Though you may know me better as the current Alpha of the Shadowmere pack. We've been watching you for quite some time, Mrs. Drake."

Well, wasn't that just bloody brilliant. I was being held captive by the leader of

Britain's most notoriously corrupt werewolf pack. I would have questioned why a non-shifter was the alpha but the pack had gotten a bit too friendly with dark magic. Clearly, those reports had been optimistic. He really had been following us. He'd done a lot of research on us. This wasn't some random opportunistic kidnapping. That meant good things were in store for me.

"Charmed," I said dryly as I channeled Fiona. She was the bravest person I knew. She'd earned the respect of a goddess with her sarcasm. I needed to be more like her and less like me at the moment. "I'd shake hands, but I'm a bit tied up at the moment. Though I have to say, your hospitality leaves something to be desired. Not even a glass of wine? And here I thought the Shadowmere pack was supposed to be sophisticated."

My attempt at humor fell flat as Marcus circled the altar like a predator sizing up prey. His movements were smooth and controlled. My Fae magic screamed warnings as corrupted energy rolled off him in waves. Whatever he was now, it wasn't just a mage. The magic surrounding him felt like oil slicking across my skin. It made me want to scrub myself clean with steel wool.

"You have no idea how long I've searched for someone like you," he said, reaching out to trace a finger along my arm. His touch burned with Dark magic. It also left a trail of shadow that sank beneath my skin. "You're a true hybrid thanks to carrying your daughter." If I could have jumped off the slab and ripped him to shreds, I would have. Anger tore through me like a brush fire.

"Your elemental powers are perfectly balanced," he continued as if he couldn't see the daggers I was glaring at him. "Do you know how rare that combination is? How powerful? You're the ideal vessel for our great work."

My rage took over and I tried to call my magic. I wanted to freeze that presumptuous git's finger until it shattered like cheap glass at a dodgy pub. Nothing happened. The

runes carved into the stone walls pulsed brighter. The absolute wankers were bloody well actively suppressing my powers. They formed complex patterns that made my eyes go all squiffy trying to look at them directly. Like trying to read the Evening Standard on the Tube after too many pints.

“If you're expecting me to ask what 'great work' means, you'll be waiting a while,” I told him. I was rocking my inner Fiona. “I've had enough cryptic magical nonsense for one day. First, the evil wine cellars, now this? Britain's supernatural community really needs to work on its hobbies.”

He laughed. The sound was like breaking glass mixed with howling winds. "Oh, I'm going to enjoy breaking that spirit." His form rippled, magic coursing over him in waves. The purple energy seemed to absorb the light around us. It turned him into something that made my soul want to try to crawl out of my body and run away screaming.

Shadow and magic merged in impossible ways. Arcane symbols blazed across skin that couldn't decide if it wanted to be flesh or pure energy. Darkness writhed beneath a form that kept trying to turn translucent. When he spoke, his voice echoed as if multiple beings were talking at once. And each one was slightly out of sync with the others.

“This is true power,” the thing that had been Marcus said. “The First Ones showed me how to transcend the limitations of mere mortal magic. They taught me to embrace chaos and become something greater. To think, I once believed being an Arch-Mage was the height of power. How blind I was.”

My stomach lurched as corrupted magic poured off him in waves. Each pulse made the runes around me burn hotter. "Looks more like you embraced being a horror show reject," I managed through gritted teeth. "Though I suppose everyone needs a hobby. Have you considered gardening instead? Much less corruption of the soul."

His magic pulled back and he resumed his human form. Though shadows still writhed beneath his skin like restless snakes. The perfect suit remained immaculate. That was grossly unfair given the circumstances. "The First Ones have promised me immortality and power beyond imagining. All I need to do is help them... redistribute the balance of magic. And you, my dear, are the key to that redistribution."

"And here I thought I was just special," I drawled, trying to ignore how the corrupted magic was seeping into my bones. It was making me sick to my stomach. Choking to death on my own vomit would damper my chances of escape. "Do all your guests get this treatment, or am I just lucky?"

"You're deflecting with humor," Marcus observed, his eyes becoming swirling pools of purple energy as he studied me like a particularly interesting specimen. "Just like your friend, Fiona. Speaking of. Once I have her and Violet, I'll have all the vessels I need." His smile widened and magical energy crackled between his teeth. "The phoenix and the witch will complete my collection. But you, my dear hybrid..." He trailed a finger through the air above my face, leaving trails of corrupted magic. "You're the perfect catalyst to start it all."

Before I could tell him exactly where to stick his perfection, magic surged through the runes on the walls. The purple light intensified until it felt like my eyes were burning. Images forced themselves into my mind. They were memories that weren't mine. Although they felt horrifically real.

I saw the College of High Magic as it had been a century ago. It was a proud institution with strict tradition. They were devoted to maintaining the boundaries between magical realms. Their halls had been a sanctuary of pure magical theory and practice. Then came Marcus's experiments. He did small things at first. He combined different schools of magic in ways that violated natural law. It was a perverted version of what Fiona, Violet and I had done. Where our power worked with one another and the limitations that came with each, he pushed the boundaries of what

magic should do rather than what it could do.

"My predecessors were weak," Marcus's voice filtered through the visions. "They believed in maintaining the old ways. They wanted to keep the magical schools separate and controlled. But the First Ones showed me a better path."

The memories shifted. They showed me a younger Marcus performing rituals in hidden chambers beneath the College. Each experiment twisted conventional magic a little more. He was corrupting the foundations of spell craft. The darkness around him grew deeper and hungrier with each violation of magical law.

The corruption crept in so gradually that many didn't notice until it was too late. His shadow magic twisted traditional spells into something evil. Those who resisted were given a choice. They must submit or become fuel for further experiments. The memories showed me fellow mages being drained of power. Bile burned the back of my throat and I worried I would lose the food I'd eaten at the cafe when their very essence was fed into a growing network of corruption.

I watched in horror as practitioners were transformed one by one. Their natural magic was perverted into something else. Some embraced the change willingly. They were drunk on the promise of power. Others fought and died screaming as their souls were torn apart and reformed into vessels of chaos.

When the visions finally released me, I was shaking and covered in cold sweat. The taste of copper filled my mouth. My skin felt like it was trying to crawl away from my body. "You're monsters," I whispered, unable to keep the horror from my voice.

"We're visionaries," Marcus corrected. He gestured to the larger chamber beyond my altar. The shadows parted like a curtain.

I hadn't been able to see it before. And now, I wished I still couldn't. The chamber

was massive. It stretched away into darkness. There were several other stone slabs that held more victims. Based on what we'd learned, I had no doubt they were witches, warlocks, and other hybrids. They were all connected by streams of corrupted power that flowed like dark rivers through the air. Their magic was being systematically stripped away and fed into massive oak barrels that lined the walls.

They were Fae wine barrels used to age and enhance magical vintages. They were similar to the ones we'd destroyed in the cellars, only there were so many more in the room next to mine. But these had been twisted, their natural preservation magic corrupted to store death essence instead. Where they should have radiated warmth and life, they now pulsed with cold hunger. The screams of the victims echoed off stone walls as their power was slowly drained.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Marcus asked. He watched the process with evident satisfaction. "Each vessel contributes something unique to the network. Witch magic provides the foundation. Warlock power adds stability. Pure mage essence allows for manipulation. But it's not enough. The network needs to be stabilized by something stronger."

"Let me guess," I said, fighting to keep my voice steady as another victim's screams echoed through the chamber. "That's where my friends and I come in?"

"Precisely." Marcus stalked around my altar. His movements were unnaturally fluid. "Individual vessels can only handle so much power before burning out. But you three are the key. Your hybrid nature will allow you to bridge different types of magic naturally. The Fae blood gives you access to ancient power, while your elemental abilities provide control. And your friends will ensure it runs smoothly. Your trio will be the perfect conductor for the entire system."

"I think I'll pass," I said, trying to sound braver than I felt. I reached for my mate bond with Argies. He could cut me off from my magic, but he couldn't touch the

mate-bond. I searched for that familiar warmth of dragon fire. My heart broke when I felt nothing. How had the runes blocked that too? Reality sunk in like a lead weight. I was well and truly on my own.

"An interesting theory," I added, stalling for time. "But what makes you think my hybrid nature won't reject your corruption entirely? Fae magic isn't exactly known for playing nice with others." That's why it was impossible for other Fae to combine their power with a witch's. My unique bond with Fiona and Violet made our unique brand of magic possible.

Marcus smiled. It wasn't a pleasant expression. "That's precisely why we've spent so long preparing. Each failed vessel helped us refine the process. The wine barrels were a particular stroke of genius. We took Fae crafting and corrupted it to our purpose. The wood is enchanted to store and enhance power, you see. We simply... redirected their purpose."

A scream pierced the air as one of the vessels convulsed. Purple energy poured from them in a heavy stream. It went into the nearest barrel, which swelled like a tick gorging on blood. I watched in horror as the victim's magic flickered and died. My mind screamed in denial as I stared at the empty husk left behind.

"You don't have a choice," Marcus continued as if nothing had happened. "The preparations are almost complete. Your friends will fall into the trap and be here in no time. Then the First Ones will reward me with power beyond imagining. No more artificial boundaries between magical disciplines. No more rules about what magic can and cannot do. There will be pure, unlimited potential."

My back shrank against the stone when he produced a ceremonial athame from his jacket. The blade was dark metal that seemed to absorb light. It was wicked sharp and would filet me with ease. I wanted to look away but the corrupted runes seemed to hold my gaze. I let out the breath I was holding when he used it to cut his own palm.

He began mixing the blood with what looked like liquid shadow in an ornate chalice.

"This will hurt," he said conversationally as he began painting runes directly onto my skin with the mixture. "Try not to pass out too quickly. The process works better if you're conscious. Besides, you'll want to feel your individual magic type being unified."

The first rune burned like acid. Tendrils of corrupted magic burrowed beneath my skin and tried to get into my magical core. Only my connection to Argies and my friends kept me from being thoroughly infected. I bit back a scream as he continued working. Each symbol connected me more deeply to the network of stolen power. The marks spread across my skin like corrupt ivy. Purple light pulsed in time with my heartbeat.

Hatred washed over me when I began to feel the other vessels. Their pain, despair, and fading essences acted as a poison that ate at what little protection I had left. Their power began flowing through me. It used my unique nature to stabilize and strengthen the matrix. It felt like being torn apart and stitched back together with barbed wire.

"Fascinating," Marcus murmured as he completed another set of runes. "Your dual nature adapts so beautifully to the process and keeps you alert. The resonance is already building. Soon, you'll be fully integrated into the circuit, and then..." He paused, head tilting like a predator hearing distant prey.

A particularly vicious surge of power cut off his words. It drew a scream from me that I couldn't suppress. It felt like my very soul was being used as a conductor of wild electricity. Through the haze of pain, I noticed Marcus consulting what looked suspiciously like my mobile.

"Your friends are being quite persistent," he commented, showing me the screen.

Messages from Fiona and Violet flashed continuously. "I do hope they figure out where you are soon. Once I have the phoenix and the witch, the circuit will be complete. Perhaps we should send them directions? After all, we wouldn't want them to miss their part in the grand transformation."

"They're going to kick your arse," I managed between waves of agony. The thought of my friends walking into this trap gave me the strength to fight against the corruption seeping through my veins.

He just smiled and continued drawing runes. Each symbol burned worse than the last as more power was forced through my unwilling body. I fought it and rejected the foreign magic. However, I couldn't keep it all out. His magic was too strong. All I could do was endure as darkness crept through my veins and shadow magic sang in my bones.

Somewhere in the distance, I thought I heard Argies roar. But that was impossible through all these wards. Wasn't it? The thought slipped away as Marcus began the next phase of the ritual. After that, everything dissolved into purple fire and pain.

"Your mate is quite powerful," Marcus observed as he added more runes. "A dragon of his caliber is rare. I look forward to studying how his magic reacts with the network. Though I imagine he'll be more... challenging to contain than you were. Perhaps we should send him a message? Let him know exactly how his beloved mate is contributing to our great work?"

The suggestion sent rage burning through me. It was enough to momentarily overwhelm the pain. "Touch my mate or my daughter," I snarled, letting my rage show in my voice, "and I'll show you exactly why the College should have locked away their dark grimoires and stuck to proper magic."

"Brave words from someone bound and helpless," Marcus chuckled. "But don't

worry. Soon, you won't care about mates or children or anything else. The First Ones will remake everything. And you'll be at the heart of that transformation. You should feel honored."

Another surge of power ripped through me. There was no holding back the screams. As consciousness began to fade, I clung to thoughts of Argies, Kalli, and my friends. They would come. They would find me. And when they did, Marcus would learn exactly why you don't mess with the Backside of Forty.

CHAPTER 12

FIONA

The last thing I saw before Aislinn vanished was her face. That stubborn, beautiful face with its mix of horror and fear. She was gone in a swirl of purple magic like some demented David Copperfield show. The image kept replaying in my head. Each loop cranked my rage up another notch until I could practically feel my magic crackling in my teeth.

So much for our relaxing wine weekend. We were supposed to be three sheets to the wind by now and cackling over some stupid show we were watching on the telly. Instead, we had apocalyptic cultists with their budget-bin evil leader who had kidnapped Aislinn. And I had this corrupted wound trying to eat its way through my side.

Speaking of which. Bloody hell, it hurt. Each heartbeat sent tendrils of vile magic creeping further through my veins like ice-cold fingers of death. This was like something was trying to hollow out your insides with a rusty spoon. It made me question everything we'd done the entire trip. How had they gotten us here in the first place? It had been my idea to go wine tasting. Hadn't it ?

I even questioned the backup plans we'd made when everything went sideways. There would be no sampling the Winter's Embrace this evening. Something I could desperately use. It might help dull the pain. At this point, we'd need to raid the whole damn winery just to numb the edges. Maybe two wineries. And a distillery for good measure.

My mind raced as the café's neon sign buzzed and flickered overhead like a dying firefly. Through the windows, the mundies who'd been cowering in the back were wandering around aimlessly as Gadross worked his magic with his disc. They'd gone from frightened rabbits to catatonic zombies. I gave myself a mental shake. We couldn't just stand here. We had to find Aislinn.

"Call Thanos," I told Violet as I clamped my hand harder against the wound. The world decided to do a merry jig around me at that moment. It felt like someone had replaced my blood with liquid nitrogen and forgot to tell my body about it. "Now, before this corruption decides to get properly creative with my internal organs. We are going to need help to find Ais."

Violet grabbed my arm as I swayed. She probably saved me from an embarrassing face-plant into the filthy snow. Her free hand fumbled for her phone. She was so upset she left little trails of phoenix fire hanging in the air like fireflies. Her fingers were trembling as she tried to dial. Nothing says 'we're totally in control of this situation' like shaky hands.

"Already on it," she muttered and finally hit his contact. She put the call on speaker phone. "Knowing how the mate bond works, the guys are probably-"

"Already together?" Thanos's voice came through clearly despite the magical interference crackling in the air. "We're at Pymm's Pondsides with Grams. Argies felt something was wrong through the mate bond about ten minutes ago. He nearly tore down half the garden. Bas just got him calmed down. You have good timing. What happened?"

"I can't believe he only got half the garden." I managed a weak laugh that turned into a grimace as the corruption surged. "He must be losing his touch. Last time Aislinn's life was on the line, he nearly took down the birthing mountain."

"Not helping, Fi," Violet muttered.

I pressed harder against the wound as Violet held her phone out. "What's happening, love?" Thanos's voice was tight with concern. He must have felt Violet's distress through their mate bond. "I felt your fear and rage."

"They took Aislinn." Violet's voice cracked. "We were at the café and... they just took her. There was this purple light and-" She broke off, her free hand clenching into a fist as phoenix fire flickered across her knuckles.

"What do you mean they took her?" Argies's voice rumbled in the background, dangerous and low. "Where is she? The bond's still there, but it feels blocked."

"We don't know yet," Violet said, her voice shaking with barely controlled rage. "Some sort of magical barrier is interfering. Gadross used his relics to track the residual energy they left behind but got nowhere. It nearly knocked him out in the process. They're still in town somewhere."

"Something about the area offers protection. Not to mention, they need a proper ritual site for whatever they're planning, and they've been building it here for years," I added.

"Fiona." Bas cut in. His deep voice carried clearly through the speaker. "What did you do to yourself? I can feel your magic destabilizing from here."

"Remember how I said this was just a normal wine-tasting trip?" I asked. I hoped I sounded more stable than I felt. "Funny story about that... turns out Hambledon has an evil cult problem. It comes complete with corrupted wine cellars. And a mage who really needs to work on his hospitality skills."

The sound of something breaking echoed through the phone. It was followed by what

could only be dragon fire. Looked like Argies was taking the news about as well as expected. Violet winced and continued with the explanation. "We destroyed the corrupted wine barrels they had infused and thought it weakened them, but they wanted us to go to the cellars..." She trailed off when she noticed how silent things had gone on the other end.

There was a long pause on their side. When Bas spoke again, his voice had gone dangerously quiet. "Corrupted Fae barrels? Using preservation magic to store something else? That sounds exactly like the work of the College of High Magic."

"The what now?" I asked, leaning against Violet as another wave of dizziness hit.

"It was a school where a group of dark practitioners took over a number of years ago," Bas explained. I felt the tension that was clear in his voice. Through the phone, I could hear doors slamming and footsteps on gravel. "They were experimenting with ways to store and transfer magical essence. They had a particular obsession with using Fae artifacts." The sound of car engines starting filled the background. "If they're involved... this is worse than we thought."

"Speaking of worse," I said as the wound pulsed painfully, "don't suppose any of that ancient knowledge includes a cure for corruption magic? Because I have to say, their hospitality leaves something to be desired. Not a single glass of wine offered before they started with the evil spells."

Wind whistled through the phone connection. They must be on the motorway already. A distant roar echoed through both the speaker and the night sky. "Was that-?" I started.

"Argies," Thanos confirmed. "He's on his way to you. We're right behind him."

"That was fast," I muttered as I eyed the growing crowd of townspeople. They were

pointing at the sky and. Oh bloody hell. That would be Argies, making the most dramatic entrance possible. Apparently, he had no patience for subtlety. I couldn't blame him. I was almost as worried as he was.

A massive shadow passed overhead. It blocked out the winter stars. Argies descended in full dragon form. His scales gleamed like a peacock sapphire in the moonlight. His wing span was wider than a house. They easily scattered snow in all directions as he landed with enough force to shake the entire street. The transformation from dragon to human was seamless. One moment there was a massive beast of legend. The next a very angry, very naked man radiating enough power to make the air shimmer.

The display sent waves of raw energy rippling through the town. I felt the corrupted wards shiver in response. Purple light pulsed through the network we'd discovered earlier. Several mundies stood frozen. They had their phones out and were recording. Perfect. Just what we needed. Viral videos of a dragon landing in Hambledon. That would do wonders for keeping the supernatural world secret.

"Show-off," Violet muttered, but her lips twitched. "You need to get dressed. I'll start damage control. Maybe a mass hallucination spell? Blame it on bad pub cheese?"

"No need," a familiar voice cut in. Gadross was irritatingly unruffled despite the chaos. His copper disc was already spinning between his fingers. "I've got this one. Though, next time, perhaps we could avoid the dramatic aerial entrance? My budget for memory modifications isn't infinite."

