

PETER GLENN

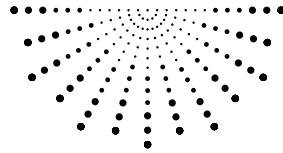


BLOOD MAGIC IS THICKER THAN WATER SERIES BOOK 5

# BEATDOWN IN BALI

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BLOOD MAGIC IS THICKER THAN WATER BOOK 5



PETER GLENN

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BEATDOWN IN BALI

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

Written by Peter Glenn.

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✿ Created with Vellum

*To family and the sweet, sweet taste of Diet Dr. Pepper, the drink I write  
almost all my words to.*

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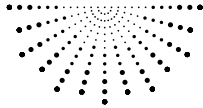
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## CHAPTER ONE



**M**y whole body tensed as the stranger's words washed over me. The Paragons of the Holy Blade. The organization that had sent someone to try and kill me just a few short weeks ago. They were here.

But how? How had they breached the magic of Mei's bar that kept people with ill will toward other patrons firmly on the outside?

A sudden revulsion gripped me, and I got the distinct impression that I would rather be anywhere but here. This had happened to me twice before in the past, and both times, it had been when Val had entered the bar and we'd been on... less agreeable terms.

The magic I'd just thought of. The sanctuary magic. It was affecting *me* instead of that... stranger. Telling me—no, compelling me—to get out of here and to do it fast. That was how the magic worked, unfortunately. If you were the one with the ill will toward the other patron, then you were the one that had to get out of the bar.

Unfair, I tell you. Totally unfair that a stranger like this—what had he said his name was? Killian? That name sounded familiar. And important. Though I couldn't remember why. Anyway, the thought that this upstart could come in here and make little old me want to turn tail and flee at the mere mention of his organization's name was deplorable.

Sadly, that was how old magic worked sometimes. It could be a fickle little bitch like that. Which is why I usually tried to avoid it at all costs.

But this was Mei's bar. The one place in the world where I normally felt safe. Where I didn't have to worry about assassins, or my sister, or the

Marks of the Underworld and their terrible powers. Where I could just sit back and have a drink and enjoy myself for an hour or two.

And yet, here I was, tension rising higher in my shoulders than it had been throughout the entire previous mission. All because of a stranger and a couple stray words.

“Miss Robinson?” Killian pressed, his tone hesitant.

I brought my head up a little so that I could make out his features more clearly. I’d been avoiding his gaze—another bit of the bar’s magic rubbing off on me, I supposed—but I wanted to look this asshole in the eye before I was forced out of this safe haven. I at least deserved that much.

Killian was... average looking. That was the best way I could think of to say it. Average height for a male, a little under six feet. Brownish hair and beady little brown eyes. An average nose that barely stuck out of his face, and boring, slightly pale lips. In fact, nothing on that face would have stood out in a crowd. If I’d been forced to give a description to a police officer, it wouldn’t have narrowed down the field much.

His outfit, on the other hand, was quite another story. He was wearing a bright blue doublet that appeared to have some sort of small cape sticking out of the back. Or something. It was hard to tell from this angle, but there was definitely an excess of bunched up fabric on the back of his top. The doublet was tucked into a matching set of trousers, which were in turn tucked into thick, black boots that shined in the low light of the bar. A matching pair of black gloves adorned his hands, one of which was still slightly extended toward me.

In a word, the guy looked like he’d just come from a superhero convention and was wearing his best cosplay. I almost snorted in spite of myself. Would have, if I didn’t despise his guts for what his organization had done to me.

The magic pulled at me even harder. I found myself getting up onto my own two feet without so much as purposefully moving a muscle.

Before I could do or say anything else, Val stepped in between the two of us, tall and imposing. His chiseled face contorted into a frown that I could make out even from this poor angle as he crossed his muscle-bound arms over his chest.

“You can’t have her,” he insisted, glaring at Killian.

Killian’s well-conceived grin faded from his face at the sight of Val standing there, acting like a barrier between us. He scowled at my



boyfriend.

Yes, I thought of Val as my boyfriend now. Why not? We'd kissed, and we certainly cared for each other. But that was beside the point.

Did he think the same of me? I could only hope so. Something I'd been meaning to bring up with him this very night, actually. If I could just get back to my life. Instead, I was still inching toward the door...

"Stay out of this, demon-spawn," Killian seethed. I could feel the hatred rolling off him. Was he inching backward now, too? Maybe this wouldn't end up so bad after all.

"Or what?" Val taunted.

A small device flashed in Killian's hand. A dagger, maybe? Every single person in the bar tensed and made ready to pounce. Even Mei. I caught a glimpse of her over my shoulder, barely able to contain her rage behind those emerald eyes of hers. A small, metallic object appeared in her palm. Not a dagger. Maybe a magic trap? I wouldn't put it past her.

"Easy," Killian called out to the assembled horde. He was straining against the magic. I recognized the look in his eyes as he fought to remain still. He was faring better than I.

Killian played with the device in his hand, raising it so we could see it more clearly. It was about the size of a small dagger, but blunt and oblong. There were a few small depressions on the surface where something like a jewel or a button might go.

All in all, it didn't look very threatening. Especially if it was thrown. Kind of like an old TV remote, honestly. Though looks could be deceiving.

"It's just a portal device," Killian explained. "I have it set to take me somewhere safe just for situations just like this where things start to escalate needlessly."

I barely heard him. The desire to get up and leave was practically overwhelming at this stage. My legs moved on their own again, and I took one giant lurching step forward, smacking straight into Val's broad back in the process.

Poor Val practically lost his balance. He hissed and shot forward with his hands, calling on his magic to summon something to break his fall. Though what it might have been, I'll never find out.

In the same instant, Killian rubbed one of the depressions on his little tool thingy, and Val froze in place, like time itself had stopped around him.

“Much better,” Killian said matter-of-factly. He turned toward me again and offered his hand once more. “Shall we?”

The last thing I wanted to do was accept that offered hand. I stared at it like it was a snake and bolted toward the door instead. I wasn’t sure what to do about Val but figured he was safe enough in the bar with all the other patrons there to support him. Besides, the magic was screaming in my ears at this stage, and it was starting to override my other impulses.

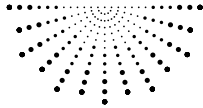
I wanted to stay and protect Val. But it was no use. I fled, a tiny voice yelling in my ear that I had to get out of there on the double. Get to some place of relative safety.

As I sped toward the exit, I craned my head to stare at Val. He looked so vulnerable, paused in midair like that. I reached a hand backward toward him as I rushed past Killian, unable to avoid the magic’s pull any longer.

Bad move. Killian’s eyes widened as he watched me run past him. “No!” He shouted. At the last second, he pounced, grasping for my outstretched appendage.

One of his gloved hands wrapped itself around the skin of my arm, clamping down hard. I felt a cold, harsh jolt of electricity pass between us, then everything around me winked out of existence.

## CHAPTER TWO



Pain. Intense, searing pain filled every fiber of my being. I had the distinct impression I was moving, like I was running through the air or something similar.

A teleportation spell, then. That must be what had occurred. Killian had mentioned his little device would take him somewhere safe. And me as well, apparently. Though I sincerely doubted wherever we were headed would be safe for me.

I'd already been targeted and almost killed by the Paragons of the Holy Blade once. Okay, in fairness, I didn't know if Amanda had been *ordered* to try and kill me or not. She'd tried, but she could have been acting rogue. From what I could remember of the situation, she'd mentioned having been sent more to immobilize me and get me alone than to outright kill me. Even if things hadn't ended quite like that.

Still, it would be a bad idea for me to trust anything these goons said.

Another wave of pain, mixed with nausea, coursed over my poor body, and I thought I would lose the contents of the booze I'd drunk at Mei's all over the... floor of this... teleportation spell. If it could be called a floor. The only things I could see were myself and part of Killian. Not even all of him. It was like the rest of the world didn't even exist.

Most notably, there was no sign of Charly at all. Likely, he hadn't been able to jump into the portal in time.

Ugh. Val's teleportation spells were nothing like this. They were full of fire and fury, but at least they didn't hurt. If this was what a normal portal felt like, I was in no hurry to experience another one.

Soon enough, the pain died down to a manageable level and the everlasting nothingness surrounding me was replaced by a brand-new location.

I winced and shielded my eyes from a sudden influx of light. Compared to the previous darkness, it was a little overpowering.

The light seemed to be coming from a large fixture that hung high overhead in the ceiling. There were several of them up there, in fact, spaced apart at even intervals. They had an office building vibe to them, although the rest of my surroundings were anything but.

A cage. I was in a cage. Well, Killian and I were both in the cage, to be fair. Strong, iron bars rose all around me, surrounding me and driving any thoughts of a nice, tidy escape from my brain rather quickly.

Beyond the bars stood a row of similar cells for as far as I could see in either direction. Which wasn't all that far, really. The light from the cell didn't extend out into the hallway, and none of the other cells were lit up like this one.

At least it was a big cell, even if it was a cell. And there was a bench to sit on, and a toilet, so if I was here for a while, I could be semi-comfortable. I supposed it was better than nothing.

Damn Killian. He'd prepared well. It looked like he had me trapped.

I reached out instantly via my familiar bond, hoping to find Charly waiting there, not far away. If I could reach him, maybe I could send him some sort of signal and get him to help.

But I couldn't. It was like clawing at a steel wall. Completely useless. I could feel his presence ever so slightly, but it was so far away, it might as well have been nothing. I certainly couldn't send any messages or feelings along to him at this distance.

So much for that avenue.

Oh well. I still had one ace up my sleeve. I had my trusty lancet in my pocket. If Killian tried anything crazy, I could summon my magic and use it to obliterate him and anyone else that came to his defense. Had half a mind to do it anyway, just for good measure.

Yet I held back. I had no idea how many guards were in this place, and getting through those thick bars would take a great deal of effort even *with* my magic. It wouldn't do me any good to kill this dickhead only to end up stuck here and dying anyway.

No, I supposed it would behoove me to listen to whatever he had to say first. Then kill him. I didn't want to take that option off the table.

Whatever he had planned, though, hopefully he didn't have to touch me anymore to make it happen. I pushed on the gloved hand that was still clinging to my forearm and gave it a hard shove to get it away from me.

Killian either didn't notice or didn't have the presence of mind to resist. His arm flung away from me and across his torso, then his entire body flailed and fell to the ground with a soft thud.

It was concrete down there, and I thought I heard a minor crunch as he nosedived, which I found to be all too satisfying. Served him right.

"Ow," Killian moaned as he finally appeared to come to. He shook his head slightly and started pushing himself back onto his own two feet.

Compared to what I'd seen of him before, it was quite animated. I wondered just how much the portal spell had taken out of him. The Lightless Seven still had a portal mage on their team. The more I could learn about the weaknesses of portals like this and what it did to their wielders the better. I'd have to face him eventually. I was sure of it.

Killian was holding his nose as he finally got back into a standing position. I noticed a small trickle of blood leaking out from underneath his fingers, and a small smile crept onto my lips.

Broken nose. Nice. Plus, it was more blood I could use to fuel a spell to actually get out of here if I needed to. Couldn't rule that possibility out yet.

He held up his other hand and let out a slight yelp, then held up the hand that had been covering his nose and waved it at me. It was remarkably clear of blood, as was his face. Worse, his nose appeared to be back to normal.

Ugh. Some people had all the luck with their magic gifts. I couldn't heal myself if my life depended on it. I knew that for a fact. I'd tried. But buttface here? He does it without breaking a sweat. So uncool.

Of course, now that my magic was my own again and I could wield it without anywhere near as many issues, maybe that had all changed. Though I hoped to not find out anytime soon...

"That's better," Killian said, an easy smile playing on his lips. He looked me up and down. "You okay? The portal didn't hurt too much, did it?"

Like a bitch, I wanted to say. It had stung far worse than I would have expected. I still had a massive headache from it that was blooming right behind my eyes, gifting me with a fresh wave of nausea.

I should have said all that. Told him all about how his stupid little spell had ruined my night. But I didn't say any of it. I didn't want to admit to weakness in front of the enemy.

"Humph," I said instead, snubbing my nose at him. "I don't have anything to say to you."

Killian nodded. "I suppose I deserve that, after the way everything shook out. I just had to get you away from that demon before he did any more harm to you."

Demon? He must be referring to Val. Val was half-demon and half-human. I was also falling for him.

"That *demon* is my boyfriend," I told Killian in a haughty tone, "I'll have you know."

Killian gasped. A look of sheer terror crossed his face. "You... you can't be serious. Demons aren't to be trusted."

I shrugged. "Val doesn't lie to me." Well, he hadn't recently, at least. As a demon, he technically couldn't lie to me, but he could avoid a question so well the answer would still trick you if he wanted to. But we'd promised no more secrets from each other, and even after everything we'd been through, for some strange reason, I believed him on that one.

My captor pulled on his face. "Of course not." He huffed. "Look, this is all coming out wrong. Do you mind if I sit?"

It was then that I realized there were two benches in this room. One behind me and one on the other end of the cell. I inclined my head and Killian sat down on the bench opposite me. I sat down as well, easing my hand into my pocket at the same time as casually as I could. When I roasted this freak, I wanted it to come as a complete surprise.

"Look," Killian repeated, "of course Valdis didn't lie to you. Not directly. But there's no way he's been honest with you about everything. How else would..."

"Would he have roped me into tracking down the Marks of the Underworld with him for his master Dagon?" I offered. I figured even if Killian somehow didn't know that already, he'd find out from whoever his boss was soon enough.

Killian nodded. "That. I don't know what they have on you, but trust me, it's not worth it. Those Marks can drive a person mad with just a single touch."

I was silent for several moments as a few different thoughts ran through my brain. My sister, I wanted to say. They have my sister. Although I supposed that wasn't true any longer. Val had confirmed as much. My sister, wherever she was, was long gone, out of their grasp.

What did that mean for me? For Val? For our relationship? I could only begin to imagine. Without the threat of my sister's death or imprisonment, I supposed I didn't have to do Val and Dagon's bidding if I didn't want to, either.

And did I want to? It was fun going on missions with Val, and there was no denying I cared about him, but this whole time I'd also been wondering how to stop this whole thing before it went too far.

Maybe it wasn't such a bad thing that Killian had whisked me away when he had. It was a chance to get free of all of it. To start anew.

Of course, the fact that I was behind literal bars now instead of figurative ones was not lost on me. I still had to escape this prison, too, if I wanted to get away.

But none of that came out of my mouth. I couldn't give away anything if I was going to get out of here. And I still had no idea what Killian wanted from me.

"You're probably wondering why I brought you here," my captor said at last. My ears perked up at that, bringing my thoughts back front and center. "And that's totally fair. I owe you an explanation."

He sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "But first, do you want to see your sister?"

My jaw dropped open. Of all the things Killian could have said, that was the last thing I'd expected. My sister? Here? Could it really be possible? Had she escaped one cell only to land in another?

I supposed that *would* explain why not even Dagon could find her. The Paragons likely had this place shielded from sryers. It was only common sense. I mean, if I had a secret base somewhere, I would have put a magic shield around it, too.

"My..." I started. I couldn't even bring myself to finish the sentence. My mind was still reeling from the mere possibility.

Killian grinned at me and gave me an appreciative nod. "Yes. Your sister Elaine Vademmann. She's here. And, as the leader of this place, I have the authority to take you to go see her. That is, if you're interested."

Leader. That's why Killian's name had sounded familiar. Damian had mentioned that he was the leader of the Paragons, and that practically no one had ever seen him in person.

Which only made this whole thing all the more suspect. Why would the leader of an organization that wanted me dead or captured come all the way out in person to collect me, only to then take me to see the one person that I wanted to see most in the entire world?

To get me on his side, I supposed. Trick me, and then skewer me later. Or maybe get me to do his bidding. The latter was a bit more likely. If he'd wanted me dead, he could have killed me by now.

I had to admit, it was the one tactic that just might work. If he really had my sister here, and I could free her...

No. I couldn't afford to think like that. Not yet. Not until I saw her with my own two eyes and tested her out to make sure she was the real deal and not some doppelganger. This whole thing could still be some sort of elaborate trap to get me to... do something. Though what, I wasn't sure. Give them Dagon's most intricate secrets?

Pfft. If that's what they were after, Killian and his org were about to be sorely disappointed...

In spite of my resolve, I found myself hoping just a little that Killian was right and that my sister really was here. It would explain so much.

He reached out a hand toward me. The same one that had grabbed onto me and whisked me away a few moments prior.

I glared down at it. "No funny business this time, is there?"

Killian shook his head. "No funny business. No portals or anything. Just me taking you to go see your sister." He looked deep into my eyes, his gaze certain. "I promise."

I considered myself halfway decent at detecting when people were outright lying to me. Not perfect by any stretch, but better than the average person at least. For some reason, I believed him. Killian at least *thought* he could take me to go see my sister. Whether or not he actually could remained to be seen, but he believed his own words.

My hand crept forward, inching toward his almost of its own free will. More strange magic at play, or just the fact that I really wanted to trust someone?

The latter. Definitely the latter. I really wanted all of this to be true. To be reunited with Elaine again, no matter the circumstances.



I took the offered hand, though at the same time, I pricked my finger on my other hand that was in my pocket with my trusty lancet device. Better safe than sorry and all that, right?

Nothing untoward happened when I grasped Killian's hand. No portals whisked me away to somewhere new, no jolts of power disabled me, nothing. It was just like he'd promised. For now.

I felt hope rising in my chest as we both raised from our respective benches and Killian took the lead position. He waved his hand at one section of the bars, and they melted away like they were plastic, quickly fading from existence.

Had the whole thing just been one elaborate illusion, then, I wondered? If so, that was good information to file away for later. No need to trap someone for real so long as they thought they were trapped, right?

"So, my sister?" I asked as Killian took us down one of the hallways. His footsteps were sure and measured, like he'd walked this path several times. I tried to keep track of where we were going in case I needed to retrace my steps for some reason, but quickly got lost. The twists and turns in this place were something extra.

Killian beamed at me. "Right. She's here." He put out his other hand in front of me. "And don't get any strange ideas, either. She's as free as a bird. She's not being held captive or anything. Neither are you, for the record. I want to be clear on that."

Humph. The cell illusion from earlier sure could have fooled me on that one. But I let it drop. The draw of finding my sister alive and well was too strong, and it overrode all my other impulses.

"She works for us, actually," Killian explained. "Has for some time now. That's how she got embroiled in this whole mess in the first place."

"Yeah?"