"Bill the Shadowmere pack," I suggested. "I'm pretty sure causing magical incidents falls under their jurisdiction, considering they started this mess."

Argies ignored our banter completely. He dressed from clothes in a bag he must have dropped before landing. Once clothed, he strode toward us with barely contained fury. His eyes still held a hint of dragon fire. The heat rolled off him in waves that

melted the snow at his feet. "Kalli's safe with Grams. She's added extra wards to the house. Nothing's getting through those barriers. Not even First Ones."

"Good to know," I said, then stumbled as another wave of corruption pulsed through my wound. The shadow magic was getting creative now and trying to sync with the larger network we'd discovered. Strong hands caught me before I could face-plant into the pavement. They brought with them the familiar scent of autumn leaves and ancient forests.

"You're getting worse," Bas observed. How was he there with us already? His Fae magic probed the wound gently, recoiling from the shadow taint. "This is not good. The corruption is trying to integrate with your nicotisa power."

"Story of my life," I agreed. I leaned into him despite my best attempts to look tough. The contact helped stabilize my magic and push back against the magical poison. "Though I have to say, corruption really brings out my eyes. Makes them sort of glow. It's very fetching if you're into the whole possessed by evil magic aesthetic."

"You're always gorgeous," Bas murmured. His fingers traced runes around the wound. Some were protective and others designed to obliterate anything in their path. My mate was more of a bulldozer on steroids and so was his magic. His magic recognized me and would never hurt me. He was doing what he could to cleanse me. My love for him deepened as each symbol flared with Fae light. His efforts, at least temporarily, contained the spread of corruption. "Shadow magic wasn't meant to mix with life magic. It could tear you apart from the inside."

"Always looking on the bright side, aren't you?" I gripped his hand tighter, drawing strength from our connection. Through our mate bond, I could feel his worry warring with rage at seeing me hurt.

Thanos pulled Violet into a fierce embrace. Over her head, he looked at the gathering

crowd of slack-jawed mundies. Then his eyes scanned across the melted snow from Argies's arrival, and the visible corruption spreading from my wound.

"I see we're maintaining our usual level of discretion," he said dryly as his arms tightened protectively around Violet. "I suppose subtle went out the window around the time a dragon decided to land on the high street."

"We always aim to impress," I quipped and then checked on Gadross. He worked his artificing magic on the crowd. The copper disc spun faster and patterns of light wove through the air like spider silk. Glazed expressions spread through the onlookers as their memories were gently altered. Within minutes, they were wandering away and probably wondering why they'd stopped to stare at an empty street.

"The corruption is spreading," Bas murmured. His fingers traced the edges of my wound. Each touch sent warmth through my veins and temporarily pushed back the shadow magic's chill. At least it was something. "We need to find Aislinn before they can complete whatever ritual they're planning. And before this gets worse."

"I'm going to try again. Maybe with the guys here we will get somewhere," Violet said. She drew a tracking circle in the snow. She threw a ball of phoenix fire at them, making them glow. Golden light pushed back against the purple corruption that seemed to be seeping into everything now. "Bloody hell. I still can't get a clear fix on her location. It's like trying to track someone through fog made of static."

"Let's try combining our powers," Thanos said as he stepped into place beside her. Divine light sparked around his hands. It was dark grey because he was from the Underworld, but it was pure and good and made the corrupted snow hiss where it touched.

I grimaced and shook my head. "Do you think it will blow anything up? I am willing to do anything to get Aislinn back, but we've never done anything like that."

Bas's hand covered my wound entirely as he tugged me into his side. "Thanks to the connection you forged with Aislinn and Violet, it won't go sideways."

Thanos nodded in agreement. "Each of us adds our strength to the tracking. The different types of magic should let us see through whatever's blocking us."

We stood in a circle around Violet's spell and clasped hands. I immediately pushed my power out of me, and the others followed suit. It was like watching a magical symphony come together. Thanos's divine energy wove through Violet's phoenix fire to create patterns of light that made my magical senses sing. Bas's ancient Fae magic joined with mine. Autumn leaves and starlight danced through the air. Violet and Thanos's power threaded through Bas and mine. Hope surged to fill me. This might work. I added my nicotisa power next. I'd held it back not wanting to overload the magic. Argies's dragon essence completed the circle. It was raw, furious, and desperate, but melded with ours without issue.

The tracking spell exploded outward like a blast wave. It illuminated magical energies throughout the region. What we saw made my stomach turn. Purple corruption threaded through the land like infected veins. It was centered on the wine cellars but spread far beyond. The cult had created a network of power collectors. They'd used the natural properties of the cellars to store and enhance their twisted magic.

"Looking a bit Evil Overlord chic, isn't it?" I commented. I was masking my horror with humor. "I have to say, purple's an interesting choice for corruption. You'd think they'd go with classic black."

"This is wrong," Bas said. His aristocratic features were tight with disgust. His grip on my waist tightened. I felt recognition through our mate bond. Some of the magical signatures must be familiar. "They've corrupted ancient Fae workings. Those cellars were meant to preserve and enhance natural magic, not... this. These were sacred

places once."

"The corruption extends well past their traditional territory," Gadross observed as he consulted another of his artifacts. This one looked like a compass made of copper and starlight. Its needle was spinning wildly as it tried to track the spread of shadow magic. "They've been expanding for years, right under our noses. I should have caught this." His guilt soured the atmosphere.

"It's not your fault," I told him. "They've been clever about it. Using existing magical structures to hide their corruption. They're parasites in the system."

"Not just expanding," I continued, studying the patterns. The corruption in my wound let me sense things the others might miss. "Look," I pointed at a tangle of lines. "There are collection points all through the southern forest. And these signature traces are from different types of magic users. The cult's been hunting supernaturals. Gathering power from various sources."

Argies growled. The sound was more dragon than human. Heat rolled off him in waves. It made the air shimmer. "They have my mate."

"And we'll get her back," Violet assured him. Phoenix fire still danced around her hands. "But we need to be smart about this. The corruption is stronger than anything we've dealt with before. We go in half-cocked, and we could make things worse. They've been stalking us, so we have to assume they know more than we want them to."

"I found something," Thanos called from where he'd been examining an area. Divine light sparked between his fingers as he traced patterns in the air. "These energy signatures are repeating. They're being recycled through the network. But some of them are decades old."

We moved to join him, and Bas's Fae magic probed the patterns. "He's right. These traces match disappearances going back at least fifty years. They've been collecting power all this time and storing it in the corrupted cellars."

"They made an evil wine cellar," I mused. "Aging stolen magic instead of grapes. Their vintage selection leaves something to be desired."

"They've been building up to this," Fiona added. "But what-"

Her words cut off as shadows detached themselves from nearby buildings. They flowed like liquid darkness before solidifying into forms that made my magical senses scream in warning. Pack members who were twisted and corrupted by shadow magic into horrible hybrids of wolves and darkness.

"Company," I announced. I gathered my power despite the way it made my wound burn. The corruption tried to reach for the shadow magic in our attackers. It created feedback that made my head spin. "And they're definitely not here for the wine tasting. Their timing is impressive. Very dramatic."

"Less commentary, more fighting," Bas suggested, moving to cover my weak side. His Fae magic gathered around us like a storm about to break.

The first creature lunged. It moved faster than anything that size should be able to. Its form flickered between wolf and shadow. Thanos met it with a blast of magic that lit up the street like daylight. The thing screamed a sound that belonged in nightmares. Thanos's power was burning away its corrupted flesh. Score one for the demigod.

Two more attacked from opposite directions. Their movements were synchronized in a way that spoke of shared consciousness. Bas's Fae magic caught one and wrapped it in a wind tunnel that tightened until shadow essence burst from it like smoke. The other met a face full of dragon fire as Argies let loose some of his pent-up fury. The

smell of burning fur and rotten flesh filled the air. My stomach roiled heavily.

There was no time to worry about throwing up. I had to duck under the dirtiest claws I'd ever seen. I retaliated with a magical bomb. The life magic should have been anathema to these shadow-twisted beings. The corruption in my wound tried to bridge the gap. The resulting feedback nearly brought me to my knees.

"Anyone else getting really tired of these guys?" I managed through gritted teeth. "I mean, points for persistence, but they're really ruining what was supposed to be a nice weekend away."

"It's rather rude," Violet called back. She was magnificent in battle. Her witchcraft and phoenix fire burned everything it touched. The assholes recoiled from her. It gave us a brief advantage. Brilliant flames danced around her like a living aura. I added my magic to hers, and each burst of our power made the corrupted creatures shriek.

A particularly nasty specimen tried to flank us. Its movements were jerky. It was a puppet with tangled strings. Bas moved like liquid grace beside me. His Fae magic manifested as deadly shards of ice that pinned the creature in place. His power had gained razor edges and sliced through flesh and bone with surgical precision.

"One of them is different," he observed. His eyes narrowed as he scanned the battlefield. "The one at the back. Its corruption isn't complete. The shadow magic hasn't fully taken hold yet."

He was right. While the others were lost to the mage's magic, one shifter still maintained a somewhat normal form. It hung back and directed the others like a commander. The tactical positioning made it stand out among its more feral companions. At least until Argies noticed it.

He moved faster than I could track. One moment he was beside me, and the next, he

had the pack member pinned against a wall. Heat rolled off him in waves, and flames flickered at the back of his throat when he snarled. "Where is my mate?" The words carried undertones of his dragon. It made me want to run and hide.

"You're too late," the shifter gasped. Dark blood leaked from where Argies's grip tightened. Shadows writhed beneath its skin, trying to break free. "She's already being prepared. The vessels-"

Grey lightning cut off his words as Thanos deflected an attack that would have taken Argies's head off. Argies had been so consumed with his rage he hadn't seen the other werewolf who was coming at him from the side. The bolt of Thanos's power turned the guy to ash. "Perhaps this conversation would be better continued somewhere less exposed? Before the entire pack decides to join us?"

He had a point. More shadows were gathering at the edges of the street. My wound was screaming from being close to so much of the vile power. The corruption was feeding off the ambient shadow magic and trying to spread faster. We needed to regroup and question our new friend properly.

"Fall back to the B&B," I suggested, then grunted as feedback from the corruption made my knees buckle. The shadow magic was really getting creative now. I loved how it was finding new and exciting ways to make everything hurt. Bas caught me. I breathed a sigh of relief as his magic wrapped around mine protectively like a warm blanket against the chill. "Pretty sure I still have that bottle of Winter's Embrace in my trunk. Magical healing always goes better with Fae wine."

"Only you would think of wine at a time like this," Violet said, but she was already moving to cover our retreat. Her phoenix fire created a barrier between us and the encroaching shadows. The golden flames pushed back the darkness.

"I'm a problem solver," I shot back as I leaned heavily on Bas. "And right now, I'm

solving the problem of how to interrogate a corrupted shifter while dealing with magical wounds and missing friends. Wine seems perfectly reasonable. Plus, it's Fae wine. That practically makes it medicinal."

Gadross appeared beside us. His copper artifact was clutched in his hand. "I've cleared the area of mundies and set up confusion wards. No one will remember anything unusual. Perhaps next time, we could avoid massive magical battles in the middle of town on the heels of a dramatic dragon entrance? The paperwork on this is going to be a bitch."

"You're no fun," I told him, then had to lean harder on Bas as another wave of pain hit. It felt like ice spreading through my veins. I could feel invisible fingers trying to get a hold of me. "Although, somewhere with chairs sounds pretty good right now. And walls. Walls would be nice. Very supportive, walls."

We fell back in careful formation. Our time working together made the movement almost choreographed. Thanos and Violet guarded our rear while Bas helped me walk. Argies dragged our captive along. His grip never loosened even when the shifter tried to dissolve into shadows. The remaining shadow-wolves paced the edges of our group but didn't attack. They seemed to be waiting for something. Or someone.

The B&B's wards welcomed us like a warm blanket. They pushed back some of the painful chill flowing through me. Bless Violet for insisting we lay them upon arrival in town. We had gone all out when setting them up. There were layers of protection spells woven with phoenix fire. I'd never been so grateful for her paranoid habit of warding every place we stayed.

"Right then," I said as Bas helped me onto the room's chair. The wound throbbed in time with the captive shifter's struggles. "Let's have a chat with our new friend about vessels and corruption and where exactly they're keeping Aislinn. Unless he'd prefer to deal with an increasingly angry dragon?"

The shifter snarled, shadows writhing beneath his skin like living tattoos. "You don't understand what's coming. The First Ones-

"Save it," I cut him off. I channeled as much command into my voice as I could while feeling like death warmed over. Thankfully I had twenty years of experience using them with difficult patients and even more challenging doctors while working at the hospital. "I've had enough cryptic warnings for one day. Start talking sense, or I'll let the angry dragon decide how to get answers. And trust me, his diplomatic skills are somewhat limited when his mate is involved."

Argies growled in agreement. His eyes glowed with barely contained dragon fire. The shifter looked between us and took in the gathering power in the room. With the evil magic kept away, ours became even more obvious. Thanos's demigod essence was a light in the room. Add Bas's fierce Fae magic. Violet's witch-phoenix mojo, and one very pissed off dragon shifter and it was enough to make even me piss my pants. The odds weren't exactly in the guy's favor.

"Fine," he spat. "But you're already too late. The vessel is being prepared. Marcus will obtain the last two-

A strong pulse of corrupted magic sparked as it hit the wards. The malevolence slithered past and cut through the air. The nasty feel made me double over and call out as the wound flared with agony. The shifter's eyes went wide and then completely black. Shadow essence poured from his mouth like smoke next. He convulsed once and went still.

"Well," I said into the shocked silence. "That's not ominous at all. Though I have to say, points for dramatic timing."

"They killed him," Violet whispered. "The corruption consumed him from the inside out. How did it get past our wards?"

"Fucking hell. How was that spell triggered remotely?" I added through gritted teeth.

"They're watching," Bas concluded grimly. His magic curled protectively around me as another wave of corruption pulsed through my wound. "Our tracking must have gotten close to their location."

"Good," Argies said. His voice was rough with his dragon. The temperature in the room rose several degrees. "I want them to know we're coming."

I looked around at our gathered group. We had Fae, demigod, phoenix, dragon, and witch magic. Plus, whatever Gadross was packing in those artifacts of his. The corruption might be spreading, but we'd faced worse odds before. "They'd better be ready for one hell of a fight," I said. "Though maybe after we deal with this wound. Being eaten from the inside by shadow magic is really putting a damper on my battle enthusiasm."

"First," Bas said firmly, his fingers already tracing healing runes around my wound, "we deal with that. Then we find Aislinn." His eyes met mine, full of concern and determination. "And then I suggest we have a very long discussion about your definition of a normal wine-tasting trip."

CHAPTER 13

VIOLET

The dead shifter's final moments kept replaying in my mind as we prepared to infiltrate pack territory. The way the shadow essence had poured from him like smoke and his eyes went black before the life drained away was going to feature in my nightmares. If I ever slept again. Between worrying about Aislinn and watching Fiona fight the corruption spreading through her wound, rest seemed like a distant dream.

Thankfully, we had somewhere to start. Gadross had managed to track down the pack's current location. It was a long shot that we would find her in an open area on their property. It was our best connection to this mess. The tracking spell we'd done hadn't given us an exact location, but it had sent the twisted shifters after us.

"The tunnels should connect here," I said as I traced the path on the ancient map we'd retrieved from the archives. My fingers left trails of golden light across the yellowed parchment. "They lead to some wine cellars that were built over even older passages. According to this, some even dated back to Roman times. Their choice to move here makes sense given how Dark magic has twisted their nature. The limestone walls are brilliant for dampening magical signatures."

Bas nodded as he studied the markings. He was supporting Fiona with one arm. Her wound pulsed with sickly purple light as it fought against the containment runes he'd placed around it. Even watching it made my magical senses recoil. She should have stayed at the B&B to recover, but none of us wanted to leave her alone. Not to

mention, we would likely need her help.

"The stone has a strange resonance," Thanos observed as he ran his hand along the damp wall. His divine power sparked at the contact. "You can feel old magics worked into it. The ancient covens used these tunnels for something important because the limestone now naturally masks magical signatures."

"Brilliant for sneaking about," Fiona managed through gritted teeth. Despite her pain, her eyes sparked with familiar determination. "Though trekking through ancient tunnels makes my skin crawl. The gods know what creepy crawlies had made their home down there over the centuries."

"I still vote for Plan B," Thanos commented as he checked his weapons. His power sparked along the blades Bas had made for him. The hum they emitted calmed my racing heart. My mate was rarely with us on cases and I liked having him nearby for this one. The stakes were so much higher this time. "It's quick, direct, and includes at least one explosion. That was my favorite addition, Fi."

"And alert every corrupted shifter in Hambledon?" I raised an eyebrow at my mate. "Let's save the fireworks for when we actually need them."

I reached for my phoenix power and let golden flames dance around my hands as I began weaving dampening spells. The fire responded eagerly. The beast inside me wanted to burn everything and reduce this corruption to ash. It hadn't taken over entirely because it wanted to find Aislinn as much as I did.

We found the tunnel entrance behind a false wall in one of the abandoned cellars. It looked exactly like something out of a gothic horror film. Damp stone walls disappeared into the darkness. Water dripped somewhere in the distance. The sound echoed ominously. Centuries of accumulated magic surrounded us.

"Remember," I whispered as we prepared to descend, "our masking spell should hide our magical signatures, but we need to stay close."

Fiona nodded. "We can add illusions to handle visual concealment. Sound will still carry, so keep quiet. I can't hide us completely while magical corruption is trying to eat me from the inside out."

"You don't have to do any of it," Bas told her. "We can kick their asses."

Fiona shook her head. "Not without being injured or worse. They're magically juiced up. We ran earlier. Stealth is the only way we survive."

Bas nodded in agreement. We continued and my phoenix fire cast shifting shadows that made me antsy. I kept expecting one of them to jump out and sink toxic claws into me. The flames highlighted centuries of magical residue that coated the walls like invisible fingerprints. Each layer told a story. There were protection spells, concealment charms, and wards against various threats. Some were so old they barely registered as more than whispers of power.

"The corruption's getting stronger," Fiona murmured as we reached a junction. Purple light pulsed through cracks in the stone. It created patterns that made my magical senses itch. "It's like the whole place is infected. It's freaking vile."

She was right. What should have been a neutral magical space had been twisted into something that made my soul want to crawl out of my skin and run away screaming. The cult's influence had spread through the tunnels like a disease. It had tainted even the ancient protective magic woven into the stone.

"Hold still," I whispered. I laid my hand on Fiona's arm when she stumbled. Something felt wrong. My phoenix fire flared as I pushed my magic out, seeking what it was. When it encountered the corrupted power, I shoved harder. The shadow

essence trying to reach for her through the wound sizzled away like water on a hot griddle. The effort made my head spin. It was like trying to empty the Thames with a teacup.

"Thanks," she breathed and leaned into Bas. "Though I think it's getting worse. The magic knows we're here. I swear it's trying to spread faster." A growl rumbled through Bas's chest. Fiona ran a hand over him in a soothing manner.