We headed down another corridor that looked identical to the last one. Although I spotted a few actual people in the cells this time. None of them looked to be under duress, though I supposed looks could be deceiving.

I let myself relax a little bit more. If there were other people about, it lessened the possibility that Killian was going to kill me. No one liked witnesses.

Killian nodded again. "Yeah. She was our head resource tracking Dagon and the Crimson Hand crew. We always knew there was a possibility they'd go after the Crown of the Underworld eventually, so we had to keep an eye

on them. We keep an eye on all the major contenders, really. Have for thousands of years.”

“Really?” That boggled my mind. Such dedication toward a singular cause. Could it really be true? I found I didn’t particularly care one way or the other. So long as we found my sister at the end of this, the rest of it didn’t really matter too much.

Another nod from Killian. Our surroundings had changed, now. Gone were the cell bars, replaced with cubicle walls. I marveled at the fact that it didn’t really feel all that different to me. Of course, I’d never worked in an office before, but I’d heard some real horror stories...

“Really,” Killian said after a moment. “That’s why our sect was formed. To keep the world safe from the dark powers of the Marks of the Underworld. It’s a noble cause, really, if a difficult one.”

I nodded absent-mindedly as I scanned my surroundings, taking in as many people as I could. There were maybe a hundred of them. And that was just the people I could see. I was positive there’d be even more that weren’t on shift or were in another location.

All those people, and I’d never heard of their organization before? Crazy.

Maybe I should have paid more attention in all those magic classes my mother had always put me through. Maybe then I’d know more about them. I’m sure my mother knew all about them at least. There’s no way there’d be an organization like this in Washington and she wouldn’t know all about it.

Another thought came to me. “You say you watch over *all* the organizations that are after the Marks?” Killian nodded again. “Does that mean you have a plant in the Lightless Seven, too?”

“Had a plant,” Killian corrected me. His tone darkened a little. “We lost him a couple months ago when there was an attack on the Mark of Lucifer.”

All the blood drained from my face, and I stopped in place. Killian whirled to see what the matter was. He had a look of concern on his face. “I know what you’re thinking,” he admitted. “But it’s okay. You couldn’t have possibly known at the time.”

Then it was true, then. That first mage I’d killed, all those weeks ago. It hadn’t been one of the Lightless Seven after all. It had been a plant. A “good guy.” If there even *were* any good guys in all this mess. The jury was still out on that one...

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out, before Killian could stop me.

My whole demeanor had changed. I'd always kind of considered myself as somewhat innocent in this whole exchange, my fate thrust on me and me just wading through. But that wasn't completely true, was it? I had blood on my hands, too.

He waved a hand in front of me. "No, it's me who should apologize. You couldn't have possibly known what was really going on at the time. You were under the control of Valdis." He said it like it should excuse what had happened.

I'd felt a little bad for killing one of the Lightless Seven at the time, but only a little. I'd figured it was them or me. But knowing it was someone else entirely? An innocent party, someone who probably wouldn't have fought me if they'd known the truth? Someone that could have helped me save my sister earlier? That hit me like a ton of bricks.

My stomach churned, and I wondered again if I was going to lose the contents of my lunch. "What do you have to be sorry for? I'm the one who killed him," I admitted slowly.

Killian sighed and motioned for me to keep walking. I did as he bade, and we passed another row of cubicles.

This place was positively massive. I was suddenly glad I hadn't tried to mow my way through on the way out. Though I left that possibility open. I still had to see my sister with my own two eyes and know she was safe.

"For the way Amanda handled you," Killian said finally. The mention of her name made my whole body tense. I'd killed her, too. What must Killian really think of me, having butchered two of his own?

"She..." Killian continued. "She was friends with Daniel. The mage you killed. I really shouldn't have sent her after you. Should have known better." A small tear formed in the corner of Killian's eye as he spoke, which he quickly flitted away.

Strangely enough, I found myself agreeing with him. That error *had* been on his part. Amanda had had ample reason to hate me. She never should have been let near me. Then why had she? I was scratching my head about that very question when we finally came to a door planted in the wall opposite us.

Not just any door, either. *Her* door. My sister's door. Even though the door had no name on it or anything like that, I could sense it. Could smell just a hint of Elaine's magical scent hovering in the air, like she was sitting

right on the other side of it, ready to pounce at me and rib me for falling for some elaborate prank.

It would be just like her to do that. I found myself smiling slightly at the thought.

“Ready?” Killian asked me.

Butterflies formed in the pit of my stomach. I was many things, but ready was *not* one of them. If anything, I was bugging out. This whole scenario was still hella weird.

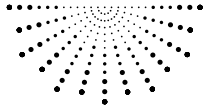
Hopeful, but weird.

“Go ahead,” Killian urged, motioning toward the door’s handle. “I promise it won’t bite.”

I let go of Killian’s hand and wrapped my fingers around the cold metal of the door handle. Was this really happening? Was I really going to be reunited with my sister again? Under much better circumstances?

Biting my lip to contain my enthusiasm, I pushed on the door.

## CHAPTER THREE



“Elaine?” My timid voice called into the room before the door was even halfway open. “Sis?”

My anxiety was so high I could barely keep my hand on the handle. I almost had to ask Killian for help just pushing the door open. Beside me, he was beaming, looking about as proud as possible.

“Are you really...” My voice trailed off into nothing. The door had been pushed open the rest of the way, mostly of its own accord. The office within was nice enough, I supposed. A desk, a chair, a small bookcase. Everything you’d expect of an office.

But no Elaine. She wasn’t there.

“Sis?” I repeated as my whole world came crashing down for the second time in under an hour. This couldn’t be happening. Not again. Not so soon.

Killian frowned. He gaped at the empty chamber. Based on his expression, he’d expected Elaine to be there every bit as much as I had. “Operative Vademman?” he asked, his words echoing against the empty walls of the small room.

“This better not be some sort of prank,” I warned as I threw caution to the wind and stepped into the office, my eyes darting to every single nook, cranny, and corner, as if Elaine might simply be hiding in one of them.

It occurred to me later that if Killian had been trying to trick me and trap me, this is exactly how he would have done it. Not that it mattered. The door didn’t close behind me. Killian didn’t chuckle maniacally. There was no trap. At least, not that I could discern.

I sniffed around for Elaine's magic scent. I'd caught a hint of it earlier outside the door, but there was no trace of it in here. No beachy scent, no hint of coconut, nothing.

Elaine was a mental mage. She could make herself appear invisible to others if she wanted just by making them think she wasn't there. Along with a host of other things, of course, although most of those weren't exactly legal. I'd had a fleeting thought that maybe she was just hiding herself to prank me. She loved to prank me. Had done it mercilessly when I was a child. But nope. No pranks here.

Just no sister, either.

I rounded on Killian. "You said she was here!"

His eyes trailed toward the floor. He shook his head abruptly. "I don't understand. She was here when I left to go get you, I swear!" He glanced up at me. "I wouldn't lie about something like this!"

On that, I was willing to believe him. Yes, he had used magic to abduct me against my will, but I'd gotten the impression that everything he'd told me since was something he believed a hundred percent. There was no intent to lie to me.

So where was Elaine?

I pulled on my face and took another step into the office. At this point, I was almost right up against the desk. My eyes searched for anything I might use to be able to find her and settled on a small scrap of paper on top of the desk. Snatching it up, I devoured the contents of the message written upon it.

"Sorry for standing you up, sis. Had to leave in a hurry. Will catch up later." The handwriting was a match for Elaine's.

A knot of dread formed in the pit of my stomach. So she had been here, and not that long ago, I would wager. What had forced her out of here in a hurry? Where had she gone this time?

There was only one way I could think of that I'd be able to tell for sure. I had to track her down. Use a tracking spell to find her coordinates and head to her rescue. That would require something with her blood on it, although I supposed if I couldn't find that, I might be able to make do with something else that was personal, if Killian had another mental mage around that could cast a tracking spell for me.

Most mental mages could conjure up images of the people they sought after. If they were skilled enough, they could use that information to

effectively locate them. It's what Elaine had done for work before this whole thing had started.

Or rather, what she'd told me she'd done for work. I certainly had no idea she'd been working for an organization like the Paragons of the Holy Blade this whole time. What else didn't I know about her?

I scanned the bookshelf and the desk but didn't find anything of note. No necklaces I'd given to her as a present or family brooches or anything.

Typical. Elaine had never really been into jewelry, anyway, and if she didn't want to be found, which was looking altogether too likely, she wouldn't be stupid enough to keep something like that around so it could be used against her anyway.

"Misty, I am so sorry," Killian said from the doorway. He was shaking his head again and sighing, but I paid him little heed. He was useless to me at the moment.

The desk had two small drawers underneath it. I hastily pulled the first drawer open to reveal... nothing. It was empty. The other one was locked. I jiggled the handle a few times to no effect.

"Hang on," Killian was saying. He patted down one of his pockets. "I have the key around here—"

I didn't wait. Time was of the essence. I summoned my magic and focused it on an air burst. The drawer flew open with a loud crack, slamming into the wall opposite the desk hard enough to shatter it in two.

Glancing at the spilled contents of the drawer, I didn't see anything of value to me. Some money and a spare credit card, plus the ends of a few well-worn pencils. Nothing of sentimental value.

Damn.

Killian let out a low whistle. "Remind me not to get on your bad side," he said with a chuckle.

I shot him an icy glare, and he shut up. Elaine had to be close by. She just had to be. I'd caught a whiff of her magic scent just outside the office. If she'd been close by then, maybe she was still somewhere in the area. I just needed a way to track her.

That was it. I had it. Her magic scent. If I could super-charge my nose, maybe I could sniff her out like a cat.

Killian frowned at me and came forward, reaching out with a hand to squeeze my shoulder. I just scowled and brushed his arm away. I was in no mood to be coddled. I had a mission to complete.

I jammed my finger into my lancet, drawing a little more blood than was probably necessary. Then I summoned my magic once more. It responded instantly, wrapping me in a warm blanket. I directed all that power at my nose, commanding it to catch even the slightest of scents.

Then immediately regretted it. I caught all the scents, all right. Every single one. Killian's sweat that had recently formed on his brow. Its icky metallicness assaulted my nostrils right away. A fart from someone three cubicles down. The unwashed body of a person yawning two seats to the right of him. All of it came at me all at once, overwhelming everything.

I fought the urge to hurl, stopping only when I caught wind of my very own bile rising in my throat and it threatened to overtake me.

Focus, I commanded myself. Find the beachy scent. Focus just on that one.

But it was entirely too much. I didn't have any sort of experience with body-enhancing magic. It was incredibly dangerous, and for obvious reasons, so I'd always shied away from it. If I'd been in my right mind now, I wouldn't have tried it in this instance, either. But the thought of catching my sister, of finally tracking her down and asking her why she wanted me to run away from Val, had been entirely too much.

And really, now that I knew who her true employer was, it all made sense. She'd escaped from the Crimson Hand and now wanted the same for me.

Of course she didn't trust Val. Why would she? She'd never seen his tender side, only that he'd used me once upon a time, and was allied with a bad guy. The bad guy. The one her whole organization was focused on taking down. That was enough for her, and really should have been for me, too, but it wasn't.

Things were simple in Elaine's world. Straightforward. Heh. If only they could be that simple for me, too. But no, Elaine was gone once again, and I was left holding the empty bag. No easy out for me. Not this time, not ever.

I used my shirt to muffle the scents that were attacking me as I backed slowly into a corner of the office and focused on shutting down the magic spell. I'd used a bit too much blood to power it, so it took its time.

Killian eyed me curiously, no doubt wondering what craziness I'd gotten up to this time. But I didn't really want to explain it to him. I didn't want to relive this episode at all if I could avoid it.



“Look,” Killian started. He approached me again, his gloved hand held out in peace. “I know this must be hard for you, but she’s going to come back soon, I swear. If you could just—”

“Just what?” I fired back, a little angrier than I probably should have. But he was just another guy that wanted to use me and my sister. Even if his motives were arguably better, it didn’t change that simple fact. “What, Killian? What should I wait here for?”

Killian opened his mouth to say something but shut it again a moment later. He shook his head again. “I’m sorry. I don’t know.”

“That’s what I thought,” I spat. I glanced at the hallway behind him. Now that my nose was mostly back under control, all I wanted was to march down it back to relative freedom. Freedom from Killian. From Dagon. From all of it.

“I’m free to go, right?” I asked Killian.

He shrugged his shoulders and then his whole body slumped. “Yes,” he said simply. “You’re free to go.”

I didn’t give it even one more second of thought. I brushed past him, jamming up against him a little harder than was necessary and headed down the hallway, using the exit signs in the ceiling to find my way out. It probably would have been quicker with an escort, but I didn’t care.

My sister was gone. Again. This time, I wasn’t going to take it lying down.

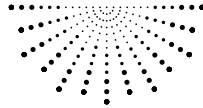
“I’ll text you when she shows up!” Killian called after me. “You’ll see then! You’ll see!”

His voice soon died down to nothing as I finally found the right way to go and burst through a set of double doors into the night air beyond.

A chilly summer wind bit into my sides as I walked, my surroundings slowly coming into focus. I was in Auburn, in their industrial district, not too far south of Seattle. I could get a Ryde to take me back to Mei’s, and then from there? From there, I’d figure it out.

Wherever you went, Elaine, I’m going to find you. Then I’ll finally get some damn answers.

## CHAPTER FOUR



“Thank you for calling InterTech customer service, this is Misty speaking. How can I help you today?” I said for probably the fiftieth time today. Maybe the hundredth. I’d long since lost track of just how many calls I’d taken.

The first few days, I’d kept track of every single call, thinking maybe it would make some sort of difference for my employers. That I’d be paid based on the call count or something. A foolish idea, but they’d harped on call times so much in the brief three-day training course that it had somehow stuck in my head.

Turns out, no one cared how many calls you took, just whether or not you answered them quickly and efficiently.

And to be honest, not even so much on the efficient bit. So long as they didn’t call back again right after they talked to you, of course. *That* was a no-no.

“Hi, yes... my phone stopped working and I don’t know how to fix it,” a sweet old lady’s voice rang out from the other side of the line. She sounded like she was in her seventies, and probably had eleven grandkids or something like that.

Would I ever have kids? I was none too sure myself. I was thirty-seven now. The proverbial clock was ticking. My last birthday had been pretty underwhelming. Just me and Evelyn and a couple bottles of cheap champagne.

Still fun, mind you, just not what I’d thought it would be originally. Although that karaoke bar would probably never be the same...

“I’ll be happy to assist you with that today,” I replied in a wooden tone. It was the same script for every call, regardless of the reason for the call. Even if I had to transfer someone right after I gave out my script. Then the next person would say the same thing, and the next, and so on down the line until the customer got to the right destination.

It was a wonder customers actually put up with this crap. Or that people actually recorded my calls and listened to them to make sure I said that exact phrase. I mean, seriously, did the quality assurance people have no lives? Was there nothing better for them to do?

But I did it anyway. My first call out the gate, I’d skipped the script. It was someone who’d asked right away to be transferred to a manager, and you’re supposed to give them what they want, so that’s what I’d done, only to find out later that since I’d skipped the mandatory feel good message, my QA score had been... less than stellar.

Which, in turn, had sparked one of my first visits to my manager’s office to talk about the importance of making a customer feel “heard.”

Whatever. After that verbal tirade, I’d half expected to be fired, but I was still here. They must be really hard up for people to work here. But then, in fairness, we *were* in the middle of nowhere, Idaho...

“Yes, thank you,” the sweet elderly lady said after a moment’s pause. I imagined her sitting in one of those giant rocking chairs, gently rocking back and forth and stroking a cat’s fur or something. I hoped she was that kind of grandma. Of course, in reality I had no idea, and I’d get in trouble for asking, so I just let the fantasy play out. “My name is Esmerelda.”

“It’s great speaking to you today, Esmerelda. May I have your account number?”

Yep. That was all part of the script, too. Didn’t matter why a customer called in. You still had to get them to say their account number, or you couldn’t do anything with them.

Didn’t make much sense to me, but such were the rules, and if I wanted to keep this job, I had to play by them.

*Did* I want to keep this job? Now there was a question for the ages...

“Account number?” Esmerelda asked.

“Yes, ma’am. It should be on top of your latest bill in the upper right corner, if you don’t know where to find it.”

“Upper right... Vern!” Esmerelda shouted. “Vern! Where’d I put my reading glasses?”

I put the phone on mute for a second to suppress a giggle. I could just imagine in my head Esmerelda hobbling around her house, chasing after an equally old Vern for hiding her glasses again.

One day, maybe I'd have a relationship like that. One day. Not any time soon, certainly.

My relationship with Val had fizzled out shortly after I'd moved to Idaho with Evelyn a month ago. She had moved here to go to med school, and I'd tagged along because my shop was still dead, and I really had no prospects, so a change of scenery had seemed like the right call.

Damian had insisted I could stay with him as long as I wanted, of course, but they were heads-deep in wedding planning right now, and I felt like dead weight in those conversations. All that did was make me think of the future that would never be with either Brennan or Val.

Oh, Val had promised he wouldn't bring up the Marks anymore. Once I'd moved, I'd make it abundantly clear that I was no one's pawn anymore. I'd only cooperated with the Hand because they'd had my sister. Now that she was gone—and she was still very much gone completely, hadn't so much as texted me or dropped me another note since that last one, or shown up at Killian's, for that matter—the Hand had no control over me. So I'd ditched them all, Val included.

Don't get me wrong. Long-distance was no trouble when your boyfriend could teleport, and we'd tried to go on a few normal-ish dates a time or two, but nothing had ever really come of it. Dagon was putting extra pressure on Val to get me to help them out anyway, and it always found a way into the conversations, even though Val promised he wouldn't bring it up.

Okay, so I was the one that normally brought it up. But he didn't deny anything when I mentioned it. That was pretty damning.

It was too bad, really. Val really was a great guy overall, aside from the whole working for demons thing. It was too bad it would just never work between us.

Thems the breaks sometimes, though. What can you do?

"What?" A creaky old-man voice shouted. It sounded far away. I doubted Esmerelda was using a speakerphone, so it made sense his bit would be muted.

I'd almost forgotten I was still on a call.

“My glasses!” Esmerelda shouted again, loud enough to take my ear off. “The cat’s always running off with ‘em and gettin’ inta mischief!”

I had to put the phone on mute again before I burst out laughing. You could laugh at the customers all you wanted, but you couldn’t do it when they could hear you. It was bad for NPS scores and all that. Not that I knew what an NPS score even was...