She nodded and we continued. Argies took point as we navigated the sodding maze of passages. His dragon senses were sharper than ours. Heat rolled off him in waves that left scorch marks on the ancient stone. That kept us toasty as the temperature dropped when we got closer to pack territory proper. Eventually, frost formed on the walls despite Argies's heat. Our breath came out in visible puffs.

"Blimey, it's proper baltic down here," I muttered as I pulled my jacket tighter. The corruption was more concentrated. It felt like walking through invisible cobwebs made of ice and pain.

"This way," Argies growled softly. His eyes glowed with dragon fire as he followed a scent we couldn't detect. "I can smell her. And blood. Lots of blood."

My heart clenched at his words. We'd known they were preparing her as a vessel. Hearing it confirmed made everything more real. More urgent. The phoenix inside me stirred restlessly. It wanted to burn away everything in our path. It was so tempting. I held onto the hope she was still alive.

The tunnels opened into what I bet had once been a grand entrance hall. Now, it looked like an abandoned Victorian asylum left to decay for a century. Pack banners that should have displayed proud heraldry were rotting on the walls. Their symbols had been forgotten and left behind. They were no longer the family they had once been.

"Bloody hell," I breathed as we took in the scene. "What have they done to this place?"

They'd have to tear everything out and start over to make it remotely livable. The marble floors were cracked and seeping evil like a badly maintained council estate after a flood. Statues of pack ancestors had been smashed into grotesque shapes. They reminded me of the abstract art installations that always seemed to pop up in London's rougher areas. Gods, it was hard to breathe.

"Fiona," I whispered, "we need cover. These shadows are dodgy."

She nodded and gathered her power despite the obvious pain it caused. The illusion she wove made us meld in with our surroundings. We'd have to move slowly so we didn't disrupt it. She'd done brilliant work. Especially considering the corruption trying to eat through her defenses. Watching her fight through it made my chest tight with worry.

Argies paused before walking out the doors. "The blood smells old. It's not Aislinn's," he growled. "Her scent is also too faint for her to still be around. I don't think she's here." His voice cracked at the end and his expression became a mix of anguish and rage.

"We might still be able to find something here," Thanos told Argies as he clapped a hand on his shoulder. "We need to find more information on what we are dealing with. Including any other properties they might have. If we can find their library, we might find something there."

Argies sucked in a breath and nodded. "I smell parchment and leather this way," He replied. He gestured toward a corridor I hadn't noticed before. "If there are answers here, that's where we'll find them."

“We’ll find her,” Fiona promised Argies.

We moved carefully through the hall. It was a challenge to avoid the thickest concentrations of shadow essence. The corruption had changed the very nature of the room. What had once been a proud pack house now felt like a temple to something ancient and hungry. It was like walking through the worst parts of the London Underground at 3 AM. Only there were more evil horrors here and less drunk tourists.

The pack's library was a massive chamber that would have made any Oxford college proud. If they were into books that writhed on their shelves like they were having fits. It wasn't because the books contained powerful magic in them. It was the external power that covered them and everything around them. Something dripped from their spines like black tears and made horrible little splashing sounds on the floor.

“Fi, look at this,” I called softly as I pulled a journal from a desk that seemed less possessed than the others. The leather cover was warm to the touch and seemed to pulse like a heart. "It's Richard Blackwood's personal records. He's the mage that went bad. He and the alpha at the time worked together. It was their relationship that caused the pack's decline."

The others gathered around as I carefully opened it. I tried not to think about how the pages felt disturbingly like skin. The handwriting started neat and proper. It was something you'd see in a solicitor's office. It became increasingly manic as the entries progressed.

"Here," I pointed to an entry dated eighty years ago, "he writes about finding ancient texts in a sealed chamber beneath the wine cellars. They were about the First Ones and their power. Listen to this rubbish. 'Our magic is but a pale shadow of what it could be. The First Ones offer so much more. Their whispers grow stronger with each ritual. The power they grant is intoxicating. The pack resists, but they'll understand

once they've tasted it themselves.'

"The lot of them are barking mad," I muttered as I turned pages. "The next bit details his experiments. He was deliberately corrupting shifters. He moved on to the pack bonds." My stomach roiled when I read the next part. "He used them to spread the taint to others. Those who fought it were... bloody hell." Bile burned the back of my throat. "They were sacrificed to strengthen Blackwood's hold over what he called animals and his connection to the First Ones."

"Like father, like son," Fiona muttered. She was referring to the family member currently leading the charge. She was leaning heavily against Bas. It was her pale face that had my heart aching. "Keeping it in the family, apparently. Though I have to say, their family reunions must be mental," she finished.

More journals revealed the horrible progression. Pack members who resisted were 'converted' through brutal rituals that made my recent visit to the dentist seem pleasant by comparison. Those who couldn't be turned were used as fuel for darker workings. The corruption spread through pack bonds like a virus. It tainted those who initially fought against it. And the alpha fell last.

"This is wrong," Bas said. His voice was tight with fury as he examined a ritual circle carved into the floor. It looked like someone had taken traditional pack magic and put it through a demonic blender. "They've taken sacred magic and warped it into something else. Shifters were never meant to be led like this. Their animals have specific needs only an alpha can provide."

"It feels a bit like that kebab shop on the high street," Fiona quipped weakly. "You know, the one where even the rats won't eat the leftovers?"

"Not helping, Fi," I said. Although, I appreciated her attempt at humor. It meant she was still with us.

Thanos was fiddling around with some books and jumped back when the book he moved opened a hidden door. It was behind the bookcase. These nutters really were going for every evil lair cliché in existence. We poked our heads in and saw that it led to what looked like a research room. The walls were covered in charts and diagrams that would have given my old math teacher a migraine. They detailed magical compatibility and resonance factors for different supernatural beings.

My blood ran cold as I studied the information. It was like looking at a shopping list written by someone planning to build a bomb out of people. "This is why they took Aislinn."

"And why they need us," Fiona added grimly. "Look. They need individuals with multiple magical signatures who could act as a bridge. Aislinn fits this as well as both of us. She's got Fae blood combined with her connection to dragon magic through carrying Kalli."

"The perfect vessel," Thanos agreed grimly. He entered and picked up a set of documents. "They've been collecting other supernatural beings for decades. Testing different combinations and trying to find the right mixture of power types. They're some demented magical mad scientists."

The alarm that shattered our investigation sounded like a cross between a police siren and a banshee with a head cold. Shadow essence began pouring from the walls like someone had turned on corrupted taps. "Company is coming," Fiona announced unnecessarily as heavy footsteps thundered above us. "And they don't sound like they're bringing tea and biscuits."

We backed away from the hidden room and turned to face the attack. The first enforcer burst through the library doors in a form that defied natural law. It was caught between wolf and man. It had too many limbs and eyes that burned with purple fire. It looked like large sections of its organs had been pulled outside its body.

More followed. Each was warped in its own unique and horrifying way.

"Well," I said as I called my phoenix fire, "I suppose subtle is off the table. Rather like my gran at Christmas dinner after too much sherry."

The battle that followed was pure chaos. My flames met corrupted flesh while Thanos carved paths through horrifying beasts. Bas wielded his weapons with as much skill, while Fiona lobbed magical bombs at them. Like the night before, there were too bloody many. They were damn strong. Each enforcer could shift between multiple forms. It made them nearly impossible to pin down. One moment, you'd be fighting what looked like a wolf. The next, it would dissolve into something with too many teeth and not enough physics.

"We need to fall back," Bas called as another wave of enforcers poured in. "There are too many, and they're drawing power from the corruption in the walls!"

He was right. Even Argies's dragon fire wasn't enough to keep them all at bay. Argies could shift and take a large portion of them out, but we wouldn't survive the collapse of the building on top of us. There wasn't enough room for how big his beast was.

We began retreating. We had to fight for every step like it was the last queue at Tesco's before a holiday. That's when one of the enforcers got too close. Something caught Argies's attention and made him roar with fury. "Aislinn," he snarled. Dragon fire lit his eyes. "Her blood is on this one. They're using it to track our movements!"

The enforcer's laugh was like breaking glass. "The vessel serves her purpose well. Soon, you'll all serve the First Ones. The old ways will-"

Argies's flames cut off whatever else he was going to say. Thankfully, we'd heard enough. They were using Aislinn's blood for tracking magic. Which meant she was still alive, but for how much longer? Bas and Thanos shoved Fiona and me behind

them. The three men acted as a wall between us and the shifters.

We fought our way back to the tunnels. Fiona and I used our magic to seal the entrance behind us with every ward we could muster. The sound of corrupted enforcers throwing themselves against the barrier echoed through the stone like the world's worst drum solo. "Well," Fiona said as we caught our breath, "that could have gone better. Though I suppose finding out Aislinn is still alive counts as a win? Even if we had to fight the pack from hell to get it?"

I nodded in agreement and continued down the tunnel. "They've got to be keeping her close. And we know why they chose us. That's something."

"It's not enough," Argies growled. His hands were still smoking from the battle. "We need to get to her before they complete whatever ritual they're planning."

"We will," I assured him. "They can't finish without Fiona and me. We need a new plan before we try again. One that preferably doesn't end with us fighting an entire pack of corrupted shifters in their own territory. They will overwhelm us if we try again."

"I might have an idea about that," Thanos said slowly. "But you're not going to like it."

Looking at his expression, I had a feeling he was right. But then again, when had any of our plans gone the way we expected? At least this time, we knew what we were up against. Sort of. Now, we just had to figure out how to save Aislinn from being used as a mystical battery for ancient horrors beyond comprehension.

CHAPTER 14

VIOLET

The Department's computer system hummed as Gadross pulled up another file on the Blackwood family. After our disastrous encounter at pack lands, we'd retreated to regroup and dig deeper. Being overwhelmed a second time had shaken all of us. It wasn't something we were used to encountering. Of course, we were down Aislinn and Fiona was crippled by her injury.

But the excursion hadn't all been for nothing. It sparked ideas and a place for us to look further. It was unlikely Marcus was keeping Aislinn close to the pack. Argies acknowledged her scent was likely secondary. It made sense that he would keep tight control over the ritual. It was evident that he didn't have complete control over the shifters. Their natures were too volatile.

"Here's something interesting," Gadross said. He tapped the screen for emphasis. "Before Richard Blackwood went off the rails, his family maintained a private cemetery. It predates the corruption by at least a century."

I leaned over his shoulder and scanned the historical records. "A family mausoleum? That's rather posh. "

"I'll try not to take offense to that," Fiona replied from where she was propped up in a chair. She was still pale from her wound. "My family created ours out of necessity to secure the portal to Eidothea. But in the Blackwood's case, I'm betting on old money and magic. They'd want somewhere special to keep their secrets."

"And their bodies," Bas added as he studied the architectural plans Gadross had pulled up. "Look at these designs. There's an entire network of chambers underneath the mausoleum."

"The records mention they used it to store their magical artifacts," Gadross noted. "Things they wanted to keep away from prying eyes. And since it predates the corruption..."

"It might give us access to Aislinn through a less defended route," I finished. Hope stirred in my chest, making me giddy. "The corruption would have had to work around the consecration. That could mean weaker defenses."

"Or at least different ones," Thanos pointed out. "It's worth checking out either way. Has to be better than fighting our way through the pack again."

Argies, who had been silently brooding since our retreat, finally spoke up. "If there's any chance it leads us to Aislinn, I say we take it."

I nodded and grimaced as the purple light pulsed through Fiona's bandages. She was a liability as much as an asset right now. But we had to do something. We would have our asses handed to us if we charged back into pack territory for another round with those corrupted enforcers.

"Right then," I said, straightening up. "Let's go poke around some posh graves. Should be a laugh."

The trip to the cemetery was tense. We kept to the shadows and avoided the main roads where corrupted pack members might patrol. It made my stomach roil when I noted how wrong Hambleton felt. The corruption had spread beyond since we arrived. It was seeping into the town like a slow poison.

We scaled the cemetery wall rather than risk the main gates. The old stones were slick with evening dew, which made for a treacherous climb. Fiona barely managed it. Her wound was clearly causing her more pain than she let on. Bas stayed close to her and was ready to catch her if she slipped. Gadross moved with surprising agility behind us, his eyes constantly scanning the shadows as he brought up the rear.

The Blackwood mausoleum rose before us. It was a Gothic monstrosity silhouetted against the darkening sky. My phoenix stirred beneath my skin. As we approached, my magical senses screamed warnings. The corrupted power flowing through the underground chambers felt like oil slicking across my skin. It made me want to shift and burn it all away. But that wouldn't help us find Aislinn.

"There's something down there," I whispered. I had to fight back nausea as another wave of dark magic rolled over us. "The corruption, bloody hell, it's worse than it was in the cellars."

"Can you get a fix on the layout?" Fiona asked. "Is it the same as the blueprints? Or has it been changed?" She was leaning heavily against Bas.

"I can't say for sure. It's like looking through dirty water. There's definitely a way down through here." I gestured to the mausoleum. I swear someone in the family had gotten overexcited with the gargoyles when they designed it. "The wards are keyed to the corrupted magic, so I can't determine if they're weak or not."

"Lovely," Fiona muttered. "This evil cult has embraced all the cliches. Having a secret underground lair accessed through a creepy tomb is the cherry on top. I don't suppose anyone brought a torch?" She sighed and continued, "I'm not sure I can maintain my witch fire that long. I want to save my energy."

"Definitely conserve all you can. I've got illumination covered," I promised as I conjured a fireball.

Thanos moved forward and lifted a hand in the air. He traced some sort of sigils that lit up for a few seconds. "The dark magic is warring with the original protections, which has created weak points. If we hit them right..."

"We can break through without setting off every alarm in Hambledon," I finished. "Bas, can you handle the Fae elements? There seemed to be a significant number of them, and Fiona should reserve herself."

"The magical signatures are unlike anything in the Department records," Gadross observed, studying the warring energies with a furrowed brow. "The corruption has twisted the original wards into something new."

Bas nodded grimly and stepped forward. His Fae magic shimmered in the air as he began dismantling layers of corrupted protections. I joined him and threw my phoenix fire to burn away components while he handled the Fae elements. The work was delicate. Like trying to unpick a jumper made of razor wire and malice.

"Bloody hell," I muttered as another trap revealed itself. This one was particularly nasty. It was a blend of shifter essence and corrupted Fae magic that would have turned any intruder into a rather artistic bloody stain. "They've really gone all out with the security, haven't they?"

"How are the wards getting stronger?" Bas asked as he carefully unwound another layer.

"These patterns," Gadross murmured, tracing the energy flows in the air. "They're actively adapting to our attempts to dismantle them."

Fiona shook her head. "My guess is they're getting desperate to protect their ritual and reinforcing all of their wards at once."

A sharp gasp from Fiona made us all turn. Fresh blood seeped through her bandages as animated shadows tried to force their way into the wound. They moved with purpose. They were testing her defenses. "I'm fine," she insisted through gritted teeth, though she was anything but. "Just focus on getting us in. These shadows are being arseholes, but I can handle them."

It took us nearly twenty minutes to create a safe passage through the wards. By the end, my phoenix was screaming to be released so it could burn away all this corruption. The entrance we revealed led to steep stone stairs descending into darkness. "Right then," I said as I called more phoenix fire to light our way. "Let's go see what horrors await us in the Hambledon Underground. It's probably not as crowded as the London Tube."

Fiona smirked at me. "It might be as dangerous, though."

"The Department's architectural records didn't show half of what's down here," Gadross added grimly as we descended.

The stairs opened into a massive chamber that made my heart stop. Rows of containment circles filled the space. Each held a supernatural being in various stages of power drain. The magic that pervaded the air was thick with death and corruption.

"Oh gods," I breathed as my fire revealed the full horror of what was happening. The leader was draining power from these beings and transforming it so he could use it for his dark ritual. The process was like watching someone try to turn wine into poison. Here, he was using living souls instead of grapes.

"We need to help them," Fiona started forward, but Bas held her back.

"Their cores have been corrupted," I explained. I nearly lost what little food I had in my stomach. "The process is not reversible. If we had time, I would burn this place to

the ground and put them out of their misery."

"We can't alert the leader to our presence," Fiona replied with a sigh as we continued.

"Each circle shows signs of prolonged power extraction," Gadross noted, his voice tight with horror as he examined the nearest containment field. "They've been here for months, maybe years."

We hadn't gone too far when a sudden surge of power made me reel. It was Bas and Argies. They'd combined their abilities. Dragon fire merged with Fae magic in a display that would have been beautiful if it wasn't born of desperation. The combined force shattered major barriers that had been hiding chambers.

"So much for a stealthy approach," I muttered as alarms shrieked through the complex. The sound was like having a fire alarm go off inside your skull.

"There," Argies growled, already moving forward. His nostrils flared as he caught Aislinn's scent. "She was here recently. The trail leads deeper."

Fresh blood marred the floor near one of the circles. Based on how Argies was reacting, it was Aislinn's blood. They'd moved her shortly before we arrived. Just our bloody luck. "Don't touch anything," I warned as we proceeded. "The corruption is active here. It's trying to-"

The shadows ahead of us condensed and formed into a familiar figure. Peterson stood before us. Though 'stood' might be generous. He sort of flowed like oil on water. His form rippled between solid and shadow, and purple energy leaked from his eyes.

"Bloody hell," I breathed. "What have they done to you? "

Gadross shifted into a defensive stance beside me, his expression grim as he assessed

what Peterson had become. "They've shown me true power," he replied in a voice that echoed wrongly. "The kind your precious Department tries to suppress. The old ways are returning, and the vessels will-"

Thanos interrupted him with a blast of demigod magic that should have incinerated him. Instead, Peterson flowed around it like liquid darkness. He moved faster than I thought possible. I screamed when he materialized behind Thanos with claws of shadow aimed at his throat.

I reacted on instinct. Phoenix fire erupted from my hands. The golden flames caught Peterson mid-strike. For a moment, his form solidified enough for us to see what he'd become. The corruption had eaten away his humanity. It left something that existed between states of being. Something dark had replaced blood in his veins. He was a living conduit for dark magic.

"You are the final vessels and have walked into our trap," he snarled as he danced away from my flames. "When the moon reaches its peak, the First Ones will have their anchor in this world. Your power will open the way."

"Not bloody likely," I shot back as I gathered more fire. "We're getting her back. Then we're going to dismantle everything you've built here."

His laugh was like breaking glass. "You don't understand. This can't be stopped. It spreads through all it touches." His gaze fixed on Fiona's wound meaningfully. "Every defense broken, every barrier crossed just feeds it. Even now, your friend's power transforms. Soon she'll be-"

Argies's dragon fire cut him off, but Peterson was already moving. He flowed into the shadows cast by my flames. He used them as paths we couldn't follow. His final words echoed back to us. "Time grows short. When midnight comes, the old ways return. You will serve as the perfect vessels. The rest of you will also serve in time."

"Well," Fiona said into the silence that followed, "that was dramatic, wasn't it? Though I have to say, the whole 'liquid shadow' thing really isn't a good look on him."

"His magical signature has been completely rewritten," Gadross said, studying the residual energy with a mix of horror and fascination. "There's almost nothing left of his original pattern."

I examined the traces of Peterson's essence. "If they've done that to Aislinn..."

"They haven't," Argies growled as he cut me off. His hands were smoking with barely contained dragon fire. "Her scent is still pure. But it's getting weaker. We need to move."

"At least we know we're getting close," Thanos pointed out as we moved deeper into the complex. "And we have time. It's not even morning yet. They need the moon at its peak. That gives us several hours."

"Several hours to find Aislinn, stop an apocalyptic ritual, and deal with an entire pack of shadow-corrupted shifters," Fiona summarized. "Plus, whatever other horrors they've got waiting down here. Should be a piece of cake, yeah?"

I was about to reply when my senses screamed a warning. The energy ahead was different. It pulsed with a rhythm that made my magical core recoil. We were getting close to something. Something big.

"Does anyone else feel that?" I asked, though based on their expressions, they did. "Whatever is going on ahead has a heartbeat."

"The ritual chamber," Bas said grimly. "They're channeling power through the entire complex and using these tunnels like magical circuits. And based on these energy

patterns..." He trailed off as he studied the purple light that seeped from the walls .

"Based on what?" I prompted, though I had a feeling I knew what he was going to say.

"The magical frequencies are converging," Gadross added, his face pale as he studied the pulsing energy. "Like tributaries flowing into a river of power."

"Based on this power, we're not approaching a ritual chamber," Bas replied. "We're walking into the heart of whatever they're building. And it's already active."

Lovely. Just bloody lovely. Another fun day out with the Backside of Forty crew. Although I had to admit, even for us, this was getting a bit excessive. We were weaker without Aislinn, and it terrified me.

The tunnel ahead opened into what had once been a natural cavern beneath Hambledon. The limestone walls were carved with runes that pulsed with that sickly purple light. Each symbol looked like it had been etched with acid and pain rather than proper tools. The physical stench of decay made my nausea worse.

"Anyone else getting horror film vibes?" Fiona asked. She flinched as another wave of corruption tried to seep through her wound. Bas's power automatically reached out to push it away. "Because I'm fairly certain this is the part where someone says 'what could possibly go wrong' and then everything goes completely tits up."

"Don't," I warned her, though I agreed. The cavern ahead felt like something out of one of those late-night films they show on Channel Four when they're trying to be edgy. "I swear I'm going mental just being near this place. Everything natural has been turned inside out."

"The process is accelerating," Bas observed. His aristocratic features were tight with

disgust as he studied the magical currents flowing through the chamber.

A scream cut through the air. One I recognized. Aislinn's voice was filled with pain and fury. The sound made my magic surge beneath my skin. And golden fire erupted around my hands without conscious thought.

"I'm not sure how close that is," Argies snarled. His dragon fire lit his eyes. The temperature in the cavern rose several degrees as his control slipped. "But something's wrong with the acoustics. The sound's being redirected and magically amplified."

"The chamber's architecture," Gadross noted grimly, "it's designed to channel and amplify magical frequencies."

He was right. The scream seemed to come from multiple directions at once. It bounced off the corrupted walls in ways that defied normal physics. Why make anything simple when you could be dramatic about it? "They're using her pain to power something," I realized as my magical senses picked up patterns in the energy flows.

Fiona nodded and gestured ahead of us in an arc. "Each scream feeds into these circuits they've built. It's all connected. The vessels, the ritual, even these bloody walls. They've turned all of Hambleton's underground into one massive magical machine."

"And we are the battery they need to power it," I finished. Her face was pale but determined despite the corruption trying to eat through her defenses. "As soon as they get us, they'll be able to activate it fully."

Another scream echoed through the chambers. This one cut off abruptly. The sudden silence was somehow worse than the sound had been. The purple light pulsing

through the runes intensified. I could feel power building throughout the complex like pressure before a storm. "We can't go running after the sound. It's a trap to lure us in," I warned Argies.

"You're right. But time is running out," Thanos said unnecessarily. "We need to move. Now."

"Should we split up?" Fiona asked. "Cover more ground? "

"Not bloody likely," I replied. "Have you never seen a horror film? Splitting up is exactly what they want us to do. Besides, I've got a better idea." I reached for my phoenix fire, letting it build until golden flames filled my vision. "These tunnels are connected, yeah? Part of their magical circuit?"

Understanding dawned in Bas's eyes. "If we disrupt the flow in one section..."

"It'll ripple through the whole system," I confirmed with a grim smile. "It might even give us a clearer path to Aislinn. Though I imagine they'll have something to say about us mucking about with their careful planning."

"Let them try," Argies growled. His form started to shimmer with barely contained dragon power. "I've got some things to say about them taking my mate."

I gathered my power and allowed the phoenix to rise within me. At my side, Thanos's blade pulsed in harmony with my flames while Bas and Argies prepared their own assault on the magical circuits. Gadross positioned himself strategically, ready to analyze any weaknesses our combined attack might reveal.

"Ready?" I asked, though it was a bit of a redundant question. None of us were really ready for this level of madness, but when had that ever stopped us?

"Let's try not to bring the whole of Hambledon down on our heads," Fiona suggested as she gathered what power she could despite her wound.

"No promises," I replied and then released my power into the nearest cluster of corrupted runes.

The effect was immediate and violent. My phoenix fire hit the magical circuit like a hammer to glass. It sent fractures of golden light racing through the purple corruption. The backlash nearly knocked me off my feet. Thanos cut through the stone. Grey lightning sparked across the surface. Bas's Fae magic targeted specific nodes and Argies's dragon fire provided raw power. Fiona's magic twined with mine to enhance my assault.

For a moment, it seemed to be working. The corruption retreated and revealed cleaner passages beneath its taint. Then, the shadows erupted from the walls like geysers of liquid darkness. They formed into nightmare shapes with the faces of previous victims twisted in their depths.

But it was Argies who turned the tide. His fury at Aislinn's capture finally broke free. He transformed into his full dragon form despite the confined space. The rest of us scrambled to the edges of the room. The cavern could barely contain him, but that didn't seem to matter as his fire melted stone and shadow alike.

The magical circuit was overloaded under our combined assault. Victory turned to horror as I realized the corruption wasn't retreating. It was being drawn deeper into the complex. Our power was feeding something that had alarm bells clanging in my head. Aislinn's scream echoed through the chambers then. It had changed somehow. It was no longer pure. The sound made my heart ache even as it urged me to burn everything.

"We need to move," Thanos said, already heading toward the source. He was right.

The corrupted power was building, and somewhere ahead, our friend was being used to power a ritual that could destroy everything we knew. We couldn't take our time to avoid being captured in the process.

CHAPTER 15

FIONA

The vile magic tore through the tunnels like a hunter as we followed Aislinn's screams. Each pulse of corrupted power made the wound in my side burn hotter. It was like someone had shoved a hot poker into my flesh and kept twisting it deeper. I was beyond wanting to throw up and pass out. All I knew was pain. It had evolved beyond mere physical sensation. Now it made me feel like I was being hollowed out from the inside.

"You okay?" Violet asked as she steadied me after a particularly vicious surge. Her witch fire cast dancing shadows on the limestone walls. "You're looking a bit peaky."

"I'm brilliant," I managed through gritted teeth. "Nothing like having evil magic try to eat you from the inside out to really make you appreciate life's little moments. Though I have to say, the corruption's got style. Purple's a bold choice for evil magic. Very avant-garde. And I do love it when someone underestimates me. I have no doubt he expected me to cave by now and get captured by his people."

"Only you would critique the aesthetic choices of dark magic while it's trying to kill you," Violet muttered, but her worried frown eased slightly. "This asshole is just another in a long line of those who assumed we were weak because we're middle-aged women. It's one of the perks of being our age."

Gadross moved closer, his eyes narrowing as he studied the corruption seeping from my wound. "The magical signature is unlike anything in the Department's records. It's

actively evolving."

Bas's hand tightened on my waist. Through our mate bond, I could feel his fury at seeing me in pain. It warred with the need to stay focused on our mission. He didn't even have to put effort into pushing back against the corruption trying to seep through my wound. His Fae magic worked at it automatically. Unfortunately, it was like trying to hold back the Thames with a paper towel.

"The corruption's spreading faster," he observed grimly. "It's responding to something in this complex. I will not lose you to this."

"No one is losing anyone. This guy might have stalked us, but he has no idea who we are or what we are capable of. He's relying on all the evil brewing down here," I replied. "I swear this place makes the London Underground feel welcoming. At least there, you just have to worry about drunk tourists and that weird smell no one can identify."

The tunnels opened into what had once been a natural cavern. Now, it was something else entirely. It was no surprise to find runes carved into the limestone walls. Each symbol looked like it had been etched with acid. Although, knowing the guy behind this, it was done with pain rather than proper tools. The sound of water dripping somewhere in the darkness was distracting. Each drop hit the stone with an echoing finality, making my skin crawl.

I opened my magical powers and looked around. There were patterns that had my stomach trying to crawl up my throat.

"Holy mother of magic," I breathed as I traced the flows with growing horror. "The magic they used to connect every victim over the years to this tunnel system is complex and wasn't done by one person. How they managed to seamlessly continue the work despite the change in power signatures is beyond comprehension."

"It's like aging wine," Violet added. "The ritual was started centuries ago. The current leader didn't start anything new. He's using the metaphorical barrel loaded all those years ago. Yeah, they're using souls instead of grapes, but the process still applies. The new person is continuing work already set into motion."

"The magical architecture spans generations," Gadross said, his scholarly nature emerging despite the horror. "Each leader adding their own signature while maintaining the original framework."

"That's disgusting," Thanos commented, his eyes darkened like storm clouds. "Even the Underworld has standards."

I nodded, fighting back nausea as I followed the corrupted energy paths. "That makes this a giant magical distillery from hell."

"The pack must have been providing test subjects for years," Argies growled. His dragon fire made the air shimmer with heat. "That's why so many supernaturals have gone missing in this region."

"This is interesting," Bas said grimly. He gestured to a chamber branching off from the main cavern. "I never would have expected something like this down here."

The room he indicated was small but packed with texts that practically radiated ancient power. Scrolls and grimoires lined shelves that were carved directly into the stone. Many of them writhed as if the knowledge they contained was trying to escape. You could feel the centuries of accumulated magical energy.

"A hidden library," Thanos observed as he examined the titles. His expression darkened. "These texts are about the First Ones."

"These volumes," Gadross breathed, his eyes wide as he scanned the ancient tomes.

"Some of these were thought lost centuries ago. The Department's archives have only fragments of this knowledge."

"That's the hundredth time we've heard reference to them. I'm not certain I understand who they are," I admitted. The corruption surged, making me grab Bas's arm to stay upright.

"Not who," Violet corrected as she carefully opened one of the less aggressive-looking tomes. The pages crackled with age and residual power. "What. According to this, they existed before magic was ordered into different disciplines. Before the barriers between realms were established."

I moved closer. I had to ignore how the corruption tried to drag at my steps. The text she'd found was written in a language I didn't understand. I thought I understood what they meant. "They want to unmake the barriers," I said unnecessarily. We all knew what the end goal was. "Why would they want to return all magic to its raw, chaotic state?"

"Ignorance? Because he was raised to continue his family's work? The price would be the complete destruction of our current magical system," Bas added. His aristocratic features were tight with rage. "Everything we know about how magic works would be undone. The very foundations of power would collapse."

"And let me guess," I said as I skimmed another passage, "that would be bad for basically everyone except these First Ones and their cultist fan club?"

"Catastrophically bad," Thanos confirmed. He'd found another text and was reading rapidly. "The winter solstice is less than twenty-four hours away. The alignment will weaken the barriers enough for them to push through."

"Using the vessel network as an anchor," I finished. "He's going to step up his attempt

to grab us. Our hybrid nature and bond naturally allow us to bridge different types of magic. We're the perfect conduit."

Gadross moved between the shelves, his trained eye cataloging the collection. "These texts detail rituals that were banned for good reason. The power requirements alone would destroy most practitioners."

Bas's grip on me tightened protectively. "Yes, your combined powers would complete the circuit."

A howl cut through the air, but it wasn't like any wolf I'd ever heard. The sound was like static that was trying to form words. Beings began pooling at the chamber entrance. My wound burned with fresh agony. "We've got company," I announced unnecessarily as the first of the transformed pack members flowed into view. "And they're definitely not here for a book club meeting."

These weren't like the ones we'd fought before. They were more rot than wolf now. Their forms were putrid and decaying even as they moved. Purple energy leaked from their eyes and dripped from mouths full of too many teeth. The sight made me wish I'd skipped breakfast. And lunch. And possibly every meal for the last week.

"The corruption's completely overtaken them," Violet breathed as she called her witch fire. Blue flames cast strange shadows across the twisted creatures. "The pack hierarchy has been destroyed by dark magic, which is why a mage is their alpha."

"Exactly. The alpha bond's been perverted," Bas continued as he slashed his weapon in a menacing manner. "The leader has replaced it with something else. Something infinitely more dangerous."

One of the creatures laughed. The sound was like breaking glass and screaming wind. "The old ways are stronger than pack law," it said in a voice that echoed weirdly.

"The First Ones have shown us true power. Soon, you'll understand, too."

"I'll pass, thanks," I replied. "I'm not really in the market for evil makeovers. Though I have to admire your commitment to the aesthetic."

They attacked as one and moved with impossible fluidity. Violet's witch fire passed right through them. Thanos's weapon cleaved through some and moved harmlessly through other rotten bodies. Gadross moved defensively, analyzing their patterns even as he dodged their attacks. But as another wave of corrupted power surged through my wound, I had an idea. A really stupid, potentially lethal idea.

"Violet," I called as I gathered power despite the pain. "Help me channel it!"

She nodded without questioning me and merged her magic with mine. We created a conduit that let me direct the corruption flowing through my wound. Instead of fighting it, I let it build before releasing it on our attackers. The effect was devastating. The twisted magic turned against them. It ripped through rotten flesh like holy water through demons. The creatures screamed as they were torn apart by the very corruption that had transformed them.

"That's my girl," Bas said with fierce pride as the last of the wolves collapsed into a gooey puddle. The victory was short-lived as my legs buckled. The backlash from channeling corrupted power sent fresh agony racing through my veins.

"Bloody hell," I gasped as the room spun. Bas lunged for me. "I vote we don't do that again unless absolutely necessary. Or at least not until I've had some spiked coffee."

Thanos caught me first. "I've got her." He gestured to the exit. "We need to move. That much power will have attracted attention."

As if in response to his words, a familiar magical signature pulsed through the

complex. It was weak but distinct. There was tainted magic around the edges, but I felt Aislinn's energy. She was warning us.

"She's still fighting," Argies growled as he moved out of the room. His dragon fire burned away the stench of rot. "She's close, and something's wrong. He's close to corrupting her magic completely."

He was right. The signal was coming from what felt like the epicenter of the plague. With each step closer, my wound festered and burned. The corruption flowing through the network was building toward the final ritual. "Hold on, Ais," I said softly as we followed her signature deeper into the complex. "We're coming. And then we're going to show these First One wannabes exactly why you don't mess with the Backside of Forty."

A laugh echoed through the tunnels. It wasn't Aislinn's this time. It had to be Marcus. The sound carried layers of darker voices beneath it, like multiple beings speaking through one throat. "Come then," he called from somewhere ahead. "Come and witness the remaking of the world. Your friend is almost ready to serve her purpose. Soon, you'll join her in ushering in the return of true magic."

"Anyone else really tired of this guy's dramatic monologuing?" I asked as we moved forward. "I mean, at least Voldemort got creative with his evil speeches. This is just getting repetitive."

"Fair point," Violet chuckled softly. "Though I'd rate him above Maleficent. At least he's not ranting about not getting invited to a baby shower. It's like he read a book that told him he had to master maniacal laughter."

"Chapter two was about giving grandiose speeches about remaking the world," I said as we approached another chamber. The corruption was so thick here it was almost visible. Purple lightning was crawling across the stone. "Someone should tell him the

classics are classic for a reason. They're outdated and overused."

"At least he's consistent," Thanos added dryly. "Evil wardrobe, evil lair, evil monologue. Points for commitment."

"The Department's seen its share of megalomaniacs," Gadross muttered, "but this one's particularly committed to the role."

Our laughter died as we reached the massive doors ahead. They were carved with the same runes we'd seen a million times. Power poured from beneath them in waves that made my wound feel like it was being filled with molten lead. But we'd become immune to them to a certain extent. At least my friends had.

Aislinn was behind those doors, and she needed us. There was no question that we'd deal with whatever horrors awaited, just like we always did. This time, I had a feeling we'd need more than one bottle of Winter's Embrace to recover.

"Right then," I said, gathering what power I could despite the corruption trying to eat me alive. "Everyone remember the plan?"

"What plan?" Violet asked with a raised eyebrow. "We never actually made one."

"Go in, save Aislinn, stop the ritual, try not to die horribly or get corrupted by ancient evil," I listed off. "You know, the usual."

"That's not a plan," Bas said, though I felt his amusement through our bond. "That's a wish list. "

"Same difference for us," I replied with forced cheer. "Ready to crash this apocalyptic party?"

"No," Violet replied with a grim smile. "But when has that ever stopped us?"

The others nodded, and we moved forward as one. The doors loomed before us like the gates of hell itself, which, given what we'd seen so far, might not be far off. It was time to crash an apocalyptic ritual and save our friend. Just another day in the life of Britain's most chaotic supernatural problem solvers.

CHAPTER 16

VIOLET

The ancient doors groaned open like a pensioner with arthritis. Bloody hell. More tunnels stretched before us. This was a maze of corruption that would make the London Underground seem straightforward. Purple sludge dripped down the stone walls and pooled on the floor like toxic waste.

"Someone needs to introduce these ancient evil types to WD-40," Fiona quipped. She was leaning heavily on Bas as purple energy pulsed from her wound. "Though he's outdone himself with the maze. Nothing says 'I'm summoning eldritch horrors' like extending the scenic route for your guests."

"Well, this is horrifying," I muttered as we watched corrupted energy drip from the ceiling like toxic rain. It even sizzled against the stone. "At least we know exactly what awaits us at the end of this charming tour. Ritual chamber, blood sacrifice, possible end of the world."

"Don't forget the fashion choices," Fiona added with a grimace. "Black robes, skull accessories, the whole dark aesthetic. Though I suppose if you're planning to unmake magic itself, you've got to dress the part."

"Speaking of which," Thanos said, divine power crackling around him as he surveyed the branching tunnels, "we need to split up. That ritual isn't going to stop itself, and we need to cover more ground."

He was right. The magical currents pulsed through the complex with purpose now. It was a corrupted heartbeat. Each wave made my magic stir restlessly. I nodded, though everything in me screamed against separating. "Three teams. The tunnels branch east, west, and center. You're right. We'll have a better chance of finding Aislinn if we divide and conquer."

"As much as I hate splitting up in the evil underground lair," Fiona added, "we're running out of time. Argies, you should take point through the middle. You've got the strongest connection to Aislinn's scent. And your dragon magic packs the most punch."

"I'll go with him," Gadross said as he pulled another copper artifact from his seemingly endless supply. This one was a sphere and looked like it had a compass set in it. Its needle spun wildly as it tried to track something. Likely the power. "I should be able to help shield against the worst of it."