“The cat’s ain’t done nuttin’ with yer glasses, ye old hag!” Vern fired back. Ooh. He was a feisty one. “Ye left them on the damn bathroom counter again!”

That elicited another giggle from me.

“You *sure* Mr. Muffins didn’t hide ‘em again?” Esmerelda accused.

It was a good thing I was still on mute. I giggled again, thinking that would be just the kind of thing Charly would do to me, if it had ever occurred to him.

Ah. Good old Charly. He was still with me, don’t worry. The only being from the magic community I still spoke with even occasionally. After the way things had gone down in the battle with Roman, there was no way I was ever getting rid of Charly.

Of course, the office had a no pets policy, so he was back in the apartment right now. An arrangement he’d been dead set against, but I was lucky enough just to have this job and be able to pay my share of the bills. I didn’t really need to argue with my boss that I should get to keep my emotional support ferret at my desk.

Yes, my boss knew what those were, and yes they were a thing that was even semi-common in Idaho, believe it or not. But I wasn’t willing to risk it. Yet.

“Oh, there they are,” Esmerelda called out a moment later. She mumbled something else, but I didn’t quite catch it.

“Told ya, you old hag!”

I snorted one final time, then took my phone off mute. “Were you able to find the account number, ma’am?” I asked in as even a tone as I could muster.

You got in trouble if you didn’t speak up every now and then, too. “A good customer knows you’re there for them,” and all that. That’s what they’d said probably half a dozen times in training.

“Yes,” Esmerelda replied after a moment. She rattled off a series of numbers, and I typed them into my keyboard at the same time. At first,

touch typing had been kind of hard for me. It's a skill I hadn't really practiced since elementary school. But it came back readily enough. I was a pro now.

"Got it," I said back as I hit enter to pull up her account. "How can I help you, Miss Smith?"

"That's *Mrs.* Smith," she chided me.

"Of course."

Esmerelda muttered something else I didn't catch. I was beginning to like her. Felt like we'd be fast friends under any other circumstances. But of course, that was never meant to be, either. "My phone?" she said, sounding exasperated. "It's not working?"

I could smack myself. Only I couldn't. The only reason I'd asked her what I could do for her again was because it was part of the script.

"You got it, Mrs. Smith," I replied, putting extra emphasis on the missus part just for her benefit. "I'll be happy to help you with that."

Can you tell that I have the script down by now? It had taken a couple days, but I never got docked on not using the script anymore. Those were costly. We got paid partially based on a reward-like system, and the higher our NPS scores, the better our hourly wage.

"Your phone, do you have it on you now?" I asked in the sweetest tone I could. You'd be surprised how many times the answer to that question was no. Like, I'm halfway decent at this whole tech support thing, especially for someone that's not trained in it, but I wasn't a miracle worker. I couldn't diagnose a phone you didn't actually have with you.

"Pfft!" Esmerelda spat. "Of course I do! It's right here in my hand!"

"Great! Can you do me a favor? Can you turn it off and then back on again? Sometimes that'll reset things and fix it right up for you."

It was the oldest advice in the book, and the best. A remarkable number of errors could be fixed just by power cycling the phone. Or any tech device, really. Also, I found that if I added that bit into the conversation, people were more willing to trust me the first time around.

Oh yeah. I was going to rock this NPS score. Maybe they'd even bump me up to the second pay tier for once.

Esmerelda hummed for a second. "You sure about this, missy?"

I nodded, even though she couldn't see it. "Yes, ma'am. It should do the trick."

“Well, if you say so. Just give me a sec.” I heard the distinct sound of Esmerelda growling, then what sounded like someone licking the phone speaker, and the next thing I knew, the line went dead.

Once again, I burst out laughing. The phone she’d been complaining wasn’t working? Apparently, she’d called us on it.

Hopefully, she’d realize that and go about her merry way. If I ended up getting her again, I couldn’t imagine the conversation going all that well a second time.

Ah, the life of a customer service agent in a call center. Non-stop laughs, I tell you.

My phone—my personal phone—buzzed. I was off the current call and no other call had immediately dinged to take its place, so I picked it up and glanced at it. One missed message. It was from my buddy Evelyn. The one I’d moved out here to live with.

Grinning from ear to ear, I read the message.

*Drinks tonight? After work?*

*Yes, please!* I typed back faster than I could think. I swear, my drinking habit had about tripled after I’d taken this job. I’d thought people could be morons at the tea and herb shop, but customer service? That had them all beat by a mile.

*Jina’s?*

Jina’s was where all the college students went for cheap booze in this town. It was no Mei’s—nothing was—but the liquor was cheap, and they didn’t close up until one in the morning. Both notes in their favor. Add to the fact that they were one of the few places without karaoke and you had a winning strategy in my book.

*Again?* Ev sent a frowny face. *I was hoping for something more like Sal’s.*

Sal’s was definitely more upscale. They had some decent wines and like thirty beers on tap, plus a selection of pizzas to go with the usual bar snack food.

*I could do Sal’s.*

*Great!* Ev replied. *I want you to meet Thom.* That was followed by three different heart emojis.

*Thom, huh?* I added an eggplant emoji and a heart of my own.

*Yes, Thom,* Ev replied. *And Misty? Lay off the emojis, huh?*

Another laugh escaped my lips. I was trying to get the hang of all this text lingo, but it was *so* not my thing. When I'd been Evelyn's age and in love, texting was still done on a dial pad where you had to press seven four times to get an "s." I appreciated the full keyboard so much more, but I was far from an expert at it.

Before I could reply, another call came into my work phone, dinging in my ear.

"Thank you for calling InterTech, this is Misty speaking. How can I help you?" I said before I even realized I'd spoken at all.

It was probably a good thing Evelyn texted me the vast majority of the time. I could only imagine the horror if I answered *her* call like that...

The caller needed help reading their bill, which was an easy ask, so I didn't mind so much. Even though I couldn't actually tell them anything that wasn't already written on it. Still, he seemed happy with my explanation, so that was good. Maybe it'd lead to a good NPS score. I hoped.

Man, the days when I was hoping just to stay alive against rogue mages were so different from this world. Better in some ways, worse in others. Everything was a trade-off.

The next hour or so passed without any further messages from Evelyn, or much of anything, really. I took probably another ten calls in that time, which meant my call times would be low. At least I could be proud of that, even if I was pretty sure I'd given the wrong info to Mr. Wood when he'd asked me where the closest store was...

Soon enough, it was time for me to take my break, so I entered a quick code into my phone to take me off the call list and set down my headset. A long, slow sigh escaped my lips.

This job was killing me, one slow step at a time. But what choice did I have? Turns out, running a tea and herb shop didn't give one a lot of marketable skills—especially because a lot of my time had been spent foraging for rare herbs and not so much with the customers, marketing, keeping track of the books, or anything that could actually help me get a job somewhere. So my work options were limited. Also, there wasn't much to do in this town if you didn't go to college.

I shuddered. Pretty soon I'd *have* to go back to college myself if I wanted to improve my situation.



For now, though, it was enough just to survive. That part, at least, was easier.

Pushing myself backward, I got out of my chair and stretched, then headed to the bathrooms. I did my business and stopped off in the breakroom to refill my water cup before heading back to my desk. I thought about getting some of their coffee, but it was terrible. Worse than the mega chain burnt stuff.

Heh. I'd never even realized that was possible, but there you have it.

"Two more hours," I said to myself as I watched the water slowly pour into the paper cup. It was cold water, at least, which was something, but boy did it ever pour out from the machine slowly.

I rapped my finger against the water cooler a few times in hopes of it speeding things along. Finally, it was done and I took a long sip before adding just a little bit more water to the cup and resigning myself to going back to my desk.

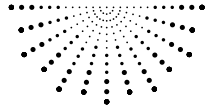
"Misty?" A gruff voice asked from behind me.

It was so sudden that I jumped a little and ended up sloshing half the water all over myself. I spun around to face the new guy. Or new guys, rather. There were two of them, standing near the entrance to the breakroom, both in tan slacks and matching red polo shirts. The guy on the left was wearing a thick pair of sunglasses, but the other one's eyes were... off.

My body tensed immediately. "Yes?" I squeaked out in a voice barely over a whisper.

Sunglasses smiled at me. The other guy flexed his fingers, balling them into a fist. It was only then that I noticed the horns growing out of both of their heads.

## CHAPTER FIVE



“**Y**ou’ve got the wrong girl,” I said instinctively. Though I knew that wasn’t the case. Demons? Here in Idaho, at my work building specifically? There was only one person they could possibly be after, and it wasn’t Jan in accounting.

I mean, it wouldn’t surprise me if someone here had sold their soul to try and get out of it, but I wouldn’t think the demons would come here if that were the case. They’d make that deal out at a crossroads or something.

Sunglasses advanced half a step. His demon partner did, too. “Is that so?” Sunglasses asked with a devilish grin. “I don’t think so.”

I gave him a half-hearted smile while I sized up my options. It was a small break room, and there was really only the one exit. There was a small window near the microwave, but we were six floors up. I wasn’t going to survive a fall like that. And even though I’d managed to semi-fly once, it had only been that one time. Subsequent attempts had been... less than stellar.

No, somehow, I’d have to get past the wall of demon muscle currently boxing me in if I wanted to escape.

“Misty is such a common name,” I argued while I searched for something I could use as a weapon. My magic surged within me, just beyond reach. But I didn’t have so much as a paper cut on me at the moment, so it was out for the count.

Instinctively, my hand snaked into my pocket, searching for my trusty lancet. Only, it wasn’t there anymore.

Metal detectors. I’d forgotten this place was lousy with metal detectors. I couldn’t bring my lancet into the workplace, or they would have just

confiscated it anyway. You needed a medical exemption for stuff like that, which I didn't have.

Fear gripped me, making my stomach churn. I was going to die here if I couldn't find a way out, and for once, I was well and truly alone. No help would be coming from any angle.

Sunglasses took another step forward. Pretty soon, he'd be in range to grab me. Then what? What did they want with me? To kill me, or just capture me?

"Dagon sends his regards," Sunglasses said. He took another step.

"Yeah?" I replied. "Well, you can tell Dagon to stay in Hell. I don't work for him anymore."

Demon Two surged forward so he was right next to Sunglasses. They were both so close I could almost feel their putrid breath on me, making me want to gag. I was quickly running out of options.

"That's not how he sees it," Demon Two insisted.

Both the demons tensed like they were about to strike. I did the only thing I could think of. I threw my cup at Sunglasses.

The paper cup harmlessly bounced off his face, splashing water everywhere. It was a lot less effective than I might have hoped, but it did serve to stun both demons for a vital second.

That was all the time I needed. I grabbed the microwave and tugged as hard as I could, pulling it free of the outlet. Then I swung it with all my might at Demon Two. He looked like the least muscled of the two.

Plastic and metal met with demon skin in a horrifying display. Demon Two reared back several steps as he fought to remain standing. Sunglasses immediately went to his aid.

I couldn't sense any blood from the wound, which was a bummer, but at least it had served to distract them both further.

My time was up. I ran for it, bolting past both demons and down the hallway before they could recover. I heard Sunglasses utter something unintelligible, then they were both after me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I could see them not too far behind me and closing in fast. With their muscle-bound forms, they'd likely be faster than me. This was hella bad. I needed something else. Something to keep them at bay so I could exit the building, hopefully without hurting any of my coworkers or damaging too much company property. I already couldn't really afford to replace that microwave.

Did my workplace have demon insurance? It seemed unlikely. There weren't that many demon attacks in Idaho. At least, not that I knew of...

Once again, I felt my magic brimming at the surface, begging to be released. But without a steady source of blood, that's where it would stay. And I was fresh out of the precious stuff.

Maybe if I fell and skinned my knees, that would do it? But what if I failed to open a wound? Then my would-be captors would just have a better chance of catching up to me.

No, I had to get out of here first and foremost. And then? Well, then we'd have to see. For now, just focus on getting out of here.

The staircase was just up ahead. I sped for the door as fast as my two feet would take me, reaching it with ease and forcing it open. It was set to cause an alarm if you opened it without badging first, but I didn't have time, so I let the alarm blare.

I could hear several people complain at the harsh noise, wondering if they'd figure out a way to write me up for this somehow, like it was my fault. Oh well, they'd just have to deal with it. My job was less important than my life.

Inside the stairwell, I had a decision to make. Up or down. The demons would expect me to go down, so I went up instead, taking the stairs two at a time with my short legs. They burned with each step, but I fought the sensation down.

Yeah, yeah. I know. Bad idea. Fewer options for escape if I went up. But maybe I could double back down later and get around the demons that way. I just had to stay hidden for long enough. It was the best idea I had at the moment, so it was worth a shot.

Bounding up the stairs, I waited at a landing not far above the door and crouched down to make myself as small a target as possible, then waited. Sure enough, Sunglasses entered the stairwell not a moment later, followed by his demon friend.

"Where is she?" Sunglasses said with a scowl.

Demon Two held up his hands in defeat. "Hells if I know."

"Let's just get after her!" Sunglasses insisted.

With that, the two of them headed down the stairs, just like I'd expected they might.

My heart rate slowed ever so slightly, and I took a steadying breath as I pressed my body as far against the wall as I could to remain out of sight.

My gambit had worked. For now.

Fingers trembling, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and clicked on Evelyn's picture. *SOS*, I texted her. *The magic kind*.

It was a signal we'd developed weeks ago. Back then, I'd been fairly certain that Dagon or someone else would come hunting for me. It had been all I could think about some days, so we'd developed a signal I could message her in case something went south, and I couldn't talk.

She would then alert the authorities for me, and hopefully they'd arrive in time to do something about it. The funny thing was, I hadn't thought about that little signal of ours for two weeks now. I'd thought the danger had passed.

How wrong I'd been.

Jamming my phone back in my pocket, I hunted around for something I could use to draw blood from my body. A discarded pen or something. It would hurt like hell to jam a pen into my finger hard enough to draw blood, but it was better than having no magic.

If I could only access my magical powers, I could take out both demons without so much as a thought. What a fool I'd been, thinking I'd be safe *anywhere* from Dagon's goons. I should have known better.

The sound of the demon's footsteps grew quiet, so I assumed they had gone down the stairs far enough by now to give me some leeway. There were two staircases I could go down in this building, one on each end. All I had to do was get to the other one and go down it, then slink out through the fire escape.

Easy peasy, right?

Slowly, I crept upward, pushing myself into a standing position. The coast was clear. I lightly stepped down the stairs, making sure to make as little noise as possible, and paused at the same door I'd just come through.

Badge. I needed my badge. Where had I left that thing again?

My hand brushed over my chest, which was when I found it hanging on the bottom of my lanyard like always. I almost laughed. Here I was, bumbling about looking for something that was right in front of me the whole time.

Maybe I really did have a lot in common with Esmerelda from earlier...

With a deft swipe of my badge, I opened the door, causing more noise than I would have thought possible, both from the beep and the heavy door itself surging outward.

A low growl from behind me made my hair stand up on edge and let me know that maybe I wasn't as safe and alone in this staircase as I'd thought.

All at once, Sunglasses was there, practically on top of me. He loomed over me and quickly wrapped his hand around my free arm, pulling hard.

Magicless as I was, I was forced to comply. I spun around, letting the door shut behind me, its safety quickly forgotten.

"Thought you could escape from us so easily, did you?" Sunglasses taunted. Demon Two was right behind him, frowning at me over his shoulder. "You little twat. We had you figured out from the start. Figured you'd try to pull something like that."

I glared up into his eyes—or sunglasses, rather. "Sorry, I figured you were just as smart as your master. Guess I should have known better."

Sunglasses shot me a confused look, cocking his head to the side. I wondered how long it would take him to figure out if that was a compliment or an insult.

While he was mulling it about in his mind, I brought my foot up and slammed it hard onto his shin. The effect was immediate. Sunglasses staggered backward, pulling me with him as he smacked into Demon Two.

Demon Two was too close to the top of the stairs, so he fell backward, down them, screaming and flailing about as he tumbled backward.

It was enough of a distraction. I wrangled my arm free from Sunglasses' grip and shoved on the door once more. It gave way, letting me spill back into the main room.

I bolted, shouting all the way about someone chasing me for any that might listen. Maybe some good samaritan would come to my aid.

Sadly, my screams did practically nothing. Only a few people even craned their necks to watch me fleeing for my life.

Humph. Some coworkers they were. Not that I was much better, but I would have at least put my call on hold and gotten up...

Along the way, I noticed a fire extinguisher on the wall. It was bolted into place, so it wouldn't do me any good without a lot of time or a key, neither of which I had. I'd just have to hope I could outpace my captors again.

The other stairway door wasn't too far off. Just another thirty feet or so. Twenty-five. Twenty.

An unearthly howl behind me made me double my pace. But it was all for naught. Something snaked out, wrapping itself around my ankle and

making me trip. It was all so sudden, I didn't have a chance to brace myself or anything.

Brown carpet came up to greet me as I slammed into it hard, making stars swim in my vision. Everything hurt—my knees, my hands, and my face. All of it. But I couldn't sense any blood forming from any of my new injuries.

Damn. Even just a few drops would have been enough to do something. But nope. I wasn't that lucky.

Sunglasses loomed over me again. He straddled me and spun me around so I was looking up at him. "Bitch," he spat. His hand struck me across my cheek fast enough to make my head spin. A fresh wave of pain rolled over me. Gods, but he was strong.

"You're gonna pay for that," he continued.

"Yeah?" I replied. "Well, I'm all out of cash at the moment, so will you take a rain check?"

I know. Taunting the person who could easily kill you wasn't my smartest move. But it felt good in the moment.

Sunglasses looked perplexed again for a moment, then he growled and slapped me even harder. This time, I felt the slightest trickle of blood run down my nose from the injury.

Yes. Blood. That was what I needed. I summoned my magic instantly and used it to usher in a massive blast of air. Sunglasses was instantly whisked away, slamming into a nearby wall with a loud thud.

I didn't need any more prompting. I forced myself up and continued my trek toward the stairway door. I was limping now and going much slower. I'd just have to hope it would be good enough, that I'd slowed down my captors enough to make up the difference.

From somewhere off to my left, I saw one of my coworkers give me a thumb's up signal, though what for I wasn't sure. Getting away from the demon, maybe? Whatever. It helped invigorate me a little. I picked up the pace as best I could. With any luck, the authorities were already on their way out here, and I wouldn't have to run for much longer.

On the next desk I passed, I spotted a wireless keyboard. I snatched it up, thinking I could use it as a makeshift weapon if the need arose. Then I kept going. Ten more feet. Eight. Five.

There! I was at the other stairwell. I forced the door open without thinking about the alarm and headed into the relative safety beyond.

Pain lanced through my head as I ran into something hard, right at eye level. My keyboard fell to the ground, and it was all I could do not to fall over myself.

As my vision cleared, I stared right into the end of a club. Demon Two's club. He was there, on the other side of the stairway door, holding it, ready to strike me again.

How had he gotten here so fast? How had I not seen this coming?

I inched backward, toward the door, but Sunglasses was there, closing in on me. I was trapped, and once again weaponless. That club had hurt something awful, but it hadn't drawn any blood.

Come to think of it, almost none of their attacks had. They'd probably been under orders not to draw any of the precious stuff if they could avoid it. Dagon knew I was a blood mage, after all.

Ah, hell. I'd been outclassed from the start.

Sunglasses grabbed both my arms and dragged them behind me. Demon Two grabbed my legs and pulled them together. I was well and truly trapped.

I smiled up at Sunglasses. "Don't suppose we could stop for tea first?" I suggested.

He just snorted at me and said nothing. Together, the duo started hauling me away down the staircase.

My mind raced. I needed an escape route, but I didn't have one. I was completely out of options this time. I thrashed and tried to fight against their holds, but they had me. It was no use. I'd just have to hope they weren't too rough with me, and that the authorities arrived in time.

Heh. Like that would happen.

Right as I was wondering just what Dagon was going to do to me for defying him, I caught a glint of something metal flash out of the corner of my eye.

Dread filled me. It looked like some sort of weapon. The demons were going to kill me.

"Just make it quick, yeah?" I said to Sunglasses. His grin grew wider as the knife in his hands became more apparent.

Blood. Why wasn't there any blood around here? All I needed was a little bit of it, and I could work my magic. Save my own hide.

Then I saw it. A tiny, almost insignificant scratch next to Sunglasses' eyes. Maybe I'd hit him harder than I thought earlier.



Whatever the cause, it was my salvation. I focused on that tiny bead of blood and pulled my magic to me. Quick as a thought, I summoned a small, concentrated burst of air at the dagger Sunglasses held, forcing it inward, toward his own chest.

The spell worked. The dagger flew inward and across his chest, carving a deep gash into his body that spilled hot demon blood everywhere.

Sunglasses scowled and dropped me in his haste to cover up his own injury. In the ensuing chaos, his partner dropped me as well.

Instantly, I sprang to my feet, scanning the hallway for something else I could use to turn the tide to my favor. That's when I spotted the fire extinguisher.

There were several in every building, mostly on the floors themselves, though there were a couple in the stairwells, too. It would have to do. I used more of Sunglasses' blood and pulled on the fire extinguisher until it came free of its clamps and flew into my open hands. Then I turned and brought the heavy thing down on Sunglasses' head.

Bits of bone and brains sprayed everywhere as I smashed the container into his head with a loud clang. That was one dead demon. Just one more to go now.

Holding tight to my weapon, I hefted it and glared down at the other demon. He started to back away slowly.

"Yeah, that's right," I said through clenched teeth. "Not so helpless now, am I?"

All at once, several things happened. I struck out with my fire extinguisher right as Demon Two produced a gun from within the folds of his jacket. A loud bang filled the stairwell, echoing up and down it as every muscle in my body tensed, thinking I'd been shot. But nothing hurt, and I couldn't feel any blood dripping down my body.

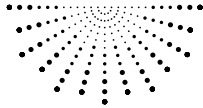
I marveled at the fact that I somehow hadn't been hit. Somehow, I was just fine.

Demon Two slumped to the ground, his grip on his gun going slack as the life left his eyes. But where had the shot come from, if not from him?

It didn't take long for me to find out the answer.

"You totally had that in the bag," Noelle said, rounding the corner and coming fully into view. She shot me a wry grin. "But I thought I'd help out anyway."

## CHAPTER SIX



“Noelle?” I said incredulously. It was her, all right, standing there with a shiny gun in her hands, still trained on Demon Two in case he somehow had survived being shot in the skull. She had gone green today. A nice, deep forest green for both her hair and the jacket she normally wore. They complimented her hazel eyes quite nicely.

Noelle was one of the few magical friends I had that hadn’t abandoned me when I’d left the magical world the first time. Whatever magic talent she had was a mystery—as far as I could remember, she’d never mentioned it—but she was an expert in combat and with just about any weapon.

She’d also been a vital resource during the assault on the underground in Malta when I’d been going up against Ghantin. To see her here now was somewhat of a relief. Even if it did raise a few questions.

“The one and only,” Noelle replied with a slight bow. She frowned at the demons for another moment, then finally put her gun away. “Looks like I got here just in time.”

I stared at the demons as well. Their lifeless, glassy eyes greeted me. Looked like they were well and truly gone. And just when we’d been getting on good terms, too.

“But how?” I asked Noelle as I turned to face her again. “Why?”

She shrugged. “Does it really matter?” She offered me her hand. “Let’s get out of here before those cops your friend called converge on the place and we can’t get out for hours, shall we?”

I blinked at the hand in disbelief. So many questions raged in my head. But maybe if I went with her, I’d get at least a few of those answers. It was

better than waiting around here for the police to ask me why I had two dead demons at my feet, though...

A shudder ran down my spine at that thought. Yes, a little distance was just what the doctor ordered.

I took the offered hand and let Noelle pull me up to a standing position. “Okay,” I said, “I’ll go with you. But only if you promise to tell me what’s going on.”

A slow smile played across Noelle’s lips. “That I can do. Come on.”

Hand in hand, we went down the rest of the stairs to the side exit of the building, slinking out of it without anyone noticing, as far as we could tell. At about the same time, the police finally arrived, swarming the building. Evelyn’s alert had paid off, just a little later than I’d needed it to.

“This way,” Noelle whispered, pointing toward a car parked at the edge of the lot. “Let’s get you out of here.”

No arguments here. I piled into the car.

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I TURNED OFF THE MUSIC THAT WAS PLAYING IN MY EAR AND LET OUT A sigh. It had been playing *The Ballad of Peter Pumpkinhead*, a little-known piece that didn’t get anywhere near as much love as it deserved. It was two days later. After the incident at my workplace—former workplace, I should say. There was no way I was going back there now—Noelle had explained everything to me. About how Damian had hired her to keep an eye on me out in Idaho, just in case something squiggly went down.

Something like a pair of demons trying to kidnap me.

Part of me wanted to be mad at him for not trusting me to watch out for myself, but only part of me. He’d been right the whole time, of course. Damian was usually right about things like this. I swear, sometimes Damian knew too much. Lucky son of a gun...

Plus, I should have known better, anyway. There was no way Dagon was going to let me go completely. He was too invested in me. If he let me go about my merry way, what message would that send to all his other victims that were trapped under similar circumstances? How would he go about completing his grand master plan?

No, it really had just been a matter of time until all this had gone down. I was just glad that no one else had died in the process. Just Dagon's goons.

"So, what's it going to be, saucy lady?" Charly asked from his perch on my shoulder.

Yes, Charly was with me once again. Predictably, he hadn't left me alone after that last incident. Not even to pee. It was annoying, and also the tiniest bit sweet. He really did care about me.

Shortly after the demon incident, Noelle had taken me back to my apartment to pack. Told me in no uncertain terms that I needed to come with her. That had been part of the arrangement, too—if anything bad ever went down, Noelle was to collect me and bring me back to Damian. So that he could make sure I was safe or something, I supposed.

It had been hard saying goodbye to Evelyn. We'd grown quite close the past few weeks, and I really had been looking forward to meeting this Thom of hers. Admittedly, I knew nothing about him, but Ev had included three hearts in her message about him. Three! So he must be all that and a bag of chips.

Ev had understood, though. Or at least, she'd pretended to. I couldn't afford for another incident like that to happen and be defenseless. Worse—for her to be a casualty, caught in the crossfire. It was really for the best this way.

Besides, I could go back and see her any time I wanted. It's not like I was stuck back in Washington forever. Just had to make nice with Damian for a bit, then I could come back. Albeit with a different job where I wouldn't be worthless if the demons came calling again.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I guess?" I said to Charly, scowling at him. "And 'saucy lady,' really?"

Charly buried his face in his paws. "Thought you might like that one, sweetheart. Since you're all feisty and stuff."

I snorted. "A little, I guess. It's better than 'dimples'."

Noelle shook her head. "If you two are about done, we've got a party to attend in your honor," she reminded me.

My cheeks burned slightly. "Right."

I turned my attention to the big red door in front of me. The door to Mei's. For a while, it had been quite the welcoming spot. Then Killian had kidnapped me from within its walls, and nothing had ever been the same since.

What would it feel like to go in there again, after all this time? How long had it been again? Over a month, certainly. It was the start of August. Hard to believe it had been so long since I'd stepped foot in this place.

And still, I hesitated. Was I worried that Killian would come after me again? He'd been completely silent since I'd stormed out of his base in Everett. More signs that my sister was apparently never coming back, I supposed. Not that I blamed her.

My sister. Elaine. I'd hardly thought about her in the past month. It was so weird. She'd been practically my only thought for so long. Trying to get her back. Get her safe. But now that I knew she was no longer under the Hand's grasp... it was different. Freeing, in a way. Make no mistake, I still wanted to find her and see that she was okay with my own two eyes at some point, but knowing the Hand no longer had control of her changed things considerably. Lessened the need and the drive to locate her, at least. This was far from the first time she'd run off on her own for a month or longer.

True, the last time had been before she'd married Mark, but it wasn't completely out of character for her. I had to let her do her own thing. Right?

Maybe that's why I hesitated outside this door. It had been nice not worrying about the perils of the magical world for a bit. Did I really want to charge headlong back into them, and everything that meant? But what choice did I have? I'd made a promise, and Noelle *had* saved me at Damian's behest.

"Spend any longer looking at that door, and I think you'll technically have to marry it," Noelle chided me.

"Very well," I said with a slight sigh. "Door, will you take me for a bride?"

All three of us laughed at that for a moment. Then, finally, I pushed on the door and headed inside. It was just a small party so Damian could make sure I was alive and well. I'd be in and out in an hour. And after that?

Well, after that, we'd just have to see, now, wouldn't we?

The interior of the bar was warm, although compared to the ninety-degree weather just outside, it almost felt cool in comparison. Mei kept her bar about eighty degrees for some reason. Supposedly, it was because dragons liked the warmth, but I had a suspicion that it probably caused her patrons to drink more.

Mei was the consummate businessperson, first and foremost.

The mixed scents of sage and dragon's blood incense hit my nostrils right away, a nice change from the slightly stale scent of sweat and piss that filled the alley close to the bar. The effect it had on me was immediate, forcing my shoulders to relax and let go of part of the tension that had gripped me ever since the demon attack.

I shouldn't have been worried. Gods, but it felt good to be back in Mei's bar. Even just in the entryway.

"Shall we, sweetheart?" Charly offered, flitting in front of my face. He gave me a bow in the air and extended a paw toward me.

I took the offered paw. "Of course, darling." Holding onto his paw and feeling a little bit silly while doing it, we descended the few steps down into the bar proper.

With each step, I felt my tension ease just a little bit more. Mei's was safe. For the most part, at least. The demons couldn't come in so long as I was here, and Killian had already shot his shot once. He wasn't likely to do it again.

A new fear gripped me, then. What if Val was waiting down there for me? What would I do about that?

I pushed that thought to the bottom of my stomach and let it languish there. I could deal with Val. It was just like meeting with an ex. Not comfortable, but so long as everyone was civil, I could deal. Val would be civil. I had nothing to worry about.

Right?

Turns out I needn't have been worried anyway. As the bar came into view, I took a quick scan of the occupants. No Val to be seen anywhere.

I breathed a small sigh of relief. It was just as well. I didn't really want to meet up with him like this anyway. There was a time and place for that meeting. It would have to happen eventually. I'd never actually officially broken up with him or anything, so sooner or later, he'd pop out of the woodwork wanting to talk. But it wasn't today.

"Misty!" a warm voice called from in front of the bar. Hank. It was Hank, the werewolf sheriff. He turned to face me, a large beer in one of his giant, hair-covered hands.

Hank was huge and covered with hair. He was wearing a red plaid shirt and a nice pair of khakis that practically whined under his bulk, but somehow managed to stay put as he shifted his weight to stand tall and stagger forward.

Of all the regulars at Mei's bar, Hank was probably my favorite. He was always so kind and gentle, if a little pushy about my meeting his youngest daughter. But we did share a name, so I kind of understood that one. I just wasn't quite ready to pull that trigger. Yet.

Regardless, I surged forward and into Hank's arms. He wrapped his giant bear arms around me, squishing half the life out of me in the process. His embrace was surprisingly warm and comforting in spite of it all, so I reached my own arms around to hug him back, though my arms only made it maybe halfway around his bulk.

"It's good to see you, too," I told him with a face full of plaid.

Hank pulled back, keeping his hands on my shoulders so he could look at me properly. "Too long, Misty," he said with a hint of tear in his eye. "It's been too long since I've seen you last. You can't stay away so long next time."

I waved a hand dismissively. "It wasn't that long, was it?"

He embraced me again. "Just come back quicker next time, okay? After the way you made your exit last time, I... we..."

A light dawned on me then. I hadn't been back since the kidnapping. Hadn't really talked to anyone about it, either, except for Damian. For all they knew, maybe I was still under the control of that Killian fellow.

I patted Hank on the back again and pulled away. "Sorry," I said slowly. "I guess I should have come back to let you all know I was okay."

Hank nodded. "You're darn tootin'. Just don't do it again, all right? I couldn't stand the thought of something awful happening to you."

"Fair enough." I found myself crying a little bit as well and quickly wiped away the tear. What was I upset about? Did I really miss this rag-tag crew that much?

Couldn't possibly be the case, could it?

"Don't worry, I'll force her to come back here weekly," Charly insisted with a stiff salute. Not that Hank could understand him anyway.

"Oh, you will, will you?" I replied, flicking him on the nose for good measure.

"Least I can do for these good people," Charly said, snubbing his nose in the air. "Plus the drinks here are pretty great."

"Oh, so *that's* why you want to come back so much. Now I understand." I snickered a little, and Charly laughed as well. Everyone else just stared at

us like we were crazy. Which, to them, only hearing my half of things, is probably exactly what it sounded like.

“Misty, darling!” another patron called out, breaking into the conversation. I winced slightly at the heavy French accent.

“Sevin,” I said coolly. Sevin wasn’t my favorite person, but he meant well. He was a clairvoyant, and he got a little too intense sometimes. But all he wanted to do was warn me about the future.

Not that I ever listened, of course. His fortunes could be a little... hit or miss. It wasn’t that long ago I’m told that he couldn’t predict anything better than the next song to play on the radio. Now? He was a bit better. But he could still be foretelling the end of your next meal just as easily as the end of your life. So I took all his predictions with a hefty grain of salt.

Sevin approached. He was wearing his typical black and white striped shirt and painter’s hat. He’d grown the slightest hint of a mustache on his face since the last time I’d seen him, which looked horribly silly and out of place.

“It is so good to see you,” he said, eyes gleaming. He put one hand on my shoulder and squeezed a little too hard. “I have been worried about you, *mademoiselle*.”

I gently picked up his hand and removed it from my person. He seemed to take the hint as he let it rest at his side instead. “Good to see you, too, Sevin,” I told him. “What’ve you been up to lately?”

Not that I really cared, but it seemed like the nice thing to say.

Sevin nodded. “Quite a bit, darling. I was let go from my job, but Damian found me a new one. It is... much better. *Magnifique*. I prefer my new boss very much, yes? How have you fared?”

I shrugged. “Some of the same, I guess. I started a new job, too.” Small world and all that.

“Really?” Sevin’s eyes grew larger. “Tell me all about it, *sil vousz plait*.”

“There’s not much to tell, really,” I promised. But he was looking at me so expectantly, that I ended up opening up to him anyway. “Very well. Here goes.”

I regaled Hank and Sevin with the tales of my life in Idaho. There wasn’t that much to tell. Customer service wasn’t exactly an exciting profession. But they seemed appropriately enthralled regardless.

“And that’s about it,” I finished a moment later.



“Survived an attack by demons?” Hank said, shock filling his gaze as his mouth hung slightly open.

I waved him off. “Now, now, it wasn’t that crazy. Besides, it was Noelle here that saved me.” I put my arm around her while I spoke.

Noelle smiled at the two and pinched my cheek. “She’s too humble. She practically had those goons on the run by the time I came around.” I opened my mouth to correct her, but she gave me a stiff glare, so I snapped it shut again. “Really, she’s pretty awesome, our Misty. Now, shall we all get a drink?”

“No arguments there,” I said with a half grin.

Hank and Sevin parted, letting us finally get access to the bar proper. Mei, of course, was waiting for us, slightly humming to herself while she watched everything play out and mindlessly wiped at the glass in her hands with a clean bar towel.

Her emerald eyes glinted slightly in the low light of the place, accentuating her green hair. It was almost the same shade as Noelle’s hair today, but only almost.

I felt the final bit of tension I’d been holding on to fall by the wayside as I peered into Mei’s welcoming eyes. “Hi,” I said in a breathy tone.

“Hey, stranger,” Mei called back. “The usual? A Diet Dr. Pepper?”

This was it. This was why I loved Mei so much. Even after everything, she still remembered exactly what I liked.

“Yes, please,” I told her as I eased onto a bar stool. Noelle took the seat next to me.

“I suppose you’re going to want a hunk of meat for that familiar of yours, too?” Mei added.

I glanced over at Charly. He gave me a pleading look. I suppose it *had* been a little while since he’d been fed. “Anything for my best bud,” I told her with a smile.

Mei nodded. “You got it. Just don’t stay away so long next time, okay? We missed your sunny smile around this place.”

The turn of phrase struck me as odd. I didn’t smile that much in general, let alone in the bar, and found half the patrons to be a little too quirky for my tastes. I sincerely doubted any of them cared about whether or not I was grinning. But whatever. It was hard to deny Mei anything.

“Deal.”

Noelle ordered a gin and tonic, and we settled in to wait for our drinks to come. It didn't take long. A large glass filled with dark, bubbly liquid appeared underneath me within moments, complete with a coaster.

I lifted the glass to my parched lips, taking a bigger sip than I probably should have and giving myself the hiccups in the process. Which, of course, only meant that I needed to take another drink to get rid of them.

Dark bubbles tickled the back of my throat as the sweet liquid filled my mouth. Gods, but the drinks at Mei's really were the best. Not even Sal's could compare. I let myself get lost in the moment with the drinks and the good company for just a moment.