He paused, then reached into his bag again. He pulled out what looked like rough-cut quartz crystals that pulsed and were lit from within. "Take one of these. They will let us communicate better than those cell phones you're all so fond of. But be warned. In a place this dark you will need to keep them clean. The corruption will try to seep in. If you see black veins starting to spread through the crystal, cleanse them immediately. Otherwise..." He grimaced. "Let's just say having dark magic whisper directly into your mind is not an experience I recommend."

"Join the club," I muttered and accepted one of the crystals. It felt warm in my palm. It was almost like holding a bit of captured sunlight. "None of us were prepared for this level of magical perversion. Thanos and I will take east," I continued as I gathered my witch fire until blue flames danced around my hands. "Fiona and Bas take the west. These should keep us connected."

"I've always wanted to go spelunking in tunnels of doom," Fiona quipped in a voice

tight with pain as she tucked her crystal into a pocket. "It really rounds out the whole evil lair experience. Although, I have to say, their interior decorator needs to be fired. Purple is best on our dragon princess." I had to agree entirely. Kalli was adorable.

"Try not to die," I told Fiona seriously as I gripped her free hand. "And Fi? Don't do anything stupid. That wound is going to try and take you over. I mean it. We need you functional when we find Aislinn."

She managed a weak grin that didn't reach her eyes. "Me? Never. I only do incredibly brilliant things that look stupid in retrospect. Besides, Bas won't let me do anything too reckless. He's worse than my mother when it comes to protecting me."

"That's what worries me," I muttered as we prepared to split off. "Your definition of 'too reckless' usually involves mouthing off and pissing off the wrong person."

"Only the necessary ones," she protested, then sobered. "Be careful, Vi. Whatever's down here is awful, old, and hungry."

"We've got this," I replied, then turned to Thanos. "Ready to crash this apocalyptic party?"

His demigod power crackled around him like contained lightning. "Lead the way. Just try not to set the entire tunnel system on fire. I'd rather not add 'buried alive' to today's list of near-death experiences. "

"No promises," I said as we split off into our assigned paths. "Sometimes a good inferno is exactly what's needed."

The eastern tunnel seemed to descend deeper with each step. The air grew thicker and colder. My senses were immediately overwhelmed by the concentration of death magic. It was like walking through a graveyard where nothing had been allowed to

properly rest. Every soul was trapped in that terrible moment between life and death.

Evidence of failed experiments and discarded vessels littered our path like trash. The scorched circles on the floor still hummed with residual power. There were shattered crystals that held traces of corrupted energy. Worst of all, the lingering echoes of pain were etched into the very stone. Each step revealed new horrors and signs of what the Blackwoods had been doing down here for centuries.

"This is awful," I said as we passed another failed ritual site. The magical residue made my magic burn beneath my skin. My magic was crying out against the perversion of natural law. "The death energy is not dispersing properly. It's being contained. I can't tell if that was intentional or not."

"Everything down here goes against the natural order, so who knows," Thanos observed grimly. "The natural properties of these tunnels could automatically store it. When you enchant limestone, it changes how things work."

As if in response to his words, the stone itself began to bleed. Dark liquid oozed from the walls. Instead of dripping down, it defied gravity and flowed upward then outward. The droplets coalesced into humanoid shapes that made my magical core recoil in horror. Blood wraiths. Dozens of them. They were created from former vessels whose life essence had been violently harvested and bound to this place.

Their bodies rippled like crimson mercury. They had half-formed faces that were melting. If I tilted my head, they had expressions of agony. Where eyes should have been, purple flames flickered in hollow sockets. The most horrifying part was their mouths. They gaped impossibly wide and were leaking black blood.

"Well," Thanos said as he drew his blades, "I guess we found where they've been keeping the leftovers. Stay close. These aren't normal spirits."

"Wasn't planning on wandering off for a tour," I replied as I called more witch fire. The flames responded eagerly. "I hate this for these people. They were innocents killed by power-hungry evil arseholes."

The shades attacked in waves. They moved with the terrible grace of the truly dead. Thanos's weapon flashed in my witch fire as he swung it in precise arcs. Thanos and I fought like one thanks to our mate bond. We knew where the other was and didn't have to worry about hurting one another by accident. We were covered in black, decayed blood as we cut them to pieces. Unfortunately, there were so many.

"Watch the backlash!" I called as I incinerated another cluster. Their final screams echoed off the tunnel walls like that scene in *The Grinch*. "He's using the defeated ones to try and grab me!" I ducked another grabby hand.

Each destroyed shade released bursts of congealed blood. It was like being struck by waves of rotten, frozen fire. Through my bond with Fiona, I got the sense that she and Bas were embroiled in a battle as well. Worry for my best friend made my heart race.

"Behind you!" Thanos called. It snapped my attention back to our fight. I spun and unleashed a wave of witch fire that reduced three shades to purified ash. Their final screams held notes of relief. That choked me up and made my eyes burn with unshed tears. Whatever fragment of their original selves remained was grateful for the release.

The communication crystal at my neck flared with Argies's voice. "The scent's getting stronger," he reported. "But it's changing. I'm afraid we're going to be too late." His voice cracked on the last part.

There was another burst of static that brought sounds of fighting. The crystal pulsed with transferred power, and I felt Argies's magic flare repeatedly. His rage burned through the connection. It was hot enough to make the crystal warm against my skin.

"Marcus is trying to feed on his bond to Aislinn to take his dragon magic," I told Thanos as we fought through another cluster of shades. Their cold essence made the air crystallize around them.

Thanos sliced a particularly aggressive shade to pieces. "Argies's rage will protect him. So will his love for Aislinn. I'm more worried about him losing his shit entirely. I just hope he doesn't bring the whole place down around our ears. Dragon fire and underground tunnels aren't exactly a stable combination."

"Would that be so bad?" I asked as I burned away another wave of shades. My magical energy was beginning to wane. Each blast required more and more effort. "It might solve our corrupt magic problem rather efficiently."

"And take our oxygen in the process," he pointed out as he carved through a shade that had tried to flank us. "We'd be buried under half of Hambledon. Given all of this, the idea is tempting."

Movement at the edge of my vision drew my attention. More shapes were emerging, but these weren't shades. The corrupted pack members that slunk toward us were barely recognizable as shifters. Shadow magic had consumed almost everything they once were. Distorted amalgamations of darkness and bestial fury was all that was left.

"Gods," I breathed as my chest tightened. It had suddenly become harder to breathe. "The corruption has eaten away everything they were. There's nothing left to save."

One of them laughed. "Save? We don't need saving. Marcus has made us strong. Made us pure. Soon, all will know the freedom of true chaos. The barriers between powers will fall, and magic will return to its primal state."

"That's not strength," I said as my witch fire blazed brighter in response to my command. It was driven by my fury over seeing magic so perverted. "That's

corruption wearing your skin like a cheap suit. And you're not even pulling it off well."

The blood wraiths surged forward like someone had rung the dinner bell at a zombie convention. Time to show these nightmarish gits what happens when they crash our rescue party. My flames caught the first wave, and I couldn't help but smirk as they shrieked. The wraiths' liquid forms bubbled and boiled away like overheated jam. There was nothing but empty space beneath their grotesque facades. That was freaky.

Beside me, Thanos went full warrior god. His sword practically sung as it sliced through the horde. "Show off," I muttered as he bisected three wraiths with one swing. He was cutting through them like Grams through her Sunday roast and looking annoyingly magnificent while doing it. The git didn't even have the decency to break a sweat.

But each death weighed heavily on my soul. These had been people once. Someone's family, friends, and pack members. Now, they were just vessels for darkness. Their very essence had been consumed by Marcus's twisted vision. The crystal flared again with Argies's voice. "We found another ritual chamber," he reported, his words tight with barely contained rage. "There are more victims. They're all dead. The walls are practically bleeding with purple fire here. Please tell me you've found her. "

"Working on it," I grunted as I immolated another shifter. Its flesh had been melted away like wax. "Bit busy with quality control issues in pack management. These guys really need a new HR department."

"Something's wrong with the energy pattern," Fiona's voice crackled through the crystal. Her usual snark was replaced by analytical focus. "It feels like it's reaching harmony. Like a corrupted orchestra tuning up. Each nexus vibrates at a specific frequency. Holy shit... they're actually using Aislinn's innate resonance as the conductor."

"Brilliant deduction," I muttered, ducking as crimson liquid whipped overhead. The wraith's form splattered against the wall when Thanos kicked it. Ugh, it was trying to reform. "And terrifying. Marcus is creating some sort of magical symphony of corruption."

The last wraith dissolved into mist, leaving behind only the steady plink of water and the low hum of whatever waited in the depths below. I pressed my palm against the tunnel wall to feel the vibrations. My magic stirred restlessly and seemed to be trying to... listen? That's how it felt. Horror washed over me as I wondered if he was already taking what he needed from Fiona and me.

"There's something else," Thanos said quietly as he cleaned his blade. "I've been studying these tunnels. They were created for a specific purpose. Look at the curve of the walls and the spacing of the support arches. It's inverted sacred geometry.

"Basically, you're saying they took a temple blueprint and turned it inside out," I surmised. "We need to rejoin one another. It suddenly feels far more dangerous to be separated."

CHAPTER 17

FIONA

The shifter hit my side like a freight train. Pain wracked every fiber of my being. One moment, I was walking beside Bas in the western tunnel. The next, I was on my knees, gasping while Bas shredded the beast. Using the wall, I got to my feet. My wound blazed with purple fire that spread through my veins like liquid nitrogen. Someone had shoved a live wire directly into my magical core and cranked the voltage to maximum.

"The final phase," I managed through gritted teeth as Bas steadied me. His hands were warm against my cold skin. "It's starting. Whatever Marcus has planned, he's not waiting for midnight. I think he's managed to get what he needs from Violet and me already."

I sensed Marcus channeling massive amounts of energy, and that was the only thing that made any sense. He was forcing power through Aislinn like water through a filter. The other vessels in the network were screaming as their remaining essence was forcibly extracted. Each cry carried notes of agony that made my stomach turn.

"Fi?" Bas's voice seemed to come from far away as another wave of backlash hit. The world spun sickeningly as corrupted magic surged through the complex. Bas's love and Fae magic wrapped around me protectively. It allowed me to think straighter.

"I can feel it," I gasped as I clutched his arm. My senses were overwhelmed by the sheer volume of power being channeled. "He's forcing everything through her. I can

feel him using her ability to bridge different types of magic to stabilize the chaos. It almost feels like he's using me as a transformer."

"Stay with me," Bas murmured. His magic probed the edges of my wound. "Don't let it pull you under."

"Wasn't planning on it," I managed. However, the effort of speaking made black spots dance across my vision. "I'm too stubborn. Plus, I've got you, Violet, Aislinn, and the kids. There's nothing that could pull me away from you guys."

The ground shook violently as ley lines reacted to the ritual. Ancient power surged through paths that hadn't been active in centuries. It made the very foundations of Hambledon tremble. Through my wound, I felt the corrupted magic flood the network. It was like watching poison spread through veins. Each pulse carried more darkness into places it was never meant to exist.

"The wine cellars are going tits up," Bas reported as another quake rocked the tunnels. Bits of ancient stone pelted us like the world's worst confetti shower. The wound in my side throbbed, making me nauseous. Pain radiated outward, feeling like someone had replaced my blood with molten glass.

I nodded in agreement. "Yeah, this whole thing's spreading faster than gossip at a town council meeting."

Through the crystal at my neck, I heard Violet's voice crackling with static. "Shit is going down now. We're out of time. We need to regroup and get Aislinn. Now."

"He's a conductor leading Hell's orchestra," I managed before another wave of pain hit. "We're in the west tunnel, near a hideously expensive Bordeaux section. Cellar organization down here went out the window long ago. Who stores their reds next to corrupted magical artifacts? Absolute savages."

"The resonance patterns in these tunnels," Thanos began through the crystal, "are oscillating between magical frequencies that shouldn't be able to exist together. He's forcing quantum superposition on a metaphysical level. The corruption's creating impossible harmonies. And the wine barrels are acting as amplifiers. The vintage years are mathematically significant dates. The bastard's turned this whole cellar into a tuning fork for chaos."

Bas's arm tightened around me as more stone rained down. The air tasted like copper and decay. There was also something older that made my magical core want to curl up and hide under a blanket with a nice cup of tea. The reaction was instinctual to protect my power from being stolen.

"Fi and Bas are closest to her," Argies's voice crackled through the crystal. It was tight with barely contained fury. "I can smell her essence from here. They're less than fifty meters from the ritual chamber. The corruption's trying to mask it, but dragon senses don't lie."

"Stay where you are, Fi," Violet cut in. "We'll come to you. No one goes in alone. This daisy chain of evil ends now, but we do it together."

"We're already moving their way," Gadross added. The sound of his copper artifacts whirled in the background. "My readings suggest the barriers are becoming critically unstable near their position. Whatever Marcus is doing, it's reaching a peak."

We jerked around when we saw movement ahead. We were poised to fight back. But instead of more twisted shifters, Argies burst around the corner. His form flickered between human and dragon as his control slipped. The temperature spiked about twenty degrees just from his presence. Dragon magic leaked off him in waves of heat that made the corruption in the walls recoil.

"I can smell her," he growled. Flames flickering between his teeth. His eyes had gone

fully reptilian and were glowing with inner fire. "She's close. The corruption is using her. It's twisting her essence into something that isn't her. What if we're too late?"

"We aren't. She is fighting to stay alive until we rescue her. No matter what, she will still be in there. We will get her back," I promised as I grabbed his hand and tried to keep him grounded. I understood why he was about to lose his shit. I wasn't far behind him. If Bas were being held, I was pretty sure the tunnels would be filled with my lime-green flames. Argies nodded in agreement and began pacing a short circuit in the narrow passage.

Right as I thought Argies was going to barrel forward, Violet and Thanos appeared from another tunnel. She had her blue witch fire coating her arms. It cast light across the stone while Thanos's demigod power crackled like contained lightning. He must be as worried as we were. His power rarely sparked like that. It was telling that the corruption writhing through the walls didn't back down at all. The combination was overwhelming.

"The barriers between magical disciplines are breaking down," Thanos reported grimly. His face was tight with concern as he scanned the tunnels. "Whatever Marcus is attempting, it's affecting the fundamental structure of magic already."

"Right then," I straightened despite my body's protests, forcing a grim smile. "Time to show this pretentious git why messing about with fundamental forces isn't as clever as Oxford made it sound. Can I just say that his timing is rubbish? We had plans to try that new Thai place tonight. Nothing ruins dinner reservations quite like a magic-hungry horror show."

The shadows around us moved in that unnatural way we'd become accustomed to down there. They peeled away from the walls and condensed into creatures that made pus demons look tame. They were former shifters, who now looked like someone had liquidized a Hot Topic store and taught it to kill.

"Isn't this just lovely," I muttered as we formed a defensive circle. "Thank you for this. This day wasn't already complicated enough. Hey, do you think they've got a loyalty program for apocalypses? You know, buy five end-of-the-world scenarios, get one free."

"That's a sale we can't afford to indulge in," Bas replied. The Fae runes along his blade cast an ethereal glow across his aristocratic features, reminding me absurdly of those nights when Dad would hold a flashlight under his chin during ghost stories. The memory felt oddly fitting, given our current situation involved actual horrors rather than imagined ones. "They're trying to drain our power before we reach the main chamber. See how they're moving? It's coordinated."

He was right. The shadow-hybrids weren't attacking randomly. They flowed like dark water and were trying to separate us while herding us deeper into the complex. We stuck together like glue and watched as their forms shifted constantly. One moment they were humanoid. The next they were bestial. Sometimes they even existed in multiple states at once. Someone had taken their physiology and put it through a blender.

"Well spotted," Thanos commented as his power lit up the tunnel. "They're part of the network and tied to you two. I think that each one we destroy will feed more into whatever Marcus is building. We shouldn't kill them."

"Brilliant," Violet muttered as her witch fire blazed brighter. "Any other wonderful news you'd like to share? Perhaps there's a hungry hellhound waiting around the corner?"

Through my wound, I could feel the corruption opening something. It had to be the barriers they kept talking about. Shit! To make it worse, each pulse sent fresh agony through my veins. It also let me sense how the network was changing, so I had to shove the discomfort aside. We needed to know what was happening before he

unleashed the performance from hell.

"Marcus," I gasped as another wave hit, "is using each surge to break down the barriers between worlds. He's opening the way for the First Ones. They're going to come through any second."

"If they do, we've lost," Argies growled. His voice was rougher as his dragon tried to emerge. "We won't be able to put the genie back in the bottle if that happens."

Before any of us could respond, the shifters surged forward like a dark tide. Dozens of them peeled away from the darkness. Their forms rippled and writhed. They were caught between human and beast in ways that defied natural law. One moment, they had too many limbs. The next, their bodies seemed to fold through dimensions that shouldn't exist. The sight made me nauseous.

"Well," Violet managed as we formed a defensive circle, "I suppose asking them to queue up properly would be too British of me?"

The battle that followed was pure chaos. I'm not talking about the fun kind you get at family Christmas when someone mentions politics, either. These things jumped at us. Their constant morphing forms made it impossible to pin them down. Traditional attacks simply passed through them. It forced us to get creative.

Violet's witch fire proved especially effective. It burned away their corrupted essence. Thanos wielded his blade with lethal precision. Each strike severed the shifters' connection to their power source before they could reform. Bas's Fae-forged sword sang through the air as well. He caught them at the moment they became corporeal and cut them down. Between Thanos's calculated strikes and Bas's fluid grace, they carved paths through the masses while Argies's dragon fire turned the air into a weapon. He superheated it until the shifters began to boil.

Marcus had done this on purpose. For each one we destroyed, the ritual grew stronger. Through my connection to the corruption network, I could feel how each 'death' fed more power into whatever Marcus was doing. It was like trying to empty a pool with a spoon while someone else was actively filling it with a fire hose.

Through spreading cracks in the walls, I glimpsed things that would give Lovecraft nightmares. The First Ones were beings of pure, unformed magic that existed before anyone had thought to write an instruction manual. Some looked like geometry having an existential crisis, while others appeared in colors that hurt my brain to process.

"Keep pushing forward," Gadross called out. His artifacts pulsed with copper light that momentarily stabilized everything around us. "Remove their connection before we cut them down. That will mean every shifter we take down weakens his hold on this section of the network!" Violet and I nodded and focused on that while keeping a stream of our witch fire flowing.

"Did you see that?" I asked as I drew strength from Bas's steady presence. His sword work had created a pattern that somehow made my nicotisa power resonate more strongly. "The corruption's retreating where we've worked our combined magic."

"It's working," Thanos confirmed as his blade found another shifter's weak point. "Your purity is growing too. Look at the walls where Violet's fire meets Argies's heat. The stone is returning to normal. We're bloody well winning."

Argies let out a sound between a laugh and a roar as his flames caught three shifters at once. Their forms dissolved into ash. "Then let's give them something to really fear. Violet! On your left!"

Violet spun, and her fire joined mine in a spiral that burned away a whole section of corrupted shadows. "Now that's what I call teamwork! Fi, can you redirect their

energy like you did upstairs?"

"Already on it," I grinned. I was finding my second wind as I caught the shifters' power and turned it back on their companions. The pain was still there, but now it had a purpose. "These gits want to play with corruption? Let's show them what happens when it meets focused magic."