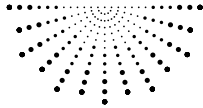
This was perfect. Everything was just... perfect, for the first time in a long time. I found myself wondering why I'd ever left in the first place. Not that it was really all that much of a wonder. The magical world was still out there, as were Dagon's goons. Neither of them would rest until they had me under their thumb.

But for a moment, just for a short moment, I could forget all about them again while I enjoyed my Diet Dr. Pepper in peace, surrounded by a few of my friends.

"Why hello there," a voice called from the entrance to the bar, breaking my little trance.

I spun to face the new voice at once, a lazy smile playing across my lips. "Damian," I said, the name coming easily to my lips. "How good it is to see you here today."

## CHAPTER SEVEN



**D**amian's warm, hearty grin peaked out at me. "Misty! It's so good to see you!" He rushed forward, throwing his arms around me in a tight embrace. His grip was so tight, it reminded me of being crushed by Hank for a moment.

Geez, did everyone miss me this much? I mean, it was a little flattering and all, but it had only been a month...

"Nice to see you too," I managed through a halting breath. Damian was squeezing me so tight it was making it hard to breathe.

He seemed to notice, as he let his grip slack up not a moment later, though he didn't immediately let go completely. "When Noelle told me about what happened, I... I'm so sorry, Misty. I should have been there to help you out."

"Pfft." I pushed Damian away so that we weren't quite as close anymore. He was way more of a hugger than I'd ever be. "What do you have to apologize for? You're not the one that got tangled up with a bunch of demons in the first place."

Damian nodded. "True, but I let you go out there in that cold, unforgiving world without so much as a magic trinket for safety. There are plenty of those that don't have any metal in them, you know. Tanglebrush charms and the like. My mother makes them in her spare time, you could..."

I noticed then that he was holding a tanglebrush charm in his hands, practically shoving it into my own palm. I took the offered trinket. "Thanks, I guess," I said, giving him a slight smile.

Truth be told, something like that would have come in real handy during the encounter with the demons. I'd have to hold onto it for safekeeping. Maybe it would come in handy at some point down the road.

Damian's eyes searched my body, like he was looking for some sort of defect or something. "Thankfully, it looks like you came out of that particular incident largely unscathed," he said at last. "Mostly, at least." Frowning, he reached forward and smoothed down an errant hair on the top of my head. "That's better. Now you look like you did when I left you."

I shook my head slightly. Damian could be a tad bit overprotective, but this was too much. It was starting to bug me out.

"Look, I'm okay," I insisted. "Really. Promise and cross my heart and all that. You don't have to fuss over me so much."

"Oh, but I do. Little Grace would never forgive me if I let anything happen to her Auntie Misty. Or 'Isty,' as she calls you now. Can't quite get that 'm' sound down just yet."

"That so?" I asked, eyeing him critically.

He nodded. "Indeed. Grace is very insistent that her Auntie Isty be safe and sound for the next play date. Apparently, you give the best piggyback rides."

That brought a smile to my face. Grace was Damian's daughter. Well, sort of daughter. Not by birth or anything. She was almost two now, if I was doing my math right, and quite the handful. When I'd stayed with Damian and LaLuna, she'd begged me for piggyback rides practically every day.

Good times, those. So much simpler than the last couple days had been. Okay, so maybe not *all* of the magical world sucked balls. Maybe there were a few redeeming qualities...

"Did you bring her?" I asked, a little more hope in my voice than I'd intended. I glanced behind Damian, hoping to find some hint of a stroller or of LaLuna back there, holding Grace in her hands or a baby carrier. Seeing Grace would do my soul some good.

Damian frowned at me. "I'm sorry, I would have, but..."

"It's okay," Noelle broke in, nudging me on the arm. "This place isn't exactly the best for a baby, am I right? Even if there *is* a highchair here."

Oh yes. The highchair. Supposedly, it had just appeared one day all on its own.

Like I said, magic can be fickle like that. I tried not to think about it.

“Don’t worry about it,” I told Damian. I lightly placed my hand over his. “Whatever the reason, I’m sure it’s a good one, right? I can just meet up with her the next time you come by.” And the next time I’m even in town. Which was going to be when, again? Idaho suddenly seemed very far away.

Damian shook his head. “No, you don’t understand. We have her under lock and key at home these days,” he explained softly. “We can’t afford to let her out of the house. It’s far too dangerous out there.”

“Too dangerous for a little baby?” Charly said incredulously. He swallowed the hunk of meat in his mouth and tsked. “What has the world come to?”

I had to agree with my ferret familiar on this one. Just what *had* happened while I’d been away?

Squeezing Damian’s hand, I looked deep into his eyes. “What’s going on, Damian? Why did you really need to see me so badly? And don’t give me the whole ‘checking up on your friends’ speech.”

Damian ran his free hand over his face. He let out a long sigh, then nodded again. “You’re right. It’s not just to check up on you. There’s more to it than that. Mind if I sit?” He motioned toward the empty stool on my other side, and I gestured for him to take it. “Thanks. Uh... Here goes.”

He started into his tale of the past month. It was crazy indeed. Part of it I’d known all about, mostly that he’d gotten engaged to LaLuna finally, following some crazy incident with the fae and the fae realm. I congratulated him on that.

But from there, his tale only got crazier and crazier. Whatever had happened with the fae had awoken their interest in Grace and caused them to send group after group of ambassadors—assassins in fae speech—through the portal after her. Turns out, there’d been two attacks just in the last week.

It seemed Damian could barely even leave his apartment without running into a group of deadly fae looking to bring about his downfall.

Thankfully, for whatever reason, Damian’s apartment was shielded from the fae’s view. They couldn’t seem to penetrate it or reach anyone that lay within its boundaries, so Grace and LaLuna were safe so long as they stayed behind doors. But it made it hard to live when you couldn’t leave your apartment without getting attacked.

My heart went out to Damian. He was obviously going through a very hard time and trying his best. My own troubles with Dagon’s goons seemed

almost paltry in comparison.

“So anyway, that’s why I’ve been so freaked out about all my friends lately,” Damian finished. “If the fae are after me, there’s no telling what they might do to someone that knows me just to find another way to get to me.”

I squeezed Damian’s hand again. “That’s got to be really trying for all of you,” I admitted. “Especially little Grace. I remember her being quite fond of a certain play group in the city.”

Damian nodded again. “Indeed. Plus, with all the wedding planning going on? Can you even imagine trying to plan a wedding when everyone is trying to kill you?”

I shook my head. “No. No I can’t. That sounds insane.”

He waved a hand at me. “So anyway, naturally I worried they might come after you, too. And I guess I was kind of right, even if it was the wrong kind of enemy that found you.”

“Heh. Guess so.”

Damian’s drink order came, then. A Manhattan. He was addicted to those things. One day, they’d probably kill him, if he weren’t immortal. He took a long pull of his drink and set it down. I wondered briefly just how long it had been since *he’d* been to Mei’s, and what the trip home might cost him if the fae came calling again.

Once upon a time, he’d practically lived at Mei’s, but the look in his eyes, and the way he was nursing that beverage instead of downing it made me think he hadn’t been here in a month, either. What a crazy turn of events.

“Look,” I said slowly, “do you need an escort home, or anything? I’m sure Noelle and I could—”

“Totally,” Noelle agreed. She patted her shoulder holster. “The fae are no match for my pistols.”

Damian quickly shook his head. “No, no. I should be safe enough for today. I think. But...”

“But there’s more you’re not telling me, isn’t there?” He shook his head again, but his sheepish grin told me all I needed to know.

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms over my chest. “Out with it, then. What else is going on with you? And don’t you dare try to sugarcoat it.”

Damian pulled on his face again and opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, another bar patron was there, inserting himself between

us. He was gripping a small stack of papers in his hands like his life depended on it.

“Pardon me,” the man said in a hesitant tone. “It’s just, I haven’t seen you here for ages, and—”

That voice. I recognized it at once. That and the tell-tale stack of papers. It could only be... “Pierre?” I said, blinking up at the man. No, vampire. Pierre was a vampire. A vegan vampire, so he didn’t drink any blood, but a vampire all the same.

His beady eyes looked hopeful, sticking out between locks of his messy blond hair. Apparently, he’d let it grow out a little bit.

Could vampires even grow hair, or was it some kind of wig? It was something I’d have to ask him about later. It looked real, but what did I know about hair? I’d never tried on a wig myself. I’d been blessed with naturally thick hair.

No matter. I was just getting distracted.

“Misty,” Pierre replied, his voice squeaking slightly, “sorry, it’s just, I’ve been so hard at work at your novel, and I’ve been aching to show you my progress for some time now. You’re the only one that seems to understand me and my muse.” He shoved the stack of papers at me expectantly.

I rocked back slightly on my chair, trying to make a little space between us. With him standing so close and Damian and Noelle at either side, I was starting to feel claustrophobic. I took the offered pages gingerly in one hand and held them out a bit so I could focus on the tight, calligraphic script upon them.

Pierre might not be that great of a writer, but his handwriting was impeccable. If awfully tiny. Either that, or my vision was starting to fade. I secretly hoped it was the former. With my luck, though, it wouldn’t be.

“In a hole in the ground, lived a...” I spoke in an even tone, reading the opening line. I stopped there, handing the sheets of papers back to Pierre.

“Something wrong?” he asked me, his eyes starting to tear up at the corners. “I feel like this one is a really strong start.”

I shook my head slightly. “I’m sorry. It’s just... it’s not an *exact* copy of another opener or anything like the last time.” Times, really, but who’s counting? “But it’s giving me serious *The Hobbit* vibes all over the place.”

Pierre scrunched his nose. “*The Hobbit*? That like some retro sci-fi or something?”

I groaned so loud I was pretty sure they would be able to hear it out on the street. Beside me, both Damian and Noelle winced.

“Something like that,” I assured Pierre. Was it really possible he was that poorly read? But then, who didn’t know Tolkien? Had he spent his immortal years living under a rock? Based on his other openers in his previous drafts, I supposed it was possible. Either that, or he had a terrible memory for the written word. Not a great trait for a budding author...

“Damn,” Pierre said, frowning. He let his stack of papers fall uselessly to the ground, forgotten instantly. “I thought I was really on to something with this one.”

I grabbed his shoulder, squeezing it gently. It was surprisingly cool to the touch. It occurred to me I’d never actually touched a vampire before. It was kind of odd and a little creepy. I retracted my hand slow enough that I hoped it wouldn’t make a scene.

“Now, now,” I told him, “I’m sure it’s great. The rest of what I’ve read is pretty good,” I assured him. Which was true, although the rest of what I’d read had all pretty much been opening lines from other famous books, so there was that.

“Yeah?” Pierre pressed, his eyes glinting and once more brimming with hope. “You really think so?”

I nodded. “Yes. Now go and write like your heart is on fire. I’m sure you’ll get the right opening soon.” If you can stop plagiarizing for five seconds...

“Thank you!” Pierre picked up his discarded sheets of paper and scurried off to a nearby table. “I’m going to write the best opening you’ve ever seen. Just you wait!”

“You’ve got this!” I called, giving him a thumbs up. He shot me one back, then started scribbling like mad.

“Sorry, mistress, I should have shoved him off ages ago,” Charly insisted at my shoulder.

I glanced at him. He’d pretty much finished his piece of meat and was patting his stomach contentedly. “Oh, I can see you were trying so hard at it, too.”

“Priorities, *chica*.”

I thought about flicking him for good measure, but I supposed I could let “*chica*” slide. It wasn’t really derogatory or anything.



“So, about that real reason of yours? For summoning me back here?” I asked, turning my attention back to Damian. I wasn’t about to let him weasel out of this, momentary distraction or no.

“Right,” Damian said with another nod. “It’s like this. Grace’s magic, it... it’s getting out of control. We’re pretty sure that’s how the fae are tracking us. Her magic residue stays with LaLuna and I even after we leave the house, and with how strong it is, well, we’re basically sitting ducks.”

I arched my eyebrow. “Just how strong is Grace’s magic, anyway?”

A look of utter terror crossed Damian’s visage for a moment, then it was gone again just as quickly. Blink and I would have missed it. “Let’s just say it involved a call to the marine biology center at the Seattle Aquarium.”

Now *there* was a story I wanted to learn a little more about. But as eager as I was for details, it was starting to get late, and I still needed to know what Damian wanted of me. Priorities, and all that. I’d grill the story out of him later.

“Okay, fair enough. So how do I fit into all of this? How am I supposed to help you out?”

Damian pulled a small scrap of paper out of his pocket and started unfolding it. The paper was yellow and torn at the edges. It looked like it was at least a hundred years old, if not older. “We need a mage, you see. Someone that knows a lot about magic and how it works. They’re the only ones that can help us find what we need.”

I wrinkled my nose. I should have known it would come to something like this. “And what is that?”

He finished unfolding the parchment and placed it down on the counter in front of me, right next to my beverage that I’d only half finished. “That,” he said, pointing to a crude drawing.

A sigh escaped my lips. Not chasing after another crudely drawn artifact. That’s how this whole thing had started a few months ago. But this was Damian. I supposed he at least deserved me listening to his whole spiel. He *had* saved me more than once.

“What am I looking at, exactly?” I tried to puzzle it out myself. It had the vague shape of an urn or a vase, and it looked positively ancient. Blue, with gold designs printed all over it. One of them looked vaguely like an ogre with googly eyes and a dog snout for a face.

Distinct enough of an image to be rare, but even so, it wasn’t much to go off of, in all honesty.

“That there is what’s known as an anti-magic device. The most powerful one the world has ever known,” Damian informed me.

I let out a low whistle. Anti-magic? That was dangerous stuff, especially to a mage. Get mixed up with an anti-magic device, and it could end up sapping all your powers permanently. Or so the stories went. As far as I knew, no one had ever actually run into an anti-magic device in years. Certainly not in recent history.

Come to think of it, all the stories of anti-magic were really nothing more than hearsay.

“And I suppose you want me to find it for you?” This whole mess was sounding less and less pleasant by the minute.

“If you’d be so kind as to do me and little Grace a favor, that is.” Damian sighed. “If we had this thing, we could lock away her powers for at least a short while. We think. Let her have something of a normal life. Give her a shot at making it to adulthood in one piece.”

I bit my bottom lip. Lock her powers away? That was something I’d only heard of happening once, and the results had been... less than stellar. That person had been fully grown at the time, too. To do it to a little child? What side effects would arise from messing with a developing kid like that?

Suppressing a shudder, I looked Damian in the eye. “I don’t know. That seems like a pretty major decision. One I’m not sure any of us can make for her. And there’s no guarantee it’d be temporary, either.”

Damian’s eyes took on a pleading look. “Please, Misty. We’ve been over this, LaLuna and I. It’s for the best. Grace deserves a chance to grow up like a normal person. Even if it’s more than temporary. It’s... it’s the least we can do for her, and the only way we can give her any sort of decent upbringing. We can’t keep her locked up constantly, and if the fae were ever successful in killing one or both of us, she’d be lost to the world completely.”

His words were softening my resolve. I bit my lip again, almost drawing blood.

“Please.”

I thought about it for several more agonizing seconds. To live a life unburdened by magic? Could it really be possible? I’d never gotten that option, but if I had? There’s no doubt I would have leapt at it. Maybe it wasn’t as bad an idea as I’d thought.

To think, I could give sweet, innocent little Grace a chance at a “normal” life? Not that I even knew what one of those was, of course. I could feel my resolve slipping as Damian stared at me with those soft, pleading eyes of his.

“Fine,” I said at last. “I’ll do it. Where am I going?” It wasn’t even really a question, really. Grace deserved it. And I did owe Damian.

Relief washed over Damian’s features. “Thank you, Misty.” He shook my hand as well. “You can’t imagine how much this means to LaLuna and I.”

“Sure, sure,” I said, nodding. “But where am I going, exactly?”

Damian shrugged. “We’re not really sure on that one.”

I scoffed. “Not sure? You want me to find something, but you don’t know where to look?” It was just like Damian to come at me with a vague request like this. If I hadn’t already accepted, I’d throw it back in his face.

“Sorry,” Damian said, shaking his head slightly. “We’ve searched all the ancient texts we can find, but we don’t get a lot of time to be out and about, so our options are limited. You know how it is. We were hoping maybe you could scry for it?”

I glanced at the paper again. I’d never scryed for anything without using the blood of the person I was scrying for, or a magical map. This urn was not a person, and while I knew of the location of a magical map, it wouldn’t do any good if the object was outside Washington State. Which was likely.

“Wish I could,” I admitted, “but I don’t have anything to scry for it with.”

Damian nodded again. His eyes were downcast. He sniffed slightly. “It’s okay. I understand. I appreciate your offer of help, anyway.”

“Hold up a second,” Noelle said from behind me. She snatched the bit of paper and scrutinized it. “I think I recognize this urn. Well, sort of.”

“Really?” I could barely believe it. How would Noelle know about such a rare and ancient artifact? This was the kind of thing only Gryffyth would normally know about. Not that he was here today.

Noelle nodded. “Yep. I recognize the art style. Vacationed near a spot that had lots of similar paintings and whatnot a few years back.” She shrugged. “I could take you there, if you like.”

It was all too good to be true. Two days ago, I’d been living a happy-ish life in Idaho, when my only cares in the world had been what to eat for dinner and whether or not any customers would chew me out. And now?

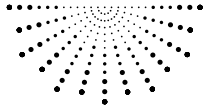
Now I was about to embark on another journey into the unknown. Into the magical world.

How had things gotten to this point so quickly? But I knew the answer. Much as I hated to admit it, I'd never really left. Never could, in fact. Maybe didn't even want to.

"Where is this place, exactly?" I asked, my voice a little too eager for my own tastes.

Noelle seemed to sense my excitement. She grinned at me. "Oh, don't worry, you're going to love it there."

## CHAPTER EIGHT



“I could get used to a place like this,” Charly quipped as we disembarked from the plane.

Looking around at everything, I could totally agree with him. It was pretty warm in the summer in Washington. Even warmer in Idaho. A little too warm, if I was being honest with myself. And dry. Oh, so dry. I don’t know how the Idahoans did it.

But here? In Bali, where this supposed anti-magic device was located if Noelle were to be believed? Here it was warm, but not too hot, and not in the least bit dry.

Of course, we *were* on an island in Indonesia, so I supposed it made sense that it wouldn’t be very dry...

“Let’s just hope I can find a place that doesn’t serve fish,” I offered in return. That had been a real concern the last time I’d visited an island nation. Islands didn’t have a ton of space, so there weren’t many cattle, and a lot of people ended up eating fish for protein. The ocean was a lot vaster than the land and all that.

I just wasn’t a big fan of fish. Never really had been. I’d been forced to eat a trout my dad had caught once on a camping trip when I was like five or six or something. I didn’t remember much about that trip, but I remembered the trout vividly. Half burnt, half raw, and horribly over-seasoned.

To be honest, it likely wasn’t the trout’s fault that I hadn’t liked it. My dad had never been much of a cook, and without the benefit of a real kitchen to cook in, well... let’s just say that poor fish never stood a chance.

Ever since, though, I hadn't been too fond of fish. Which, in a city like Seattle or Tacoma, is kind of a big deal. Once again, the ocean is pretty close, so something seafood related is on just about every menu.

"Amen to that." Charly sniffed his nose, his head angling in one particular direction. "But don't worry, I think I smell beef close by."

"Beef?" My mouth watered at the mere thought of a nice hunk of beef. I hadn't had a good steak in a few weeks. They weren't cheap.

Noelle chuckled. "Maybe," she said. "There might be a few beef places around here for the tourists, but most of what you'll find is chicken or fish. This place is highly Hindu. You know how they feel about cattle."

I couldn't tell whether or not it was me or Charly that felt more deflated. "Oh well," I whined. "It was worth a shot."

Noelle nudged me on the arm. "Come on. Once we get out of this airport, I think I can find us a McBurger or something. According to my maps app, there's one not far from here. It's going to be your best shot at beef."

My stomach growling, I nodded and motioned for her to take the lead. She obliged.

It was my first time in Bali, a fact that was not lost on Noelle in the slightest. Apparently, she'd vacationed here a couple times in her life. She explained that she liked it because it was nice and tropical. And relatively cheap. Apparently, you could buy a nice three bedroom house out here for under a quarter of a million. Couldn't find a place like that in Seattle, I'll tell you that much.

Hmm. Maybe I could get used to fish...

We were in the capital of Denpasar at the moment, or close enough to it at least. It was the main city on the island, and a good thirty percent of the population lived here. Which made a certain amount of sense, seeing as the island was only ninety miles across total.

Crazy to think that my home state was bigger than the entire nation of Bali, but there you have it. Ninety miles wouldn't even get you to Yakima from my old apartment, much less to the opposite end of a nation. The rest of the world really was different from the US.

We headed out of the airport. I'd thought customs would give us a lot more grief for my bringing Charly along, but it had been quick enough. For a government agency, of course. I supposed some things never changed.

Oh, I'd had to answer a few questions for them and show them a document from a vet verifying he didn't have fleas and his shots were up to date—a fact that brought no amount of embarrassment to Charly's little cheeks—but after an hour or so of waiting, they'd sent us on our way.

I was really starting to miss the fact that I couldn't just teleport wherever I wanted. It was so much faster and neater than going through airplanes and customs. But I didn't exactly have a demon with me anymore, so my options had been limited to what Damian could provide. Which consisted of a couple of coach tickets with two layovers and a rental car.

Speaking of, Damian had stayed behind for obvious reasons. He had his hands full just caring for Grace and making sure her magic didn't destroy the wrong thing. There was no way he could focus on this mission in his current state.

No, he'd be a liability, not a blessing, as sad as it was to say. Didn't need to bring someone along that couldn't keep their head in the game. There was no telling what we'd face while trying to find this device of his.

So it was just me, Noelle, and Charly on this mission.

At least they'd had snacks on the plane. Not a full meal, but enough to keep the worst of the hunger pangs at bay. Although now, a couple hours later, I was really starting to feel the combined effects of the fact that I hadn't slept much in four days, and I was apparently starving. My stomach growled right about the same time we reached the rental car.

Noelle took one glance at my tummy and shook her head, giggling all the while. Not sure what she thought was so funny about being half-starved, but whatever. I had half a mind to at least glare at her or something, but it wasn't really her fault.

"Let's go feed that tummy of yours, shall we?" she said as she piled into the driver's seat. "Don't want it giving away our location."

My cheeks burned bright from the teasing, but I let it go and slinked into the passenger seat without a further word to her or anyone. She wasn't wrong. That stomach of mine could be a liability if I didn't feed it soon.

Not to mention a burger sounded like heaven right now.

Outside the airport, the city of Denpasar was quite beautiful. I hadn't really had any idea what to expect, but my expectations wouldn't have done it justice, anyway. There's only so much you can tell about a place from pictures on the internet and all that.

Vegetation was everywhere, which wasn't that different from Seattle, but was a nice sight compared to the slightly barren Idaho landscapes I'd lived in for the past month. You could never get too much green, in my opinion.

All sorts of different types of plants, too. Big, leafy bushes abounded, and palm trees sprouted everywhere. Practically every spare bit of ground was covered in some plant or other.

The architecture, though, that was what really stood out to me. What could I say about it? It was like nothing I'd ever seen in my entire life. Not too far from where we were stood an old Hindu temple. It looked about like you'd expect, with multiple square roofs rising up into the sky on top of one another. But that same roof design was mirrored everywhere I looked. And I do mean *everywhere*. Even the nearby burger joint looked kind of like a temple. Well, aside from the giant golden arches sticking out on the signage right in front, of course.

Pulling into the drive through, I glanced over the menu. It had more in common with a traditional American menu than I would have thought, though there were a few differences—the addition of curry dishes, in particular.

Mmm, curry. I loved a good golden curry. But they were all vegetarian, and I was craving beef. “Two cheeseburgers with extra ketchup!” I yelled over Noelle into the little microphone thing. Then I blushed and retreated to my side of the car. Would they even speak English? I probably should have checked with Noelle on that first.

Thankfully, the order taker didn't skip a beat. Her slightly tinny voice repeated my order word for word in a thick, but understandable, accent. “Can I get you anything else?” she asked when she was done.

Noelle fired off her own order—a giant dish of curry with a side of fries, of all things—and I threw in a chicken kebab for Charly, for which he seemed particularly grateful.

We proceeded to the next window. The cashier there looked about like you'd expect; highly tanned and slightly Asian in appearance. He took our credit card easily enough, and before long, we had our food in hand.

I devoured my first burger almost without even looking at it. I just needed to fill the void that had formed in my stomach. A whimpering glance from my familiar let me know that I probably should have tossed



him his food first, or at least at the same time as me. It was the nice thing to do.

I handed him his kebab, which he downed in record time, letting out a loud, satisfied burp when he was done. Patting his stomach, his mouth salivated as he stared at my remaining burger, sitting in my hands.

“You... you’re still hungry?” I asked in a confused tone.

Charly let out a slight whimper. “Of course not.” He was trying to play it cool, but his eyes gave away his true thoughts.

Staring down at my other cheeseburger, which tasted remarkably American, a war played out in my head. Did I make the ultimate sacrifice to appease my familiar?

Of course I did. I tore off a quarter of the cheeseburger and handed it to Charly, who took it greedily. He took a rather large—for him—bite and let out a moan of contentment.

“Mm, beef,” he said, sounding happier than he’d been the whole trip. “I promise never to leave you again, my good friend.”

“You already don’t,” I complained.

“No, not you. The burger.”

Snorting, I left him to his own business, insisting after a moment that he sit in the back seat while he devoured the rest of his meal. Ferrets could be messy eaters, apparently. I’d gotten crumbs all over my nice blue shirt just from those few minutes.

“Feeling better, you two?” Noelle asked with a teasing glance. She dipped one of her fries in the curry and devoured it. It looked divine. I’d have to try it some time.

“Much,” I admitted without a hint of shame.

“Good. It’s quite a way to the hotel we’re staying at, so you might as well get comfy. From there? Well, from there, we’ll start hunting down this urn of yours.”

“Tomorrow?” I offered. I was really feeling the jet lag, especially now that my stomach was sated.

Noelle nodded. “Tomorrow. I wouldn’t take you scuba diving without letting you get a full night’s rest first.”

“Scuba diving?” I scrunched my nose. “As in, in the ocean?”

“Is there any other kind?”

I laid my head against the headrest and tried to clear my brain. Scuba diving, huh? At least it would be a new adventure.

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THE HOTEL HAD BEEN UNEVENTFUL, AT LEAST. I'D FALLEN ASLEEP almost as soon as my head had hit the pillow. My sleep had been somewhat fitful, filled with dreams of demons coming to get me. And Val. Val had been in my dreams, too.

We'd finally had "the chat," and he'd yelled and spat at me for breaking off contact with him. It had all felt so real in the moment that when I'd woken up, I'd sworn I could still hear his voice in my ear, shouting obscene things at me.

The whole thing had left me so shaken that even Noelle had said something about it, although I hadn't filled her in on the details.

But that was last night, and this was now. We were on the northeast section of the island of Bali now, staring out at a very lovely beach. Noelle had laid out two sets of scuba gear in front of us. One for each of us.

"Where's *my* mask?" Charly asked, clearly confused.

"You don't get one, bud," I told him.

Noelle nodded. "That's right. The water is too dangerous for ferrets. Too many sharks, and all that."

I leaned in close to her and whispered, "Are there really sharks out there?"

She shrugged. "Maybe."

We both giggled. Charly sulked. "But mistress! I can't leave your side. Every time I leave you, you run into trouble!"

I put my hand on my hip. "Now, now. I went to work for like three weeks without you and only got attacked by demons once. I'm sure I can handle a little undersea diving." I hoped. I had a sudden pang in the pit of my stomach. Would I be safe out there? What if demons *did* attack me?

Ugh. Now I was thinking like Charly. I really needed a vacation one of these days. A real one, far away from all of this craziness.

Just need to finish this mission first. Then I can go back to Idaho if I want. One more mission. That was it. Nice and easy.

It helped calm my nerves a little to lay it all out like that.

Turning my focus back to the matter at hand, I pointed down at the pile of equipment. "So what is all this stuff?"

"I was just about to get to that."

Noelle explained what each piece of equipment was, one piece at a time, while she also helped me get dressed and ready. I tried to listen but didn't really catch any of the names of the equipment, just their purposes. Masks, tubes, tanks, and such. And a little nozzle-looking thing that determined just how much oxygen I got.

"But don't worry," she insisted. "You shouldn't have to adjust anything for this dive. This one is nice and easy, to get you used to this sort of thing."

"And why are we scuba diving, again?"

Noelle shrugged. "It's the most likely resting place of your artifact. The oceans are largely unexplored. If that urn were somewhere on land, there's a good chance someone would have stumbled upon it by now."

Valid point. Still... "How do we know they haven't?"

Another shrug. "Well, we haven't heard any stories about masses of people losing their magic suddenly, have we?" I shook my head. "There you go. So it's probably somewhere off the coast."

Ugh. I hated it when she made so much sense like that. "Fine. But don't most people dive off boats for this sort of thing?" It was the last argument I could come up with.

Noelle frowned. "I mean, we could do that, but I figured this would be less jarring for you for your first dive. Don't worry, we can do that next time." The grin she gave me as she said that last part was positively evil.

Whining a little, I finally nodded. Noelle clapped me on the shoulder. "Come on, it'll be fun."

I supposed I'd done worse things in the name of fun. Plus, I'd tried the water out earlier, and it was nice and warm, so there was that. Hanging out in warm water for a bit hunting down an urn? There were worse ways to spend a day.

"Okay, fine. Let's do this thing."

"Great!"

We got back to getting dressed. Donning the wetsuit was easy enough, but getting the oxygen tank to go on my shoulders correctly took a little work, though we got it done. Once everything was in place, she buckled the harness into place and helped me into a set of flippers.

I found it rather hard to walk in the flippers—especially with the weight of the tank on my back—but Noelle insisted it would make a huge difference once we were in the water.

"Just wait and see. You'll like it."

She hadn't been wrong so far. I decided to trust her on this bit, too. She did know a lot more than I did about this kind of stuff.

"Okay, now go down to the water and wait for me. I'll only be a minute."

"What about me?" Charly complained. "Where will I go, buttercup?"

I bit my lip. "You can fly overhead, I guess. We shouldn't be going out too far this time," Noelle said. "You might be able to spot us."

The statement did little to reassure him, but eventually, he huffed and nodded. "Fine. But I'm not in the least bit happy about this turn of events."

In spite of everything, I found I was actually kind of excited. This was going to be fun. A new adventure for me. Just me, Noelle, and a calm ocean. It'd be amazing.

"You'll be fine," I told Charly, nudging him on the nose. "It's only for like an hour."

Charly grumbled, but he acquiesced.

A moment later, clad in full gear, Noelle came up to me and clapped me on the back. "You ready, kid? Remember, we won't be able to talk down there in the water, so if you get stuck, you're going to have to rely on your own magic to get you out."

"What about you?" I asked. "I still don't even know what your magic ability even is."

Noelle flashed me a toothy grin. "Haven't you figured it out by now?" She tugged on her hair, which was done up in a nice braid. It was a deep, shiny red today. "I can change the color of things. Well... really just my own body and the clothes that I wear. Not much use under the ocean, but I'll be fine. Don't worry about me, I've done this dozens of times."

"Oh, cool!" I replied. "So you can, like, make yourself invisible and stuff?"

This time it was Noelle's cheeks that looked flushed. "Maybe?" she admitted. "Come to think of it, I've never actually tried."

Pfft. Crazy. She'd had this power her whole life, and she'd never tried to make herself disappear? That would have been the first thing I'd done.

"Just... wait until we're back on land first, okay?" I begged.

She giggled. "That I can do. Ready?" I nodded. "Good. Let's go. Remember the map. We're just going to go out to the Japanese wreckage out that way," she pointed to a distant spot, "then come back. You shouldn't

even see much out there. Although, if you did manage to find the urn on the first go, that'd be pretty crazy, right?"

"Oh, come on. I'm not Damian. I'm not *that* lucky."

Noelle clapped me on the back again. "Come on, let's just get going."

With that, she lowered herself the rest of the way into the ocean and was off. The agreement had been that Noelle would go out first, and I'd follow at a short distance. That way, if anything went wrong, she could come to my rescue. It was a good plan.

Slowly, I lowered myself into the water as well. It felt kind of weird and unwieldy with the tank on my back, but I managed it without too much trouble.

I plunged my head into the water, making sure the goggles and the breathing tube were on tight first. Both were. My lungs fought against the air coming through the tube for a moment, like they didn't want to breathe it in.

After a moment, I had that all sorted and was breathing regularly through the tube. Nice, even breaths like Noelle had instructed. Not too deep, and definitely not shallow. I watched as bubbles flew up past my face as I exhaled. It was kind of cool, honestly.

Double-checking to make sure everything was in place, I pushed off and started swimming. Noelle was right—the flippers did make a big difference. Each kick of a flipper propelled me much further than I would have gone on my own.

Soon enough, I was way out in the water, completely engulfed by the stuff, and living my best life. Up ahead, I spotted a small group of turtles floating along in the water. I waved to them like a complete idiot, half-expecting them to wave back. Of course they didn't, though. This wasn't an animated movie, it was real life.

It was still cool to see them floating past, though.

I looked for where Noelle had gotten off to, spotting what I was pretty sure was her flippers just a short distance ahead of me. There were other people in the area, and a few of them had scuba gear on, too, but I was pretty sure that pair belonged to Noelle. I'd recognized the bright pink of them anywhere.

She'd worn the pink flippers on purpose to make it easy to spot her. It was nice of her, really. The bright pink had been a little extra. Of course,

Damian—or his mom, more likely—was paying for all of it, so it didn't really matter.

Follow the pink flippers, I told myself over and over. It was an easy mantra.

Noelle was right about this whole scuba thing. This *was* fun. And quiet. Pretty much the only noise I was aware of was that of my own breathing. I wasn't sure the last time I'd been around so much quiet—life with Charly and Evelyn had been anything but quiet—but I could kind of get used to it.

Just then, something brushed up against me. Something warm, but slimy and a bit rough. It slid over my exposed hand, sending shivers up and down my spine.

I spun to face the new threat only to find that it was a giant manta ray floating past. I breathed a quick sigh of relief. Nothing to worry about, then. Just getting a little too close to the native animals.

For a second, I'd been worried about another demon attack. Nope, it was just a really big fish. I marveled at the creature for a moment as it zoomed past me. I'd never seen a manta ray in real life before. Well, okay, I'd seen them in the aquarium before, but out here in the ocean? It was a completely different experience. One I couldn't quite describe.

Humbling, in a way. That was a word for it. I was humbled to be accepted by such a creature.

The manta ray went about its merry way, and I had another moment of freak-out as I spun around, searching for Noelle and her bright pink flippers. They were gone. Where had she gone? Why had she left me behind? Didn't she know I was a newbie at this?

My heart started to race, and I felt myself taking shallow breaths. My lungs started to burn like not enough air was reaching them. I forced myself to relax and think about this rationally. Noelle wouldn't abandon me. She'd be back to check on me soon enough. I just had to be patient and wait.

Seconds stretched by as I forced myself to slow my breathing and wait. I'd never been all that great at waiting, but I didn't need to wait for long. Noelle's pink flippers came into view just a few moments later, beckoning me onward, and deeper into the water.

We were almost at the wreckage now. Noelle had picked it because it was close to the shore and not super deep, plus it would give me some great experience at looking through obstacles underwater. A great combo, no?

Only now I was having second thoughts. Maybe this was too much for me, even as a beginner course. All I knew for sure was I couldn't lose sight of Noelle again. I latched on to the sight of her and steeled my nerves. I could do this.

Scanning the area with one eye while keeping the other trailed on the pink flippers, I caught a glimpse of the edges of the boat creeping up. We were getting close. As promised, it wasn't too much farther, but it looked so deep. It must have been forty feet underwater, if not more. I'd certainly never been that deep before.

Was it even safe to go that deep? But then, Noelle was already halfway to it...

I sucked up my courage and headed for the wreckage. When else was I going to get a chance to do something like this? Probably never.

Kicking and angling my head downward, I found the descent was easier than I imagined it would be. Maybe it was the weight of the tank on my back, but it wasn't too hard to get closer to the sunken boat.

And what a wreckage it was. It was an old World War II boat, but despite the fact that it had sunk some time ago, it was still largely intact. Seaweed had grown on it, of course, and there was coral cropping up around it, but you could still tell that it had once been a boat. Could almost make out some of the markings written onto the side of the hull, even.

It was a sight to behold. I spent so long staring at it that I almost lost track of Noelle again. Almost. But she was still there, swimming at the edge of my sight. Those bright pink flippers had been a great idea. Visibility wasn't quite as good down here at the ocean floor, but those puppies still stood out nice and easy.