The shifters fell back as we pressed forward. Our combined attacks created a cleansing wave that pushed the corruption before us. Through my wound, I could sense Aislinn's presence growing stronger. We were carving a path straight to her.

"She's fighting too," Argies called out, hope mixing with the fury in his voice. "I can feel her pushing back against whatever's holding her. She knows we're coming!"

The tunnel opened into a massive chamber that made my stomach turn. Marcus stood in a ritual circle. He looked chuffed with himself as Dark magic writhed around him like angry licorice. But it was what he'd done to Aislinn that made bile rise in my throat. She hung suspended in a massive crystal structure. Purple energy coursed through her veins like toxic lightning, each pulse stripping away more of her essence. Through my wound, I could feel how the network was using her. I could also feel Violet and myself. Marcus was taking our natural ability to bridge magical types and perverting it into something horrible.

"Welcome," Marcus called. His smug grin made me want to throat-punch him. "You're just in time to witness the remaking of magic itself. The return to true power, before artificial constraints were imposed."

"Oh, do shut up," I snapped as I gathered what power I could despite feeling like death warmed over. "I've had enough of your awful villain rubbish to last several lifetimes. I have to say that the evil lair aesthetic is a bit on the nose, innit?"

Argies's control finally shattered. His dragon form erupted fully. His wings spread to fill half the chamber as flames poured from his maw. The temperature spiked so high it felt like standing in a blast furnace. The corruption in the walls actually began to steam.

"Release her," he snarled in a voice that shook the very stones.

Marcus just smiled. The expression made shadows writhe beneath his skin. "Release her? Why would I do that when she's finally fulfilling her true purpose? She and her friends are opening the way."

Cracks appeared above us. Argies backed away from them when the First Ones pushed against an invisible membrane. Their presence made my magical core vibrate like a phone set to silent. These weren't your garden-variety monsters. They were what magic looked like before anyone had thought to give it rules.

Then, I did something either brilliant or monumentally stupid. Probably both. Instead of fighting the corruption network, I embraced it. My wound became a handy connection point. The pain was immediate and overwhelming. Someone had replaced my blood with acid. Despite that, I began altering the signature.

"What are you doing?" Marcus demanded as he sensed my presence in his system.

"Having a proper laugh," I managed through gritted teeth. "Want to see a neat trick?"

I did something I rarely ever dared and reached for my nicotisa power. Next, I did something absolutely mental. Instead of trying to purify the corruption, I let it flow through me and twisted it back on itself. The effect was immediate and catastrophic. A bit like pouring Coca-Cola into a Pepsi machine.

The crystal structure encasing our trapped sister shattered like a mirror hit by

lightning. It sent shards of corrupted magic in all directions. Argies moved faster than I'd ever seen him. His massive dragon form surged through the chaos. He caught Aislinn as she fell and cradled her against his scaled chest. His wings wrapped around them both.

Dragon fire erupted from him in waves of cleansing heat. He was burning away the Dark magic that had sunk its claws into her. The flames would have been destructive to anyone else. Not only was Aislinn bonded to Argies, she had also given birth to a dragon. It allowed the flames to only target the darkness while leaving Aislinn untouched.

"No!" Marcus howled, but there was something off about his fury. His response sounded calculated, and it made my instincts scream in warning. "The ritual-"

"Is bugged," Violet cut him off while I continued channeling power through my wound despite feeling like I'd been put through a magical wood chipper. "Time to pack it in, mate," she informed him with a snarl.

Marcus just smiled at her. It was a horrible expression. "Are you sure about that?"

The chamber groaned as Marcus vanished through one of the reality gaps, the First Ones reaching for him as he passed. The corrupted power was building throughout the complex, each pulse making my wound burn hotter.

"The barriers are still weakening," Gadross announced. His copper artifact was spinning wildly. "Marcus already has what he needs from the three of you. He can use that to continue the ritual elsewhere."

"Gods, this day just keeps getting better," I sighed as more stone rained down around us. The wound in my side felt like it was trying to tear itself open from the inside. "Next time, I vote we skip the wine tasting and go straight to stopping the apocalypse."

It'd save time, wouldn't it?"

Bas grabbed my arm as my legs threatened to give out. The backlash from corrupting Marcus's network was hitting me hard. "Time to go. This whole place is about to collapse."

"Right then," Violet said as she moved toward what looked like a safer passage. "Let's postpone the end of the world for another day. Thanos, clear us a path. Fi, can you walk?"

"Define 'walk'," I managed through gritted teeth. "If you mean 'stumble about like a fresher after last orders', then yes. Anything more coordinated is going to be a bit dodgy."

The chamber was coming apart around us, reality trying to stitch itself back together even as the lingering corruption ate away at the foundations. Through the shrinking gaps, I could still feel the First Ones watching and waiting. Their presence made the very air vibrate with their unique frequencies.

Argies held an unconscious but breathing Aislinn in his arms. The relief on his face was painful to see. "She's alive," he reported. His voice was rough with emotion. "The corruption's gone, but..."

"But Marcus got what he wanted anyway," Gadross finished grimly as another quake shook the tunnels. His artifacts were still spinning and trying to track something we couldn't see.

"The network was mapping our abilities to bridge magical disciplines while we made our way through," I explained as we navigated the crumbling passages. "He had what he needed from Aislinn long ago. The tunnels continued until he got what he needed from us."

"Your essences became a key," Thanos said as we rounded another corner. "One that could unlock the barriers between magical types permanently."

"I don't suppose anyone knows where he might have gone?" I asked, wanting to look ahead. No reason to worry about what had already happened. "Or should we just follow the trail of reality-breaking horror and hope for the best?"

"We'll find him," Violet promised, her phoenix fire lighting the way ahead. "We always do. Though next time, let's try to stop him before he gets his hands on the metaphysical equivalent of a skeleton key."

Purple light flared ahead of us as another section of tunnel collapsed. The corruption was spreading faster now, eating through stone and magic alike. Somewhere in the complex above, Marcus was gathering power for something much worse than what we'd already seen. The First Ones were still waiting. And this time, they'd be ready for us.

CHAPTER 18

VIOLET

“ W hy isn't she waking up?” Argies barked. “Is she alright?” He held Aislinn close to his chest as his face crumpled with anguish.

Fiona and I scrambled to his side and stumbled when the old stone cavern shuddered violently. Debris rained down from the ceiling as the corrupted magic made everything twist and buckle. Gadross's copper artifacts spun frantically. His brow furrowed with worry as he tracked the spreading energy surges. My heart hammered against my ribcage as we checked on our best friend.

Fiona moved quickly, pressing a finger to Aislinn's wrist and checking her over with the practiced motions of a seasoned nurse. "She's alive," Fiona reported. Her brow furrowed with worry. "She's sustained a lot of injuries, but none that seem immediately life-threatening. We need to get her to Zreegy as soon as possible."

I used my own magical senses to assess Aislinn's condition. I felt the faint flicker of her essence. There was no trace of the corrupted Dark energy that Marcus had tried to use against her. However, she was dangerously drained. That was not good.

"The barriers are failing," Gadross called out. His voice barely cut through the groan of tortured stone. "Do what you can for Aislinn for now. We can't afford to wait. Marcus is forcing open a new rift, drawing the First Ones through. We have to find him and stop the ritual before he completes the connection!"

Thanos moved to Gadross's side. His demigod power crackled around us like summer lightning. "Can you trace the source of the disturbance? If we can pinpoint his location, we may be able to disrupt the ritual before it's too late."

Gadross tilted his head from side to side as his artifacts hummed with increasing urgency. "The ley line nexus complicates matters. The power flows are being redirected and the corruption is making it difficult to get a clear reading. We need to shore up the damaged areas first, or the entire town of Hambledon could come crashing down on top of us."

I cursed under my breath and opened my magical senses. I could feel the First Ones' alien presence pressing against the boundaries of our reality. Their inhuman consciousness made my magical core shudder with primal fear. "Fiona, we need to focus on stabilizing the tunnels. Thanos, Gadross. You two work on tracking down Marcus. We have to find the source of the corruption and cut it off at the root."

Argies' gaze flickered between Aislinn and the chaotic scene unfolding around us, his dragon fire flickering between his clenched teeth. "What about our girl? I should be the one to put an end to that bastard Marcus after what he's done to her."

I placed a steadying hand on Argies' arm and met his gaze with resolve. "I know, but we need you to focus on keeping Aislinn safe. Fiona and I will handle the tunnels. You and Bas focus on guarding her until we can sort this out."

Argies nodded reluctantly. His expression was torn as he tightened his grip on Aislinn protectively. "Fine. But the moment you lot find that wanker, we're making sure he pays for what he's done."

As Thanos and Gadross pressed forward, Fiona and I turned our attention to the chamber where Marcus had performed his twisted ritual. The air was thick with the stench of corrupted magic. The stones were completely infected and crumbling as a

result.

Fiona's magic flared to life. Our power blended together, and we wove an intricate pattern of cleansing energy. We focused our intent on purging the chamber of the lingering taint. The corrupted essence writhed and hissed as it was burned away by our combined magic. It took significant effort to restore the natural balance of the room.

With the corruption driven back, we turned our attention to reinforcing the chamber's structure. Fiona's magic flowed like water. I added mine to the mix, and together, we sealed cracks and reinforced the ancient stonework.

The groaning of the chamber subsided as our efforts stabilized the area. The threat of immediate collapse in that room was averted. Exchanging a resolute nod with Fiona, we hurried to rejoin the others. We needed to heal the rest of the tunnel system and find Marcus to put an end to his machinations once and for all.

"The nexus point is just ahead," Gadross shouted. His artifact whirled and spun as he tracked the shifting energy flows. "But the ley lines are in chaos. Marcus is twisting them to fuel his ritual. The strain is tearing the tunnels apart!"

As if in response, the floor suddenly buckled beneath our feet. It sent us staggering. Massive cracks spiderwebbed across the ancient stone. Purple energy pulsed from the widening fissures. "Can you guys shore up the damaged areas before we get smashed?" Thanos asked. Fiona and I nodded.

"Gadross, can you guide us to the weakest points? It'd be better to start there first," Fiona clarified.

Gadross nodded as his copper artifact flared with a steady, pulsing light. "Follow me, and I'll point out the most critical sections for you. Eventually, you need to reinforce

the ley lines. It will be the fastest way to stabilize the architectural foundations before the entire complex comes crashing down."

Fiona and I cast a shield around us to fight against the encroaching darkness. The tunnels groaned and shuddered around us. Stone and magic alike seemed to twist and distort under the strain. The First Ones' presence grew stronger with each passing moment, and their inhuman consciousness clawed at the fading barriers.

"There!" Gadross pointed ahead. His artifact guided us toward a crumbling junction where multiple ley lines converged. Purple energy surged and pulsed from the unstable nexus. Shadows writhed around it like hungry tendrils. "This is the weakest point. If we can shore it up, it should buy us some time to find Marcus and stop his ritual."

Our spell expanded, creating a wider protective bubble around us. "Then let's get to work. Violet, be ready to reinforce the ley lines as soon as we cleanse the area," Fiona replied as her magic flared to life.

Fiona and I turned our focus to the corrupted tunnel system. We were surrounded by the cloying stench of dark magic. Closing my eyes, I could feel the twisted ley lines pulsing with Marcus's evil energy. The natural flow of power was warped and corrupted.

"We need to purge this area completely," Fiona instructed. "The corruption runs deep. We can't leave any trace of it behind."

I nodded in agreement as my magic filled me. "Then let's give these ley lines a proper scrubbing. Marcus's filth won't be able to taint them once we're done."

Together, we wove our magic in a synchronized dance. Our energies intertwined as we targeted the corrupted nexus points. Our enchantment flowed like a cleansing

river. It swept away the lingering traces of shadow essence. Wherever our magic touched the darkness recoiled and burned away. The air grew lighter. The oppressive weight of the corruption melted away.

"Add your fire," Fiona prodded.

My eyes widened, and I swallowed hard. Adding phoenix fire to such powerful conduits could end in disaster. "I need you to keep it from blowing us all up."

Fiona chuckled and nodded. "I can do that." With her power surrounding me, I poured my fire into the ley lines themselves. The golden flames burned away the twisted knots of power that Marcus had created.

The pathways resisted at first. The corrupted energy lashed out like a wounded animal. But slowly, steadily, our magic restored the ley lines to their natural state. The ancient flow of power reasserted itself. As the last vestiges of corruption were scoured from the chamber. Fiona and I turned our attention to the crumbling architectural foundations. Using our combined magic, we reinforced the ancient stonework. Like before, we sealed cracks and imbued the structure with renewed vitality.

The tunnels groaned and shuddered around us as the damage began to slowly repair itself. Sweat poured down my back as we fought to keep the old town of Hambleton from being buried. Time seemed to blur as we moved from one critical juncture to the next. We poured our magic into the ley lines and stabilized the weakened structures.

The corruption continued to press against us. Thankfully, our magic held firm. We'd created enough pockets of stability to allow the ancient power to reassert itself. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, we stepped back. Our spells dimmed as the ley lines pulsed with a healthy, natural rhythm.

Gadross's artifact dimmed. "You've cleared the critical sections. The ley lines are stabilizing, and the architectural integrity has been restored. You've bought us some time. We need to find Marcus and stop his ritual before the First Ones breach the barriers completely."

Thanos nodded in agreement as he twined his fingers with mine. "Then let's not keep him waiting. Can that gadget guide us to the source of the corruption, or not?" He directed the question to Gadross.

Gadross nodded and flicked something on the gadget in his hand. It began swirling and glowing again. Its energy spread as it sought the telltale signature of Marcus's twisted power. After a moment, one of the hands stopped. It was pointing down a tunnel to the east.

"This way," he said. "The bastard's close, and he's running out of time."

We hurried through the now-stable tunnels. It was a relief to see the ancient stone and magic pulsing with renewed vitality. The corruption had been driven back. Its tendrils were severed from the ley line network. I wish that meant Marcus was weakened, but I knew better. He was still out there, desperate to complete his ritual and open the way for the First Ones.

Fiona held up her hand, stopping us. "We need to take care of our girl before we go charging into another fight."

Argies tightened his grip on Aislinn, his expression torn between worry and determination. "It's about damn time. The corruption's done a number on her and I need her to wake up."

I nodded, understanding the urgency in their words. Aislinn was a vital member of our group, and the strain of her recent ordeal was evident in the pallor of her skin.

"Fiona's right. We are going to need her in the coming battle."

Fiona moved to Aislinn's side with a familiar potion flask in hand. "This should help stabilize her," she said, uncorking the stopper and carefully tipping the restorative liquid between Aislinn's parted lips.

Argies watched with bated breath as Aislinn swallowed the potion. "Let's speed this process along," I suggested.

Fiona nodded in agreement, and we joined our magic. We wove a focused spell to accelerate the potion's effects. Aislinn's features relaxed. Some of the tension left her body as the healing elixir took hold. "There we are," Fiona murmured.

Aislinn blinked and opened her eyes. She looked between Argies and us. "What happened?" she asked. Her voice was hoarse but growing stronger. "Did we...?"

I placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, offering a small smile. "We're looking for Marcus now, but we've begun cleansing his corruption."

Aislinn nodded, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "What are we waiting for? Let's get the bastard."

We laughed and shook our heads. "We will," Fiona promised. "You take it easy and get your strength back. Let us do the work until we find him."

Aislinn pushed against Argies until he set her on her feet. She swayed but steadied herself. "I'm good with that. Just don't think you're keeping me out of the final fight. I have a bone to pick with that arsehole."

Together, we pressed onward. The Backside of Forty was united again and ready to preserve the sanctity of the realm we held dear. As we rounded the next corner, I was

struck by a sudden realization. "Wait," I said, holding up a hand to pause the others. "What about the Shadowmere Pack? We can't just leave them as twisted abominations."

Gadross's brow furrowed. His copper artifact continued whirring softly. "You're right. The pack was corrupted by the Blackwood family's centuries of work. We can't just abandon them to their fate. They're still living beings."

"And they're trapped in a nightmare of Marcus's creation," Fiona snarled.

Thanos's expression hardened. "Then we'll have to find a way to undo the corruption and restore them to their true selves. We can't leave them to suffer. Nor can we allow them to continue as a threat to our world."

"Agreed. Gadross, can your artifact track their location and give us a sense of their condition?" I asked. "The sooner we can find them and begin the cleansing process, the better."

Gadross's brow furrowed in concentration as he consulted his device. "They're scattered throughout the tunnels. But I'm detecting a powerful relic. It could be responsible for Marcus's hold over them. He would need something to keep control over such powerful people. If we can disrupt the artifact, it may weaken the hold Marcus has over them."

"Then that's what we'll do next," Thanos declared. "As much as I don't want to divert again, we have to free the Shadowmere Pack. After that, we are turning our full attention to stopping Marcus's ritual."

We went behind Gadross as he followed his copper artifice. I sighed as my senses remained alert. "I'm so tired of fighting. I hope the remaining corrupted shifters steer clear of us," I grumbled.

Fiona snorted and shoved my shoulder playfully. "Now you've jinxed us. We're going to be overrun by those arseholes any second now."

"Don't say that," I replied.

We moved cautiously through the damaged passageways, Gadross's artifacts guiding us toward the source of the corrupted energy. As we approached a juncture, a cacophony of twisted roars and snarls echoed through the tunnels. Gadross's eyes widened, his devices pulsing with distress.

"They've detected our presence," he warned, his voice tense. "Be ready."

Fiona and I cast a shimmering shield before us as we pressed forward. We were all braced for the onslaught of twisted shifters. Their forms rippled and contorted as they snarled and lunged at us. The corruption had torn apart the core of their being and warped them into nightmarish versions of their former selves.

Beside us, Aislinn stood steadfast. Her elemental magic flickered weakly but determinedly. Despite her lingering injuries, she summoned bursts of elemental power. She even managed to push back the corrupted shifters with blasts of earth and wind. Though drained, she was still a badass and remained unbroken.

"We have to find the relic Marcus used to control them," Gadross called out. "It's the key to breaking his hold over the pack." We nodded in acknowledgment as we fought our way through the shifters.

His artifice whirled and spun. The copper device guided us deeper into the tunnels. "I'm detecting a concentrated source of the corruption across from us. That must be where he's channeling his control from."

My gaze skipped around the area. It was a challenge to see through the bodies. "Let's

not waste any time."

Aislinn's arm flew into the air. "It's over there."

I followed her finger and saw the black urn in an alcove to our right. Turning to Fiona, I nodded. "Together?"

Fiona nodded, and her magic swirled to life. The golden energy blended seamlessly with mine. "Let's get rid of this shit," she replied.

As one, Fiona and I surged forward. Our combined magic lanced out towards the corrupted relic. The tainted object writhed and hissed as our purifying energies enveloped it. We poured energy into the thing for several seconds. Keeping our focus on the task was difficult with the fight going on around us. After several seconds, the dark magic that had clung to its surface withered and crumbled away.

The corrupted shifters stopped fighting. Their howls turned to ones of agony. Their forms wavered and distorted as the corruption's hold began to slip. Aislinn added her elemental magic and helped reinforce the restoration of their true natures.

"Keep going!" Thanos shouted. "It's fighting back. Don't let the corruption regain its grip!"