Another... something brushed up against me. A manta ray again, maybe? I didn't quite catch a glimpse of what it was. Once more, I felt honored that the local sea life trusted me enough to get so close to me. It was all that and a bag of chips.

I caught a hint of something blue and gold sticking out of the wreckage near the base, so I swam closer to it. Could it be? Had I really found what I'd been looking for so soon? There was no way. It wasn't possible that I'd find it on the first dive. Noelle had drilled it into my head that we'd be out here for weeks.

Several glorious weeks of diving in the ocean and living off Damian's mom's credit card. It was perfect. And yet, that did look vaguely like an urn

down there.

I dove further, until I was practically scraping the bottom of the ocean floor. Now that I was up close to the object, I saw that it was just a discarded swimsuit. Someone had apparently littered, and the litter had fallen down this far.

Part of me wondered what that had been like for the swimsuit's previous owner. Had they been forced to swim back ashore naked? My cheeks burned a little at the thought of that happening to me.

But I was in a wetsuit. It was many things, but revealing was not one of them. And as tight as it was, it wasn't going anywhere.

I tried to relax and enjoy my time, but the area around me was getting dark. Too dark. The light was lower down here, but not that low. What was going on?

My stomach lurched. Something was wrong.

Taking a deep breath, I started swimming up toward the surface. I'd done the dive; it was time for some safety. A faint thumping noise filled my ears as something shook the tank on my back. I craned my head to try and find the source. It had been so quiet down here for so long. How strange to hear a thump like that out of nowhere.

Suddenly, my breathing became more uneven. Pulling in the next breath became harder and harder, like I was no longer sucking in anywhere near enough oxygen. Was it time to surface already? But I'd only been down here for thirty minutes...

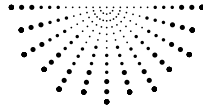
That's when I noticed it. A series of bubbles. Too many bubbles. There were always bubbles when you were scuba diving, but at no point had there been this many.

I felt for my oxygen tank. It was still there, but something was wrong. A hole. There was a hole in my respirator hose. A big one.

Well, hell. I was going to drown.



## CHAPTER NINE



**F**ocus, Misty! Focus! You're going to be just fine. It's not that far to the surface, and Noelle is just around the corner somewhere. She'll see you in distress, and she'll come to your rescue. You just have to have a little faith.

Is what I told myself in my moment of panic. It was a great speech, but it did little to calm my swift-beating heart.

Okay, just don't panic. Try that. Start with that. Look for the surface. It can't be that hard. Should just be a little ways above you. Forty feet or so, right?

I glanced in the direction I thought was upward, but with all the bubbles flowing around me and the overall darkness, I couldn't make out much of anything. In fact, all I could see now were those blasted bubbles. I'd heard that you could get disoriented underwater and forget which direction was up. It was on a myth-busting TV show once. But I'd never believed it until now. Now, I was very much a convert.

Just follow the bubbles, the thought came to me. Follow them up. They would all head toward the surface on their own, right? So it made sense that if I just followed them, I would get there, too.

Only there were bubbles all around me, everywhere I looked. I couldn't see where they were going because they were going all over the place.

Damn.

I took in a deep breath of my remaining oxygen, but a little bit of water came in with it, too. No doubt thanks to the glaringly large hole in my respirator hose.

Coughing, I ended up spitting the mouthpiece out. It flew off on its own, landing somewhere that I couldn't see.

Darkness. How had it gotten so dark down here? It was even worse than before. I wasn't *that* far down, was I? But I could barely see anything. Everywhere I looked, it was just encroaching darkness. Even the bubbles had mostly dissipated.

Was this the end? Was this how I was going to die, with lungs full of seawater next to a downed ship? It seemed almost fitting in a way.

No. I couldn't think like that. Noelle would surely see me and come to my rescue. She'd promised as much. I had to trust in that.

In the meantime? In the meantime I needed to focus. Try to save myself.

I felt around me for the mouthpiece. Maybe I could get another breath or two of oxygen to help me before it gave out completely. But scraping around in the dark like this, I couldn't make out where it was. It was literally tied to me, and somehow, I still couldn't find it.

Some diver I was. Why had I agreed to this whole plan again?

My lungs ached. My mouth hurt, holding in the last bit of oxygen—last bit of life—in them. But it wanted out. Escape. Soon, I'd have to let it go and take in a new breath, and with it all the water surrounding me. It was evolution fighting against me, and I was next to helpless.

There was nothing for it. I was done for.

No. I couldn't think like that. I had to do something before I reached that point. But what? In between the darkness and my own body fighting against me, I was running out of options. I couldn't just float. Not with this tank on me, and it was latched onto me in like three different places. Too much to try and undo in my current state. If I could even manage it and still live long enough to float upward, which seemed unlikely.

What was it Noelle had said? To use my magic if I got into trouble? That sounded like a good strategy. I could do that. I just needed some blood. Fortunately, I knew just how to get some. Whatever had thunked into my hose earlier had forced it open, hopefully leaving behind a nice, ragged edge all along the point of impact. If I could somehow manage to cut myself on that edge...

Yes. It was a plan. Not much of one, but it was all I had.

My lungs continued to burn. My mouth threatened mutiny if I didn't exhale. My head was starting to become foggy. I let go of a little bit of that

precious air. Just a tiny bit. Water surged forward, trying to get into my mouth, but I fought against it.

The tension in my body eased up a tad. I just had to hope it would be enough.

Raising my hand to where the rupture was, I felt around for the rough spot. I found it quickly enough. A jagged edge of metal sticking out where it shouldn't have been.

Yes. That's what I needed. Jagged metal to make a nice cut. I could practically feel my magic surging up at the mere thought of being summoned.

I rubbed my hand up against the ragged edge of the ruptured hose sticking out. It stung, but not enough. It wasn't jagged enough to do damage like that. I needed to really jab my hand into it.

Trying hard not to think about the thousand-plus germs that were no doubt floating around in this water, I brought my hand up and then forced it down onto that jagged edge. Once. Twice. A third time.

Intense pain flowed through my hand from what I assumed was a puncture wound. It was hard to tell, since everything was wet to begin with. There was no way to know if I'd added to the moisture with my own blood. I'd just have to hope it was enough.

Pulling on my magic, I begged and pleaded for it to come to my rescue right as the last bit of air escaped out of the corner of my mouth.

My body pleaded with me to breathe in. To let more air into my lungs. I resisted. I needed to focus. Just for another moment. Then I'd be safe.

Air. I needed air. It would be hard to summon air down here, well below the surface, but hopefully not impossible. I called on the life force of the blood floating all around me. I could see it now, a red tinge to the water near me. There was so much of it. How deeply had I cut my hand, exactly? All I could tell was that it was kind of numb.

No matter. I could deal with that later. Air first. I summoned forth my magic, telling it to form a bubble of air around me. To let me be surrounded by the precious stuff.

All at once, a burst of air flared out, starting near my core and radiating outward in a wide sphere. It was large enough to encompass my whole body and maybe an additional foot or two beyond that.

Suddenly, I fell flat against the edge of the bubble. It felt odd, being weightless this far underwater, while also practically blind. But I couldn't

float in midair, so when the water beneath me was forced away, I was forced down with it.

I landed against the water with a slight thwacking noise. It was all too surreal. I was still very much below the surface, but I felt for all intents and purposes like I was on a wet patch of land instead.

Nifty.

My lungs couldn't take it anymore. I sucked in a deep, precious lungful of air, reveling in how amazing the stuff felt coming into my lungs after living so long without it. It was glorious. The haze and confusion in my head started to dissipate with every single breath.

Testing the air bubble with one of my fingers, I noticed that it held up fairly well. None of the water could rush in, so long as I kept the magic flowing. I could feel it on the edges, begging to be let in, but it was powerless against the might of my spell.

Now that the immediate threat was over, I could take stock of the rest of my injuries. My oxygen tank was a goner and would only serve to keep me down here with its bulk. I fought with the various buckles for several moments and finally managed to undo the harness, shrugging out of the tank and intending to let it fall to the ocean floor. It apparently wasn't protected by my air bubble, and yet it floated away anyway. So weird.

At least I knew for sure which way was up now.

Next, I turned to the bleeding gash on my palm. I could see just how deep that wound was now. It was at least half an inch deep. Much worse than I'd imagined, and bleeding fast.

I started to feel light-headed again, although this time, I was pretty sure it wasn't from a lack of oxygen. I'd need to find a way to stem the tide of the blood before I lost consciousness. There was plenty of blood already surrounding me in the water to work with. I didn't need to lose more of the stuff than necessary.

There wasn't much down here to work with, but I did have my wetsuit. I summoned a bit of fire with some of the excess blood and burned a small hole in the sleeve of my suit just over my shoulder. It burned my skin, too, but only a little.

Yanking down hard, I was able to pull the fabric off at that point, ending up with a nice-sized faux bandage. I thought for a moment about trying to heal my own wound, but we all knew how that worked out for me in

general. I'd tried it once even after gaining control of my magic back, and it had still been a dismal failure.

Nah, it was better this way. I'd reach the surface and find Noelle, then we'd get to shore where help was waiting in the form of my med kit. Much better that way.

Working fast, I wound the fabric around my palm nice and tight, using my teeth to steady it so I could tie it into something resembling a knot. It felt nice and secure, at least. I just had to hope it would hold long enough. Blood oozed into the bandage, but the flow was slower than before. It was working.

Good. Just keep me safe a little longer, bandage. Just a little longer. Then Noelle can help me get the rest of the way to shore.

Speaking of, where was Noelle? She'd promised to help me if I got in trouble, but trouble had come, and she was still nowhere to be seen.

Of course, I could only see maybe five or six feet in any direction, so for all I knew, she was in a similar mess...

No matter. Two obstacles were down. Now I just needed to float up to the surface. Without the tank, it should be relatively easy, right? But there was something else. Something Noelle had warned me about. Something about decompression sickness?

I couldn't really remember what she was talking about—she'd mentioned a lot in a very short amount of time, most of which she'd told me I didn't really need to worry about—but she'd been very particular about that point. About the fact that if I was far enough under water, that I couldn't just rise to the surface nice and quick, or I'd get sick or hurt.

How far down did I have to be before that became a thing? I couldn't remember. But I didn't want to suffer any more than I already had, so I decided to take it slow. I still had plenty of spare blood to call on.

I directed my air bubble to push me upward, toward the surface. But to do it very slowly. I really didn't want to get sick. The air responded to my commands, flowing upward. It was easy enough to tell which direction that was this time because I was most definitely at the bottom of my air bubble.

Every few inches, I would swim slightly upward myself, pushing against the floor of the air bubble with my flippers to make sure I stayed safely where the air was. It was kind of serene, if a little unreal. Much safer than scuba diving, I figured, if a little harder to pull off.

The going was slow, but as I got closer and closer to what I could only assume was the surface, the area around me grew brighter as well. Part of that was because the light could filter in better with less water blocking it, but it felt like there was more to it than that. Something slightly magical in nature. Was my magic helping block out the darkness on its own?

I scanned the area for Noelle as I traveled upward, but I still couldn't find her anywhere. Whatever had happened to her, I'd have to find out later. I was almost to the surface now. Close enough that I could probably cut power to the air bubble and just float the rest of the way. I was maybe five feet from the surface.

My arms and legs felt slightly rubbery from all the swimming and the effort of staying alive, and the blood supply was running low, so I did just that. Water rushed in from every angle, practically crushing me under its weight. I freaked and let out a huge breath all at once, closing my mouth tightly to hold on to the last bit not a second later.

Damn. That had been close, but I'd survived. Now I just needed to get to the surface and find help.

Wouldn't you know it, not far from my current location, I spotted what I assumed was the hull of a small boat. Maybe I could signal to the rider when I reached the surface and get them to row me to shore. It was worth a shot. Just had to float up a bit more.

Finally, my head broke through the surface of the water. Instantly, my lungs reacted, forcing me to inhale deeply of the warm, clean air. It was the sweetest air I'd ever tasted. Oh, how good it felt to be out of the water. At least partially.

Scanning my surroundings, I turned around a bit until I was facing the boat I'd seen earlier. It was maybe twenty feet off, and definitely occupied. The boat was in the same direction as the sun, so I couldn't make out who they were, but they were close.

"Hey!" I yelled to the occupant of the boat. I waved my good arm like mad. "Please help me!"

The occupant of the boat seemed to notice my antics. They started rowing, coming in closer. As he rowed—I was pretty sure it was a he now—his features came better into focus. Tall, and muscular, with a strong body. Possibly American, with dark hair and pale skin.

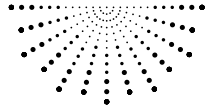
Thank goodness. Another Yank. They'd speak English, then.

"Hey!" I repeated. "Help! Please!"

The boat rowed closer. I put my good hand over my eyes and took off my goggles so I could see the rower clearly, instantly wishing I had left them on a tad longer.

My heart sank as Val's smug grin greeted me, beaming down at me. "Really, Misty?" he said, shaking his head. "Again?"

## CHAPTER TEN



**G**reat. Just great. My sort-of ex comes to my rescue. Again, as he so eloquently put it. I was *so* never going to live this one down.

I had half a mind just to let the waves take me back down to the bottom of the ocean. It would be fitting and save me from what was bound to be a very awkward conversation. The thought was more tempting than it should have been. Or maybe that was just my overall exhaustion speaking.

Whatever. I could deal with it all later. For now, I'd let him have his moment and me some relative safety. At least for a few minutes.

Up in the boat, Val grinned down at me. He had the audacity to offer me his hand. Pfft. Like I would take that at this juncture. Instead, I stared at it like it was a three-headed snake and crossed my arms over my chest.

Well, I tried to, at least. I was still actively treading water, so it was far less effective a gesture than it otherwise should have been.

I glared up at him, which was none too easy with the sun in my eyes and ocean water dripping down my forehead. But I managed it all the same. "What's that supposed to mean, 'again'?" I accused in a flat tone.

Val let out a haughty grunt. "What do you think? I mean, this is kind of a common theme and—"

He sized me up and down. Well, the part of me that was above the waves at least. His eyes trailed toward my bandaged hand, and I reflexively tried to hide it behind me. His tone and expression changed instantly to one of concern. "Wait, are you seriously injured?"

"No!" I fired back.

Okay. Not my smartest move. But it had been a few weeks since I'd last seen Val, and to see him now like this...



The last thing I wanted was to appear vulnerable to him again. In fact, I didn't really want to see him again at all. Was pretty sure I wouldn't, as a matter of fact, when it really came down to it. Our last date had been, well... let's just say a disaster movie would have had less going wrong in it.

We'd gone to a fancy restaurant. One of those ones where you're supposed to dress up even if it's just a casual dinner. You know the type, where they charge like seventy dollars for a steak and your waiter is also a master sommelier. Fancy.

Well, Val had forgotten to tell me about the dress code, so I'd gone in wearing a pair of torn jeans and a low-cut blue shirt. Pretty standard fare for me, of course. Val had insisted it would be no problem, but the looks that the emcee gave me when he saw my outfit? They could have turned Medusa to stone.

I'd offered to go home and change, but the staff had also been insistent it was just fine, and that I was an honored guest and yada yada. Really, I just figured they didn't want to waste a chance to blow some of Val's money. But whatever, I went ahead and went in with that outfit, and we took our seats.

All throughout the meal, we had to suffer silent stares and little muttered sentences from other guests and servers as everyone gawked at my choice of clothing. It got to me so bad that we didn't even stay for their world-renowned flourless chocolate torte. And I'd really been looking forward to that torte, too.

On the way back, Val had been so angry he'd blown through a stoplight—yes, he'd driven me to the restaurant; no, I don't know why—and he ended up getting pulled over by a cop. I was already so embarrassed by this point that I just begged him to teleport me back to my new apartment I shared with Evelyn, which he'd later done without arguing.

Then, when he'd leaned in to kiss me goodnight, he'd misjudged how low the ceiling was over my doorway and managed to conk himself nice and good, spoiling the whole thing and earning a bruise at the same time.

Shortly after that, he'd disappeared without said kiss or even a goodbye. I hadn't seen hide nor hair of him after that night, and up until this moment, had been certain it was going to stay that way. Who wanted a girlfriend that was so much trouble, anyway?

"Come on, just let me see the hand," Val pleaded.

I shoved it under my armpit. "Why?"

“Why?” He shot me an incredulous look. “Because it looks infected, that’s why. Why else?” He grunted again. “Come on, just get on the boat and let me help you.”

“Maybe I don’t want your help,” I countered. Mostly I just didn’t want the lecture I’d no doubt get and to let him back into my heart when so much was already off-kilter. But I left off that part.

“Oh, come on! Please?”

“I...” My words failed me. Val was right. I should let him help me. The wound wasn’t great, and I was tired from the magic use. I could use his help. It was everything that came with it I wasn’t sure I could handle.

Glancing behind me, I tried to assess whether or not I could make it to my med kit on my own. How had the shore gotten that far away? It seemed a lot farther than I’d thought in my head.

To top it off, there was still no sign of Noelle, and I didn’t see Charly flying overhead either like he’d promised. Of course, Charly couldn’t fly me to the shore by himself, but still.

On second thought, maybe a ride of shame in Val’s boat wasn’t all that bad of an option...

“Fine,” I said at last. “I’ll let you help me just this once. But I don’t want to hear anything about anything other than the hand.”

Val let out a long breath. “Deal. I can work with that.”

“Good.”

He offered his hand to me again like I hadn’t just argued against him helping me. “Come here. I’ll help you up into the boat.”

This time, I took the offered hand, reveling in how nice his skin felt up against mine. I was kind of cold from spending time in the dark water, but his touch was warm and electrifying. Several emotions ran through my head at that touch. How I missed it. Had longed for it, even, on some of those lonely nights in Idaho.

But I kept it all to myself. I was already too embarrassed to even look Val in the eye. I accepted his help getting into the boat, and the towel he offered me to help dry off, then sat on the opposite edge of the boat and stared out into the distance instead.

Val tended to my hand without so much as a word. He took the injured appendage gently in his own, and within seconds, I could feel his healing energy flowing into me, warming me further. It was nice. Nicer than I deserved, most likely.

The boat ride back to shore was mostly uneventful. The whole time, Val said nothing, just confidently rowed back, his powerful arms making short work of the waves. For a moment, I got lost in watching him battle against the ocean, his broad, smooth body straining against the elements. Then his gaze got a little too close to mine, and I stared out at the water again.

“Mistress!” Charly cried a few moments later. I scanned the air for him and managed to spot him coming toward me from over toward the shoreline.