I gritted my teeth, pouring every ounce of my power into the task at hand. The phoenix within me spread its wings. Before I knew what was happening, the cleansing fire shot out of me and surrounded the relic. It burned brightly with each passing moment. Slowly but surely, the evil energy began to recede. And the shifters' natural forms reasserted themselves.

The three of us worked in perfect synchronization to sever the corrupted connection. The relic crumbled under the onslaught of our combined magic. The broken shards

released the pack from Marcus's twisted control. The shifters shook their heads and blinked in confusion as they regained their senses. Gadross stepped forward, his copper artifice pulsed with soothing energy.

"Easy, now," he said in a calm and reassuring voice. "You're safe. The corruption's hold has been broken. It's time to restructure your pack."

One by one, the shifters gathered themselves. They wore expressions of relief and gratitude. A surge of pride filled me. Knowing that we had saved them from the nightmare Marcus had inflicted upon them was highly satisfying.

Thanos placed a hand on my shoulder. "Well done, Vi. Now, let's see about Marcus."

I nodded, the phoenix within me settling back into a watchful state. "Lead the way, Gadross. We've still got work to do."

CHAPTER 19

AISLINN

As the last vestiges of the corrupted energy dissipated, a sense of relief washed over me. We had freed the Shadowmere Pack from Marcus's twisted control. Their natural forms reasserted themselves as the relic's hold was shattered. The look of gratitude on their faces made the effort worth it.

Still, I couldn't shake the lingering effects of the corruption's taint. Marcus had tried to unravel the very core of my being. He'd twisted my various parts into some perverted mockery of unity. The memory of that violation made my stomach turn. It made me want to run home and hug my daughter. Now was not the time to dwell on my trauma. We had a madman to stop.

"Gadross," I called out, my voice steady despite the weariness that tugged at my limbs. "Any luck tracking down that bastard Marcus?"

The Department agent's copper artifacts whirred to life, the devices guiding us deeper into the labyrinthine tunnels. "I'm picking up a strong magical signature up ahead," he reported, his forehead creased with intense focus. "It's definitely Marcus, and he's throwing up one hell of a defense."

Fiona's expression turned grim. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's not keep the wanker waiting. I'd say he's had more than enough time to stew in his delusions of grandeur."

Violet nodded in agreement. "Couldn't have said it better."

We traveled in silence for several minutes until things changed. Oppressive energy set me on edge as we pressed forward. I was about to ask about the shift when the tunnel ahead erupted in a shower of debris. Massive, hulking figures emerged from another corridor. Their bodies were contorted. Flesh melted into twisted amalgamations of disparate parts. There was a grasping claw here, a gaping maw there, and all were bound together by a pulsing, gelatinous mass.

Argies let out a feral snarl. Dragon fire flicked out of his mouth when he said, "So the bastard's sending his pet abominations to slow us down, is he? Fine by me. I was hoping to work out a bit of frustration."

Thanos chuckled and pulled out his sword. "Stay sharp, everyone. These creatures are an extension of Marcus's corrupted power."

I steeled myself, drawing on the last dregs of my elemental magic. I hurt everywhere from Marcus's torture, and I feared I might simply collapse if I pushed it too far. I could let the others handle this. They wouldn't hold it against me, but I refused to sit by and do nothing. I made a mental note not to use all of my energy. I had to save some for Marcus.

The twisted abominations surged forward. Their guttural roars echoed through the tunnels. Argies met them head-on. His dragon fire burned away their malformed flesh with righteous fury. Thanos's sword sliced through their ranks. Bas was right beside him, cutting them down just as easily.

Violet and Fiona worked in seamless harmony. Their combined magic unraveled the corrupted essence binding the creatures together. Wherever their purifying energies touched, the abominations recoiled. Their discordant screeches made my head throb even worse.

I gritted my teeth and summoned bursts of power to supplement the others' efforts. Earth jutted up and formed jagged spikes that crumbled the abominations' footing. I conjured fire next. It seared their twisted flesh while I used air to blow the stench away and disrupt their movements. Though my strength waned with each passing moment, I refused to falter.

Thankfully, the others carried more of the weight. It wasn't long before the last agonized wail echoed through the hall. The twisted creatures collapsed, and their corrupted forms dissolved into a noxious sludge. I leaned heavily against the tunnel wall. My chest heaved as Fiona approached with a concerned frown.

"That was too bloody close," she muttered. "We can't keep running into these kinds of obstacles and expect to have enough left to take on Marcus himself."

I nodded wearily and closed my eyes for a moment to gather my strength. "You're right. We need a new plan. One that plays to our strengths and exploits Marcus's weaknesses." Straightening, I met Fiona's gaze with a resolute expression. "And I think I know just the thing."

The memory of Marcus's twisted machinations still burned in my mind. The corrupted energy he used to try and unmake me was seared into my very being. But in that violation, I had also glimpsed the underlying structure of his power. It taught me the weaknesses that, if properly exploited, could be our key to victory.

"Marcus is obsessed with unity. He wants to erase the barriers between magical disciplines," I began as we continued. "But that very obsession is also his downfall. He doesn't understand the true strength that comes from embracing our differences and enhancing each other. He doesn't see a need to help anyone else."

Fiona's eyes widened. I saw the spark of understanding flicker in their depths. "You're saying we can play on his need for control and perfection to throw him off-

balance."

I nodded as a faint smile tugged at the corners of my lips. "Precisely. We may not be able to match him in raw power. If we can disrupt the cohesion of his magic, it could give us the opening we need to put an end to his evil schemes once and for all."

Violet stepped forward. "We're going for facials as soon as this is done."

That lifted my spirits as we pressed onward. A surge of cautious optimism filled me. Marcus had underestimated us before in thinking he could break us and remake us in his image. But he'd forgotten one crucial detail. The Backside of Forty didn't break. We adapted, we evolved, and we emerged stronger than ever.

This time, we would be the ones to teach Marcus a hard lesson. And when this was over, he'd learn why you never mess with a bunch of stubborn, midlife, magical misfits who refused to allow evil to spread. Our pace quickened as Gadross's copper artifice guided us deeper into the tunnels.

"We're getting close," Gadross reported. Deep lines etched across his brow as he concentrated. "We've cleansed the ley lines, but we should watch for any attempts to take them again. I'm not sure if he needs them to fuel his ritual."

As if on cue, the ground suddenly shuddered beneath our feet and sent us staggering. Massive cracks spiderwebbed across the ancient stone. Purple energy pulsed from the widening fissures. Fiona and Violet threw a spell ahead of us. I was familiar with their protective barriers.

Argies and I surged forward. Our magic worked in tandem to clear a path. My elemental bursts disrupted the Dark magic's creeping efforts while Argies's dragon fire incinerated every scrap. It couldn't find a way around Fiona and Violet to get another foothold. Moving forward was slow going.

The further we pressed, the thicker the corruption became. At one point, the air writhed with Marcus's malevolent power. We were so focused on what we were doing that I nearly missed the new threat. It emerged from the gloom. The creatures lurched towards us with massive teeth and even bigger paws.

"Demon hounds," Thanos growled, and his eyes narrowed as he sized up the approaching monstrosities. "Nasty buggers, but nothing we can't handle."

I nodded as I started conjuring elements. "Then let's show them why they shouldn't have come between the Backside of Forty and their goal."

The demon hounds surged forward. Their guttural roars echoed through the tunnels. Argies met them head-on. He'd shifted his fingers into talons. He sliced through their tough hides. I supplemented his assault with bursts of earth and air. The elemental energies confused the creatures.

Thanos and Bas used their weapons to cleave heads from shoulders wider than most buses. Fiona threw a few magical bombs and then decided to use her witch fire. Violet started with her blue witch fire. The stench of burning flesh made my stomach turn violently.

For every demon hound we dispatched, two more seemed to take its place. The relentless onslaught wore me down quickly. My magic flickered and waned as fatigue began to set in. "Bloody hell," Argies panted. "These things just keep coming. We need to find a way to cut off their bloody supply line."

I gritted my teeth, racking my brain for a solution. As I studied the demon hounds' movements, I caught sight of something. "Focus your fire on the tunnels behind them. I think I know where they're coming from."

Trusting my instincts, Fiona, Violet, and my mate shifted their assaults. Argies spit

his dragon fire towards the debris-choked passageways while Fiona and Violet directed their flames to the same location. The intense heat caused the rubble to crumble. It effectively sealed off the demon hounds' route of reinforcement.

With their supply line cut, the creatures faltered. Their twisted forms wavered as the corrupted energy that sustained them began to wane. Seizing the opportunity, we redoubled our efforts, our magic working in seamless harmony to dispatch the remaining monstrosities.

"Bloody good work," Violet said as the last hound fell. "But that was far too close for comfort. We can't keep fighting these endless waves of Marcus's abominations."

"The good news is, we won't have to worry about fighting any more of Marcus's creatures. The man himself is just up ahead," Gadross replied with a grim smile.

Fiona's grin turned feral. "Then let's not keep the bastard waiting. Time to show him that you don't mess with the Backside of Forty and get away with it."

We surged forward on swift feet. I easily kept up. Anticipation fueled me and gave me a second wind. We rounded the next corner, and the tunnel opened into a vast chamber. Marcus stood in the middle of it with his corrupted magic radiating an unholy power.

But he was not alone. Beside him, a rift had been torn in the barrier between realms. From it, tendrils of pure chaos reached through. The First Ones were trying to force their way into our world.

"So, you've finally decided to join the party," Marcus sneered, his voice layered with the discordant undertones of the First Ones. "I was wondering when you'd grace me with your presence."

Fiona and Violet flanked me. Their magic flared to life. Argies and Thanos moved to the other side of Marcus. Their power radiated a rage that was both awe-inspiring and terrifying.

"This ends now, Marcus," I said. "Your malicious schemes have gone on long enough. We won't let you or your evil destroy the sanctity of our world."

Marcus's laughter echoed through the chamber. It was cold and mocking. "Destroy? My dear Aislinn, I'm not here to destroy. I'm here to remake. To forge a new world where magic knows no boundaries or limitations. And you and your friends will be the foundation upon which I build my new order."

I expected Fiona to issue some witty retort to that statement. However, she and Violet threw a magical spell at Marcus. It exploded in spectacular fashion, taking one of his arms with it. His roar of fury and pain was followed by him using fire to cauterize the wound and stop the bleeding. He leveled us with a look that should have killed us right then and there. Oh, shite. We were in trouble.

FIONA

The vast chamber echoed with the thunderous clash as we faced off against Marcus. Violet and I threw magic at him and he countered with spells of his own. Marcus's form rippled with the stolen power of countless victims. Black snakes writhed beneath his skin. He'd been completely warped and corrupted by his insatiable hunger for power.

"You think you can stop me?" he roared. His voice was layered with the alien undertones of the First Ones. "I have been shown the path to true power."

Violet and I paused in our assault to erect a protective barrier that deflected Marcus's barrage of corrupted energy. "Your so-called unity is nothing more than a veil for your own ambitions, Marcus. The First Ones care only for remaking our world in their twisted image. They will use you, and then discard you. Just as they've done with so many others."

Gadross's copper artifact began humming. "The ley lines are in flux. Marcus is disrupting their natural flow. He's trying to spread his corruption. "

Fiona's eyes narrowed. "Then let's shut that down." She and I surged forward. Our magic wove in intricate patterns that lashed out at the corruption heading for the ley lines we'd already cleansed. Funny thing, my wound was healing very well ever since we'd cleared the tunnel system of his corruption and destroyed his dark relic. It hardly hurt anymore.

Marcus let out a guttural snarl. Shadows lashed out to block our assault. "Fools! Can't

you see? This is the future. A world where magic knows no boundaries or limitations! The First Ones have shown me the way to true power!"

Thanos growled as he took a step forward. "The First Ones care nothing for your ambitions, Marcus. They seek only to remake our world in their own warped image. A 'unity' forged through the destruction of all that makes magic beautiful is not going to benefit you at all."

Gadross's artifice pointed toward the pulsing epicenter of the corruption he was sending to the ley line network. "There! If we can disrupt his primary nexus, it should sever Marcus's link to the vessel network."

Fiona and I worked in seamless harmony. Our magic joined without hesitation and surged toward the corruption. It sizzled and hissed when it hit the evil magic. The spell we cast scoured the threads he built during his ritual. It was slow going and took all of our focus. Thankfully, Thanos and the others kept Marcus distracted. Argies and Bas darted in with attacks. Argies blew a burst of dragon fire at Marcus. Bas followed that up with a hit from his Fae-forged weapon before retreating.

We poured our magic into preventing the corruption from spreading. Our combined power lanced out towards the pulsing epicenter of Marcus's ritual. We created a purifying pattern that sought to sever his connection to the vessel network. As our magic reached the twisted ritual circle, the reaction was immediate and catastrophic. The corrupted energy recoiled violently. Cracks spiderwebbed across the floor and the power writhed and collapsed inward.

A shockwave of explosive energy radiated outward. The corrupted power exploded in a cacophony of agonized screams. "No! This cannot be! The First Ones promised me power beyond imagining!" he cried. The stolen magics tore themselves free from his disintegrating essence. He exploded on a final howl of anguish.

The barriers between realms shuddered and rippled. Fiona and I surged forward, our magic combined automatically in a brilliant display of power. Our efforts coalesced into a dazzling torrent that slammed into the rift. It sealed it shut with a thunderous implosion. The First Ones' alien presence was forcefully pushed back as the natural order reasserted itself.

Gadross's artifacts spun and flickered. His eyebrows knitted together as his mind worked through the problem. "Do you lot do this every day? Because I have to say, this is both terrifying and bloody exhausting."

I let out a sharp bark of laughter. "Every day? Hardly. Though I suppose you could say we've gotten a bit of practice over the last couple years."

Gadross let out a weary chuckle. "Practice? That's one way to put it. I haven't had much work over the last couple of years. You lot have spoiled me by taking all of the difficult cases."

Violet shot Gadross a wry grin. "Well, we do aim to keep things interesting. Though, I would like to dial it back to only occasional world-ending crises. If you're feeling nostalgic for the good old days of handling cases, we can send them your way."

Aislinn rolled her eyes as a faint smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "As if you'd last a week without some new supernatural mystery to solve."

Gadross chuckled. "Thank the gods for that. I don't handle these nearly as well as you guys. I couldn't have stopped Marcus with all of the Department's other officers fighting at my side. I'm just going to say thank you and hope you never retire."

Fiona clapped him on the shoulder as her grin turned sly. "That's the spirit, Gadross! Trust me, you're going to look back on this and realize it was the best career move you ever made. And remember, there's nothing quite like a little apocalypse-

prevention to spice up the daily grind."

As we made our way back to the surface, I couldn't help but feel a renewed sense of purpose. The darkness had been driven back, but the battle was far from over. Now, it was time to rebuild. To restore the natural harmony of magic that had been so gravely threatened.

The next night, we were soaking in the mineral-rich waters of an exclusive Fae spa in the heart of Hambledon when Violet's mobile buzzed on the edge of the pool. She reached for it with a frown and put it on speaker. "Mum," Ben's voice carried clear tension even through the connection. "We've got a bit of a situation at university."

"Define 'situation'," Violet said as she straightened. I could see her maternal instincts kicking in.

"Three students have been found dead in the library," Bailey cut in. "They're supernaturals. They were missing some part of their brain I heard. The police are blaming a serial murderer."

"The campus wards are acting strange, too," Bailey added. "Like something's interfering with them."

I let out a heavy sigh, already reaching for my robe. "Sounds like our sort of problem. At least it's not going to be another wine-tasting gone wrong."

"We'll be there straightaway," Violet promised her children, mother-bear protectiveness clear in her voice. "Don't do anything until we arrive. And stay away from that library."

"Yes, Mum," the twins chorused, though I could tell by their tone they were already investigating.

"So much for our relaxing spa weekend," Aislinn muttered as we climbed out of the pool. "Though I suppose mysterious magical murders at university are a step up from preventing the apocalypse."

I shot her a wry grin. "It'll be a nice change of pace. No more bloody wine cellars or tunnels collapsing around our ears. Maybe we'll even get to sleep in a proper bed for once."

Violet rolled her eyes as she gathered our things. "Let's just focus on making sure my kids are safe, shall we? You two can bicker about the accommodations later."

VIOLET

There was nothing quite like being yanked from the little beauty rest you'd allotted yourself at arse o'clock by AC/DC screaming about eternal damnation. Actually, scratch that. There was something worse. Getting that wake-up call when you're already losing your bloody mind over your magically talented twins gadding about at some mundie university while a power-hungry psychopath was picking off supernaturals like they were on a shopping spree.

I shot up in bed like I'd been shocked. My heart was doing the sort of gymnastics routine that would make an Olympian proud. The emergency go-bag I'd packed was sitting by the door. I'd stuffed it with enough magical firepower to level a small country. And here I'd been, thinking I'd collect the girls at a civilized hour. So much for best-laid plans and all that rot.

My mind wouldn't shut up about the grisly details they'd shared yesterday. Three practitioners drained like juice boxes. Their bodies had been arranged in those sodding geometric patterns that were so popular in home decor. Two weeks. Three bodies. Zero leads. Fiona had been the first to identify what we were likely dealing with. She always was the clever one of our little supernatural detective trio. Ever since she'd moved to England, the three of us had been thick as thieves, solving one mystical mess after another.

Now, here we were, Artemis's chosen hunters, with Fiona leading our merry band of chaos with her razor-sharp wit and even sharper intuition. We were meant to meet up at first light and sort out this mess. Well, technically, this was first light, wasn't it? Just not the sort any sane person would choose.

My mobile lit up the room like a bloody lighthouse. Ben's name flashed on the screen with all the subtlety of a neon sign. Next to me, Thanos stirred. His eyes caught the light like a predator's in the dark. It turned them into molten silver and gave me a glimpse of his ancient power. Being spawned from Underworld royalty had its perks.

"The twins?" he asked in a voice rough with sleep.

I nodded, already answering. "This better not be what I think it is."

The strangled sound that came through the speaker made my heart clench. Mother's intuition is a bitch sometimes. "Funny you should say that, Mum."

Shit. I was already rolling out of bed when I heard my son's voice crack with panic. "Henry is dead," Ben choked out before I could ask what had happened. "In the Maughan Library. There's... there's blood everywhere and there are octagons overlapping again. Plus, the magical residue..." He trailed off, but I felt what he meant. Someone truly psychotic was preying on supernaturals in London.

"Benjamin." I used my best mum voice. It was the one thing that could cut through his panic. "Breathe. Where exactly are you?"

"In the restricted section. Fourth floor." His breathing was coming too fast. "Mum, his skin... it's like all the color's been sucked out. And his hands..."

"Stay put. I'm calling in the cavalry." I yanked on my boots while grabbing my emergency bag. "Is your sister there?"

"Bailey's here now. She's doing something with the magical traces."

That was my girl. "Good. Use the diversion spell to keep the mundies away until we get there. We don't want them getting another case that will raise more questions." I hung up and immediately dialed Fiona.

She answered on the first ring. "Please tell me we're not accelerating our timeline to stupid o'clock in the morning."

"Ben and Bailey found a friend, Henry, dead in the library and surrounded by geometric patterns."

"Dammit." Fiona paused, and the rustle of clothes echoed through the line. "I'll grab Aislinn from the guest room. We'll be outside in ten."

"Thanks," I told her and hung up. I turned to Thanos, who was already up and checking the Hellmouth wards. "I need you to-"

"Hold down the fort and keep our dimensional portal from spitting out demons?" He gave me a grim smile. "Already on it. The Hellmouth's has been surprisingly restless all night. It might be connected to whatever's happening in London."

I grabbed my jacket, mind already racing through possibilities. "If someone's messing with demonic magic near the university-"

"It could be resonating with our friendly neighborhood portal to hell," he finished. "Go. I've got things covered here."

I kissed him quickly. "Keep your phone on. If anything tries coming through-"

"I'll send it back with a strongly worded message." His eyes glowed brighter. "I've got Hutcoth and Roscock to help. Go, protect our kids." I went warm all over when he referred to them as our kids.

They weren't his biological children, but he made it clear he loved them like they were. He had accepted it when I told him I didn't want to have more kids. I hadn't yet told him I'd changed my mind and wanted to share that experience with him, so I'd gone off my birth control. Shit kept happening and it never seemed like the right

time. I wasn't going to tell him when I was racing out the door, either. At this rate I would be pregnant before I told the man. Hell, I already could be for all I knew. Shaking that frightening thought off, I clasped his hand as he walked me to my car. He kissed me soundly before I took off for Pymm's Pondsides.

Fiona and Aislinn were already waiting in the driveway when I pulled up. Fiona was clutching a massive travel mug of coffee like it was life support. She'd been in England for a couple of years and hadn't given up her coffee for tea, but I understood the tendency to solve crises with caffeine.

"The Hellmouth's going mental," I announced when I got out to help them put their things in the car. Thanos had no doubt been up half the night monitoring the bloody thing which is how he was aware of the activity.

"Any risk of demons gate-crashing?" Fiona asked through a yawn as she clutched her mug. None of us had managed breakfast yet—three a.m. emergencies weren't exactly conducive to proper meals.

"Thanos has it handled," I assured them. "He's confident he can keep it under control."

"But if it's acting up now—" Aislinn started. She looked as knackered as I felt.

"Then whatever's happening in London is more dire than we thought," Fiona finished, her voice tight despite the early hour. "We should take my car. It's got better wards."

"Right, because you're such a stellar driver when you're knackered," I muttered. "Last week, you nearly took out Mrs. Peterson's garden gnomes."

"At least I know what real biscuits are," Fiona countered. "Not these weird cookie things you dunk in tea."

"Says the woman who thinks tea should be iced," Aislinn countered. The familiar banter helped ease some of the tension as we piled into my car. It looked ordinary enough, but like everything else in our lives, appearances were deceiving. The boot alone contained enough magical emergency supplies to stock a small occult shop.

I filled them in on the details as I navigated the dark country roads leading to the motorway. "Ben found Henry on the fourth floor. Bailey's containing the magical evidence."

"That makes this victim number four," Fiona said from the backseat. She pulled out her laptop. She'd found a whole database of American magical crime patterns after we'd left the spa. "What is this killer after? Is it just a sociopath who enjoys killing? Or are they building to something?"

"It's hard to say. The patterns feel too precise and intentional to be random. Aislinn, send a quick text to Gadross letting him know what happened. We will need his help on this case with the mundies."

Aislinn nodded in agreement, and I saw her typing in the rearview mirror. "He can also help cleanup. I think someone's collecting power for a specific purpose. You don't think Marcus had other family and they're back to finish what they started do you?"

"That's not possible," I replied. "Gadross researched the Blackwood line. There are none left."

"Besides, Ben and Bailey didn't see any purple energy," Fiona added. "This feels like a serial killer to me. A magical one, but the deaths feel like what I've read about those types of murderers." She hesitated and looked at me with wide eyes. "What if this guy heard about us and is using your kids to bait us and get us there?"

The thought made my power surge, and the car's electronics flickered. "Oi!" Fiona

smacked the dashboard. "Take it out on the bad guys, not your car!"

"Sorry." I'd lost control of my magic when I thought of my kids in danger. "But you might have a point. It sure seems as if someone's targeting practitioners working with the twins."

"Nothing is going to happen to your kids. We'll handle it," Fiona promised. "That's why you've got us. We're the Backside of Forty. We've basically become the magical A-Team."

"I understood that reference," I said dryly, "and I'm not sure whether to be proud or concerned."

"Be both," Aislinn suggested. "It's more efficient."

The drive to London took less time than it should have, thanks to a combination of my lead foot, the lack of traffic at the early hour, and a few strategic traffic-clearing spells. I was not going to mention the latter to my kids. They didn't need any ideas.

The Maughan Library loomed ahead. Its brick and Portland stone facade rose like a fortress in the darkness. During the day, tourists would stop to photograph its neo-Gothic grandeur. The octagonal reading room, the massive arched windows, and the intricate stonework that made it look more like a cathedral than a library. Now, at three in the morning, the Victorian masterpiece felt wrong. The glass dome of the round reading room caught what little moonlight there was. It reflected it back with an oily sheen that had nothing to do with normal physics. And that was before you factored in the dead body.

"Jesus," Fiona muttered. "And I thought the Harvard library was pretentious. This place looks like it's waiting for Dr. Frankenstein to pop around. "

"Wait until you see the Reading Room," I said. "The round one under the glass

dome? Something actually lives in there."

"You're joking," she countered.

"Wish I was. The twins had to deal with it last term after it started interfering with the electronic lending system." I smirked. "Turns out a nest of sprites decided the dome was prime real estate. They kept scrambling all the computers for fun, the little menaces."

"Only in England," Fiona sighed as we walked across the lawn. "Protection circle?"

Aislinn nodded as she lifted her handbag higher on her shoulder. "That's a good idea. With someone killing like this, we don't want any residue following us home."

Fiona and I locked eyes and nodded. My magic rose first and tugged on my phoenix fire as I drew power from my core. Next to me, Fiona's magic sparked and danced. Hers was a wild blend of witchcraft and Fae energy that was stronger because she was a nicotisa. It always reminded me of lightning in a bottle. Where my power burned hot and fierce, hers crackled with barely contained chaos.

We'd done this dance a hundred times before. My magic reached out and wove between the electric threads of her magic until they twisted together in a familiar pattern. The barrier bloomed around us like a soap bubble made of fire and starlight. Our power worked together until her wild energy settled into place.

We found Ben and Bailey on the fourth floor in the North Wing. They were just past the rows of study carrels that lined the massive arched windows. Bailey was renewing her complex dispelling charm. She'd done a great job on it. No mundie would come anywhere near the scene. Ben was huddled against a bookshelf. His magical signature was so erratic that books were literally rattling on the shelves.

They were the medieval manuscripts section. The area technically shouldn't have

been accessible at that hour. Apparently, I'd taught my children too well. Locks were just suggestions when you had magic and knew the right tricks. I wish that was the worst of what we encountered. My gaze continued taking everything in, and my breath caught.

The scene hit me like a boot to the stomach. Henry lay sprawled between the display cases. His body was twisted at an angle that made my insides go wobbly. His skin had that horrible grey-white color that screams 'bloody hell, definitely not breathing anymore.' Dark blood had spread out around him in perfect, overlapping octagons. It was the sort of precision that takes time and planning.

But it was a hole in his head that caught my eye. It was right at his temple, perfectly circular, about the size of a pound coin. Like something had drilled into his skull. It was clean, surgical, and utterly horrifying.

"Did the other victims have the same wound?" Fiona asked. She was staring at the hole with the kind of intensity that meant her scary-smart brain was connecting dots I couldn't see yet.

"What are you thinking?" I asked, though I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

She shook her head slowly and crouched down to study the body. "Not sure yet. But that hole is significant. It's too precise to be random."

"We will figure that out," I told her as I rushed to my kids. "Oh, babies," I breathed and tugged each of the into my sides. "What happened?"

"We found him about an hour ago," Bailey said as she leaned into me. "We didn't see anyone. There's a Dark magic residue. It's a lot, but I'm containing it."

"The octagons," Ben choked out in a shaky voice. "I was reading about them last week in a book we borrowed from Grams over break. I think they're meant to contain

power and keep it from dispersing after... after it's taken."

"Bloody hell," I breathed as I crouched to examine the patterns without touching them. The perfect geometric shapes made various other ones when they overlapped. I had to look closely to see the individual octagons. "These are old magic. Really old. And whoever did this, had a precise purpose. But what was it?"

"Merlin's balls," Fiona muttered. She pulled out her phone to document the scene. "Knowing the purpose might help us find the killer. The precision here is nothing like what Marcus did in Hambledon and I can't think of another case that even comes close." She paused, brow furrowing. "Wait. This reminds me of something. Those Beacon Hill murders last year?—"

"The ones the mundane police blamed on that serial killer?" Aislinn asked.

"Yeah, We've been going through cold cases," Fiona explained to the kids. "After you called, I figured we should look into the active murderers just in case it has happened before. Anyway, the crime scene photos from Beacon Hill showed the same overlapping octagons. The mundie detectives just thought they were some psychopath's signature. They never made the magical connection. And honestly, I wouldn't have either if not for these new deaths."

Bailey shuddered and blew out a breath. "That's unsettling. I don't like the thought this person is going to continue killing because it feels like the design was used to harvest Henry's magic."

"The blood's still tacky," Aislinn noted. "Do you think you interrupted them before they could finish?" She asked the kids.

"No," Fiona replied before Ben or Bailey could open their mouths. "Look at how the inner octagons overlap. They've already collected what they came for."

A door creaked in the distance. "Security," Ben hissed.

"Hide or alter?" Aislinn asked quickly as Fiona and I prepared to hide everything.

"Gadross isn't here yet," I muttered. "We have no one to handle the memory work. We'll have to?—"

The security guard's curse cut through our whispered planning. Poor bloke had come around the corner faster than we'd expected. His torch clattered to the floor as he fumbled for his radio. He began babbling about blood and bodies as he called for backup.

"Shit," Fiona muttered as she began weaving invisibility through our protection bubble. "So much for damage control."

Other campus police arrived within a couple of minutes. They were followed quickly by the local constables. We pressed ourselves against the stacks as the library erupted into chaos. Police sirens wailed as boots pounded all around us. More fluorescent lights flickered to life overhead. They were harsh and unforgiving and made Henry look even worse. Radio chatter filled the air as more bodies poured in. They were followed by paramedics who took one look at the scene and called for forensics.

"Well," I whispered as we carefully edged around a cluster of horrified police officers, "this is going to be all over the morning news."

"At least they can't see the magical elements," Aislinn murmured back. "Small mercies."

Fiona's snort was barely audible. "Yeah, but explaining that hole in his head's going to be fun for someone. Ten quid says they blame it on a drill. "

"Not the time," I hissed, though she wasn't wrong. We had bigger problems—like

sneaking past the growing crowd of authorities without breaking our concealment. The whole bloody Met would be here soon. Unfortunately, we couldn't get out of there.

Gadross arrived a few minutes later, looking as irritatingly composed as ever despite the ungodly hour. His glamour was perfect, as usual - just another detective in a rumpled suit. He spotted us behind our concealment and gave a subtle nod before speaking to the detective involved. After a few minutes of what looked like mind-numbingly boring police talk, he stepped closer to where we were lurking like really obvious spies.

"There are too many witnesses to handle memory work effectively."

"Brilliant," I muttered, fighting the urge to bang my head against the nearest wall.

"So, what's the plan?"

"The magical elements are hidden well enough," he began, "but we need to ensure the investigation stays firmly in mundie territory. They already have three victims, which means their focus is on the serial killer aspect. You don't get many of those, so that is their biggest concern. You will need to act as if you're part of the case and talk to others to ensure they haven't picked up on anything magical."

The next few hours were a blur of statements, medical examiner visits, and trying to keep Ben from accidentally shorting out every electronic device in a fifty-foot radius. By the time we escaped, the sun was threatening to rise, and my caffeine levels were reaching critically low levels.

"Let's get you two home," I told the twins, already planning to raid their coffee stash.

"Pack what you need. You're not staying in that flat until we sort this out."

"Mum-" Bailey started to protest.

"Not negotiable." I fixed them both with my best mum-glare, the one that had stopped supernatural creatures in their tracks. "Someone's targeting supernaturals. You two have a hybrid nature and are more powerful than most. You have targets on your backs just by existing. You'll practically fall into his lap by staying here."

"She's right," Aislinn added in a gentle but firm voice. "Your wards are good, but whatever this is? It's beyond standard protection."

"Plus," Fiona chimed in as we cut across the campus green, "your mom's place has a literal portal to hell as a security system. Talk about your ultimate home defense." She suddenly stopped dead. Her head snapped toward the science building like someone had yanked it with a string. Her usual smart-ass expression vanished. It was replaced by the intense focus that meant serious magical shit was about to go down.

"Fi?" I asked as I reached for my power.

"Something's wrong." Fiona's gaze darted around. Her hands clenched into fists that were sparking with poorly contained power. That was never a good sign. The woman usually had better control than a type-A personality at a planning meeting. "Something just happened. It felt like someone took normal magic and twisted it inside out."

"Where?" I asked as I reached for my power. The campus was supposed to be safe, damn it. That's why I'd let my kids go to the university instead of keeping them locked up at home with the Hellmouth for company.

Fiona pointed toward the east side of campus. Her whole body had gone rigid. "There. It's definitely coming from over there."

"That's the science building," Ben said.

Bailey went absolutely still beside him. "Oh god." Bailey's face drained of color.

"Rachel. She was supposed to be working on her experiment there last night. She texted me about it."

Before any of us could react, Bailey took off running toward the building. Because, of course, she did. Sometimes, I wondered if I'd somehow managed to birth myself. That was exactly the kind of stupid, brave thing I would have done. It was hard to be mad at her for running off when there was a killer on the loose.

"Bailey!" I shouted after her. "Wait for backup, you absolute- And she's gone. Fantastic."

"Teenagers," Aislinn muttered as we sprinted after her. "Why do they always run toward the danger?"

"Family trait," Fiona panted beside us. "Like mother, like daughter."

We burst through the science building doors just in time to see a figure in black darting around the corner at the far end of the hallway. They moved inhumanly fast. And the magical trace they left behind made me itch.

"Split up?" Fiona asked as she gestured to the arsehole running away.

A crash and a choked sob from one of the labs made the decision for us. "Bailey first," I said grimly. "Then we hunt."

We found her in the chemistry storage room. She stood frozen in the doorway. The fluorescent lights buzzed overhead and cast harsh shadows that did nothing to hide the horror inside. Rachel's body lay sprawled amid scattered lab equipment. She was also surrounded by precise geometric patterns that made my magical senses scream in warning. This time, the drawing wasn't perfect. It was messy and half-finished, as if we'd interrupted him. My eyes scanned her temple, and I grimaced when I saw the hole.

Ben caught Bailey when her knees buckled. He kept her from hitting the ground, but his power was fluctuating dangerously. The lights overhead started to strobe. I placed a calming hand on his shoulder and moved closer to them. "We interrupted him this time."

"You're right about that. There are elements that match the others." Fiona pulled up photos on her phone with hands that trembled slightly. "This is the same basic pattern, but..." She gestured at the scattered symbols surrounding Rachel's body. "This one's unfinished. We must have interrupted him."

"They're sloppy," Aislinn observed. "And it looks like Rachel put up a fight. Why go through all this trouble and not finish? What were they trying to accomplish?"

I glanced at my twins. Their faces were ghost-white in the flickering lights. Bailey was sobbing silently against her brother's shoulder while Ben's power made the air crackle with uncontrolled energy.

"We could still catch him," Fiona said as she moved toward the door. "He couldn't have gotten very far. If we split up-"

"No," I cut her off. "We're not separating. Not when we don't know what we're dealing with." I looked at the half-finished ritual circle, the hasty symbols. "This person took down four other victims without leaving a trace. The only reason this one's messy is because you sensed something wrong."

"Why is this happening?" Bailey choked out between sobs. "Why Rachel? She was just... she was just trying to finish her thesis..."

Before I could answer, Gadross appeared at my elbow, his glamour perfectly in place. "Morris is two minutes out. Security called him the moment they saw movement on the cameras."

Right on cue, Detective Morris burst through the door, his face thunderous. "You again? This is the fourth victim you lot have stumbled across. Want to explain that coincidence?"

I stepped forward, deliberately placing myself between him and my kids. "We were heading to the library for a late study session." I kept my voice steady and professional. "Given the recent murders, we were concerned when we saw the police activity. Bailey remembered her friend Rachel was working late on her thesis project, so we came to check on her."

"And the suspect?" Morris's eyes narrowed. "Security footage shows someone in black fleeing the scene right before you arrived."

"He took off right as we entered the building," I said. Unlike my children, I'd had decades to perfect my poker face. "We were more focused on finding Rachel than chasing after him."

Morris's jaw worked as he looked between us and the crime scene. I could practically see him trying to piece together a puzzle where half the pieces were invisible to him. "Detective," Gadross cut in smoothly, "I've got officers en route to review the security footage. Perhaps we should focus on the suspect rather than harassing witnesses?"

Morris turned to my kids. "I'd like to interview you in the office next door. Now. I want statements from all of you."

Ten minutes later, I watched through the office window as Morris interrogated the twins. Ben's hands were shaking so badly that his keys were rattling in his hand. Bailey's mascara was running, though whether from tears or sweat, I couldn't tell.

"Your kids need to work on their poker face," Fiona muttered beside me. "They're about ten seconds from causing a blackout." The overhead lights flickered ominously

as if to prove her point.

"Right," I straightened up, my mom-mode battling with my hunter-mode. "Earlier plan stands. We need to move you two somewhere safe."

"No." Bailey's voice was quiet but firm. "We need to stay here."

"Bailey-" I started, but she cut me off.

"Mum, listen. Fiona felt him tonight. If we hadn't been close by..." She gestured at the demolished lab, her hand trembling. "Rachel might not have been the only victim. And what if they try again? What if next time it's someone else we know?"

"She has a point," Fiona said as she examined one of the crystals. "That magical signature was distinctive. If they try this again, I might sense it before anyone else."

"And we can help protect the other students," Ben added, his voice stronger than it had been all night. "We can use the campus warning system to notify the others to get to safety."

I looked at my children - my brave, terrified, determined children - and saw myself. They had the same stubborn set to their jaws and the same fierce need to fight back against the darkness. Keeping them locked away wouldn't keep them safe. It would just make them more determined to sneak out and help anyway.

"Fine," I said finally. "But we do this smart. Aislinn?"

"I agree. It's best to stay here," she replied.

Fiona nodded. "I've already thought about modifications to their flat's wards. We can layer them with detection spells. It might give us an early warning system."

"I'll increase patrols around campus," Gadross said from the doorway, making us all jump. "Morris may be suspicious, but he'll be watching the wrong things."

"Alright," I told my twins. "You can stay. But we do this as a team. No heroics, no solo investigating, and no trying to avenge your friends on your own. Promise me."

They nodded solemnly, though I saw that familiar glint in their eyes. The one that said they'd follow the rules... right up until the moment they thought breaking them would save someone. God, they really were my children.

"Now," I said, "let me call Thanos. Because if you think I'm scary when I'm angry? Just wait until a demigod finds out someone's targeting his step-kids."