“Charly!” I called back, waving my hands like mad. Over my familiar bond, I could feel the worry in his little body; the pain at losing me, even for just a little while. It threatened to overwhelm my senses.

The little guy flew through the air, colliding with my arms as I pulled him in for a warm hug and several pets. “Oh, it’s so good to see you,” I told him, nuzzling his face up against my neck. His warmth was comforting, too, albeit in a completely different way from Val.

“Don’t ever do that to me again, mistress,” Charly begged. “I couldn’t bear the thought of something bad happening to you.”

Wow. He wasn’t even using any pet names. He must have been really scared. “Of course not,” I told him, stroking his fur again. He didn’t even seem to mind that I was getting it slightly wet. “Don’t worry, wherever I go next, I’ll make sure you can come with me.”

“Thank you, mistress.” He pushed his body so far into my shoulder I thought we’d become one for a half a second.

Val shot me an amused look but said nothing. He really was being a complete gentleman about the whole thing, which only made me feel that much worse.

Soon enough, we had made it all the way back to shore, and I managed to get out of the boat by myself. Val offered to help me again, but it wasn’t really that hard once I’d gotten the flippers off.

Hopefully, I’d never see those things again. But then, I’d thought I’d never see Val again, so...

Speaking of. I pulled on his arm to make him face me. He spun, all full of smiles and smugness. “Just why *did* you come to find me, anyway?” I demanded. I stood up on my tiptoes, so I was on a more equal level to him. It didn’t really work—he was too tall for that—but it made me feel a little better.

Val crossed his arms in front of his chest. “To come help you out, of course. We’ve been over this. What other reason could there be for me to come out here?”

I raised a finger and pointed it at him, prepared to lay into him nice and good, but his reply caught me off guard, and I ended up lowering it a moment later. “Say what now?”

Val nodded. “I came out here to rescue you. Just like you thought.” He let out a short sigh and let his arms fall to his sides. “I admit it, okay? I have a spy that keeps track of your whereabouts. He reports back to me, and if you’re in trouble, I come to your aid. I’ve told you this before.”

That was true. He’d admitted as much once, after the fight with Brennan. Heh. Now there was a name I didn’t think about too often. Strange how things could be hard to let go of completely like that.

His explanation made sense. Sort of. “Then how come I didn’t see the spy out there, in the ocean?” I fired back.

Val shrugged. “Are you sure you didn’t?”

I opened my mouth and shut it again. He had a point. Maybe they’d been out there. It was hard to keep track of such things when you’re so busy looking at everything else. Maybe he really did have a spy out there tracking me.

Still...

“If that’s true, then why didn’t you come to my rescue when the demons attacked me in Idaho?” I demanded. It was a fair question.

Val’s eyes widened. “They what now?”

“Pfft. Like you didn’t know. A couple of Dagon’s goons came and attacked me while I was working in my office building in Idaho. I managed to fend them off with a little help from Noelle at the end, but still.”

Val’s expression was once again a mix of emotions. I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. He pulled on his face. “This is serious, Misty. If Dagon came after you directly, then...”

“Then what? What don’t I know?”

I was tired of everyone having secrets all the time. Especially after Val had promised me there would be no more secrets. And now he was out here again, keeping things from me. Vital things. Why was everyone like this?

Val’s eyes darted about. He pulled me in a little closer to him. “Look, this is serious, Misty. We need to get out of here. Now. I’m taking us somewhere safe.”

I shook free of his grasp and walked just far enough away that I was pretty sure he couldn't teleport me, but not so far that I couldn't feel his warmth. Gods, but I was a mixed-up bag of awful emotions.

"No," I insisted, planting my feet firmly on the ground. "Not until you tell me what's going on. What's really going on."

It was bad enough that my sister was still keeping secrets from me. If Val really wanted back into my life, I wouldn't suffer that he did the same.

"Look, Misty." Val sighed and shook his head. He took a half step forward, but I put out my hand to stop him and he stayed put. "I get it. Things are confusing. No one's telling you enough about what's going on. I want to tell you the rest. Really, I do. But I need to get you to safety first. Then I promise I'll explain everything. Please."

He held his hand out to me again. Every part of me was screaming out at me to take it. To trust him. I was in this mess partially because I'd trusted him. Why not see it through? And yet still, I hesitated.

I took another step backward. "Not until you tell me what's going on," I demanded.

Val let out another sigh. "I don't want to force you, Misty, but you're making it really hard to keep you safe. Dagon is out there, and he—"

"Screw Dagon!" I spat at Val. "Him and all his minions. Including you!" I glared daggers at him at that last comment.

Val looked appropriately wounded. He hung his head low. "I suppose I probably deserve that. If you'd just come with me, then—"

"Then what? Why should I care about you and Dagon's little game anymore? Now that Elaine is no longer under his thumb, you have nothing to lord over me. No reason for me to continue in this fight. Dagon can go die in a fire, for all I care."

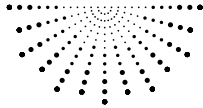
"That's just it, Misty. Dagon, he... I..." Val shot me a pleading look. His eyes darted about once more. "You don't understand, he..."

"He what? Wants the Marks? I know that. But you know what else?" My tone got higher and higher as I spoke. A few people at the beach turned their heads to stare at us, but I didn't care. "Dagon shouldn't have the Marks. Now that I'm free of you, I'm far more likely to join forces to stop Dagon than I am to ever go with either of you ever again."

I stared down at Val as I spoke. Well, as well as I could. In effect, I glared at his chest. Hopefully, he'd get the message anyway.

“That’s just it, Misty!” Val exclaimed. He held his poisonous hand out to me again. “The Marks. Dagon. I’m trying to stop Dagon.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



**T**hat stopped me cold. “Say what now?”

I’d been expecting a lot of rebukes from Val. And I do mean a *lot* of them. But not that. Nothing could have prepared me for that answer.

“I said I’m trying to stop Dagon, just like your sister is. Or was, rather. Even I don’t know what she’s doing now,” Val explained.

Huh. That was an interesting tidbit. Does that mean Val had known this whole time that Elaine was with the Paragons? And so what if he had? That didn’t really change much. She’d still been a captive of the Crimson Hand pretty much the entire time I’d known him. I guess it didn’t really matter.

But the other thing. *That* was something. “What do you mean, you’re trying to stop Dagon? You’re his bloody right-hand man!”

Val shook his head. “That’s Baphomet, but I get what you mean.” He growled. “Look, I’m sure you have lots of questions, but none of them will matter if I don’t get you out of here and somewhere safe on the double. Please.”

He firmly gestured toward his outstretched hand.

Could it be true? Was he really trying to stop Dagon? And if so, was it a recent thing? I needed answers, but more than that I needed Val back in my life. I hadn’t realized it until I’d seen him again, but I missed him dearly.

My heart yearned to accept that hand, to go with him, yet still I hesitated. I wanted to trust him. Like, really trust him. But I couldn’t quite bring myself to do it completely. Not with that other revelation. If he’d been holding onto that little tidbit this whole time, what else hadn’t he told me?

“Come on,” Val urged. His eyes darted about again. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

It was then that I noticed it. The other people at the beach. Some of them looked completely normal, but that one over there that had swiveled his head in my direction when I’d shouted earlier. Did he have... horns? It kind of looked like it. And that child next to him, her eyes were blood red. That wasn’t natural.

A shiver ran down my spine. Maybe we *were* in trouble after all. Or I was, at least. Val might be fine, but there was no doubt those demons were here for me.

“I...” Whatever I was going to say next, I never got a chance to find out.

“There you are!” Noelle shouted, smacking me on the back as she trudged up the beach in full scuba gear. “I was searching all over for you, and you’re back here lollygagging on the shore? You had me worried sick.”

Spinning to face Noelle, I gave her a sheepish grin. “I’m sorry, I got lost and—”

“And your gear!” Noelle grunted. “That was all rented. We’re gonna have to pay for it if you lost it.” She put a hand on her hip. “I get this is your first time and all, but you’ve got to be more careful with your gear.”

“Sorry,” I repeated. “My respirator hose, it ruptured and—”

Noelle’s eyes went wide. “What now?”

Val whistled and we both spun to face him. “This is all well and good, but we need to go. Now. Please?”

I glanced over at the demon father and daughter I’d spotted earlier. They were already heading down this way. And there were more of them, too. This cozy little beach was somehow now crawling with demons. One of them had already formed a fireball, and another was pulling a gun out of a holster on its hip.

“Got it,” I said quickly. I grabbed Noelle’s hand and pulled on it, placing both it and my own hand into Val’s. “Let’s get going.”

Noelle frowned. “What’s going on now?”

A second later, my world erupted into the familiar sight of searing flames.

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IT WAS A FEW HOURS LATER ON THE SAME DAY. THE SUN WAS STARTING to get low against the horizon, which I found odd, because it was only like five thirty in the afternoon. But apparently this close to the equator, the day wasn't quite as long, even in the middle of summer.

Go figure. I had a lot to get used to in these tropical areas.

We were still in Bali, just in a different area of it. We were in a town called Jimbaran, a small fishing village in the southern region, far away from the beach we'd been at earlier.

Val had arranged for us to have a safe house out here that had no ties to the Crimson Hand. Apparently, even without their near limitless resources, he still had connections in some spots. Enough to see us comfortable for the moment, at least.

After portaling over here in a tizzy, I'd explained the situation to Noelle. What I knew of it, at least. She'd understood and even felt bad for me. The whole time I'd been boating back to shore and chatting with Val, she'd been frantically hunting for me, but she'd been stricken by the same strange darkness that I had and hadn't been able to see much of anything, either.

She told me that next time we'd be sure to add flashlights to our tool belts, just in case that sort of weirdness ever happened again.

For my part, I kind of hoped there wouldn't *be* a next time. Maybe we could look at some nice, land-locked locations for a bit. I'm sure there was at least one ancient ruin on the island we could scope out, right?

Anyway, I'd cleaned up, and we'd both changed into clothing that Val had procured for us. It was local clothing, so it was nice and breathable and a little loose-fitting, but at least my outfit was still blue, and something I could easily fight in. Given the circumstances we were under, I had the sneaking suspicion that we were going to end up fighting something—or more likely several somethings—more than once.

Now that we'd changed and had a light lunch, I was back to hunting down Val for answers. He'd promised he'd tell me everything I wanted to know, and I was going to get it all out of him one way or another.

My mind instantly went to one particular way I could pump him for answers, and my cheeks burned a bright crimson. Gods, why did my brain have to go there?

I couldn't count on it for anything, I tell you.

"What's the plan?" Charly asked from his perch on my shoulder. "Corner him? Tie him up and threaten him until he talks?" He made little

jabbing motions with his paws as he spoke.

Heh. I'd thought briefly about tying up Val, but not in an effort to get him to talk...

Focus, Misty. This was an interrogation. Fun time could come later. If at all. And likely not. He was still kind of my ex, remember?

Thankfully, it wasn't hard to locate Val. He was humming and working away in the kitchen area, preparing dinner for all of us. I inhaled deeply, relishing in the wonderful scents wafting from his work area. Coconut, mango, and something meaty as well.

Oh, it all smelled so good. And if it smelled this good, just imagine how good it would all taste. Yes, Val could cook for me any day.

Standing there in the entry to the kitchen, watching him chop up fruits while checking on his pan that was over a flame with such intensity... It was strangely alluring. Why had I ever left him again? I suddenly couldn't think of a reason.

"Hey," I called to him in what I figured was a slow moment. I didn't want to interrupt his vibe if I could avoid it.

Val jerked his head up from his tray of ingredients and smiled at me. The smile was warm and inviting, and just a little bit enticing. "Hey, you," he replied. He set down his knife. "What can I do for you?"

I leaned against the door frame. "No, keep going. I like watching you work."

"Can't cook and keep you company very well at the same time, now, can I?" He shot me a devilish look. "Not if I want to do it right."

"And do you?" I asked, glancing down toward his midsection. "Want to do me right?" My hand slipped over my mouth, and I gasped. "I'm so sorry!" I exclaimed. "I didn't mean for it to come out like that."

Val turned off the stove and came around the counter. He stood in front of me, his heat washing over me, penetrating me. "Do I ever," he said in a breathy tone, his words caressing my ear. He lifted a finger and lightly grazed my cheek. Flames rose in my belly. I lifted my lips lazily toward his own. Then he looked away. "But I promised you an explanation first, right?"

I cleared my throat and took a step away from him, the intense sensations in my core dying the further I got from his heat. "Right."

Business first, Misty. Then...

No. Can't think like that. It isn't right. Not like this. Not with Noelle and Charly here and the Hand on our tail and... Yeah. Best not to think like that at all.

"Care to take a seat?" Val offered, pointing toward the dining room table.

I nodded. "Sure." Yes. Sit in a chair. Much safer than being cornered by Val, wilting at his very touch. I took the offered seat, trying to look as prim and proper as I could. "Sit by me?" I said, my very mouth betraying me. I almost clapped my hand over it again.

Val let out a long sigh. "How about I sit across from you instead? Easier to talk to each other that way."

"Good call." Plus then it'll be harder for me to shove everything out of the way and jump you. But I kept that part quiet.

Val eased into the chair opposite me at the table that suddenly felt way too small and looked deep into my eyes. "I'm sorry," he said at last.

"What?" I swear, every time I turned around, Val was saying something that shocked me today. Just how many secrets did this guy have, exactly?

"Well, I, for one, thank you for the apology," Charly said in a matter-of-fact tone. I'd almost forgotten he was still there.

I snorted. "And just what does he have to apologize to *you* for?"

"Are you serious? What doesn't he have to apologize for? Let's start with his treatment of you. And why he's really here," Charly insisted, folding his paws over his chest.

"Fair enough." I gave Charly a light pet and listened to him purr, then turned my attention back to Val. "So spill it, big man. Why did you come here? What's the real reason?"

Val groaned and pulled on his face. "Can't a guy just be concerned for the safety of his girlfriend from time to time?"

So he still thought of me like that. Huh. Good to know. I shook my head. "Uh uh. Nope. I need a better reason than that. There's something else going on. What is it?"

"Fine," Val said, sounding deflated. "It's the Marks of the Underworld. They're back in action. Two of them."

All the tension I had in my body, the feelings in my core that wouldn't quiet down, they all died out in an instant. "I knew it!" I shouted. "You and those stupid Marks. You're still after them!"

Val put his hand over his eyes. “Yes, I am, but it’s not what you think, Misty. If you could just listen to me for a moment.”

I pushed myself away from the table and crossed my arms over my chest. “I can’t believe you. Here I thought you really were worried about me, but you’re just here playing puppet for your master like you always have.”

“No.” Val growled. “No, you’ve got it wrong. Like I said on the beach, I’m trying to stop Dagon, not help him! And I need the Marks to do it!”

“You... what now?” Another revelation. I was beginning to feel like I was at my wit’s end. What happened to no more secrets?

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” Val insisted. “That I’m on your side. Yours and your sister’s. Have been this whole time. Dagon doesn’t realize it, but this whole time, I’ve been trying to undermine him.” He paused for a moment and sucked in a deep breath. “Only, if he’s going after you directly, he might have figured it out. Might be starting to suspect that I’m not as much of a lapdog as he thought. Which is why—”

“Which is why you said I’m in danger. Not because I’m no longer playing for his team, but because I might be actively against it.” It made sense. Dagon had always been content to let Val shepherd me before. The sudden change of tactics had to have been spurred on by something.

Val nodded. “Exactly. That’s why I had to get you off that beach.” He stood up and came over to where I was, kneeling on the ground next to me and looking up at me with pleading eyes. “I’ll admit it. I came here to get your help with one of the Marks of the Underworld. If I can get ahold of even one of them and keep it out of Dagon’s grasp, he can’t complete his goal. And with two of them active, one of them in the same area you happened to be in, well...”

“You figured you might as well try and convert me.”

Another curt nod. “Yes.”

In all honesty, it didn’t sound that bad now that it was all out in the open. I supposed I shouldn’t have been so hard on him.

Val sighed. “But the danger’s too great now that he knows we’re back together. I can’t handle it if anything happens to you. So I’m canceling the operation completely. So what if Dagon finds the Marks? The whole world can burn, so long as you’re safe.”

To say I was touched would have been an understatement. The hits kept coming today. I was starting to feel a little disoriented. Those last words,

though, stuck with me. “You... you really feel that way?” I wasn’t sure what else to say to that declaration.

“Yes.” Val puffed up his chest, “I do. I care so much for you, Misty. I can’t bear to see you hurt. So if I have to stop this whole mad charade and let Dagon run rampant to protect you, I’ll do just that.”

It was all a little overwhelming. I felt faint, like I needed to lie down. But Val was in a particularly talkative mood, and I still had more questions that I needed answers to.

“And you really don’t know what happened to my sister? Where she’s gotten off to?” I pressed.

He shook his head. “Cross my heart and hope to die. She’s gone. Whatever game she’s playing, I’m not a part of it. Never have been.”

The fact that he couldn’t lie to me helped, but I trusted him. If he said he didn’t know what Elaine was up to, then he didn’t know. It didn’t do much to settle that part of my mind, but there you have it.

“What other secrets are you keeping from me?” I asked. Then shook my head. “No, don’t answer that. I don’t want to know all your secrets. Rather, what secrets aren’t you telling me that you think I should know about?”

Val let out a long sigh. For several seconds, he said and did nothing. “Just one thing,” he admitted at last. “I never told you because I didn’t want to burden you, but I suppose there’s no harm in letting you know now.”

I braced myself, my mind reeling, figuring he was going to say something like he didn’t really like me like that or something. “Go on.”

Val gripped the corner of the table so hard his knuckles turned white, then slowly released it, flexing his fingers a few times. “I know why Dagon picked you. To hunt for the Marks, that is. It never had anything to do with your sister.”

Okay, I hadn’t been expecting *that*...

“Come again?”

Val stood and started pacing. “I’m sure you’ve always wondered, right? Why you? Why not some other mage that actually knows how to track things?”

I nodded. He had a point. I was curious about that. “Keep going.”

“Well, I mean, your sister did play a small role in it, insomuch as we needed a reason to get you to go along with the whole plan. But there was always more to it. A reason why we needed you specifically. Or, rather, a blood mage.”

A light dawned on me then. “The Marks. They require blood to activate.”

It all made sense now. Every time I’d seen a Mark active, it had either been with someone who had spilled a lot of blood, like Beige Man, or someone that had the Mark embedded in their skin, being actively fed with their blood, like all the Lightless Seven mages. Was it really that simple?

Val nodded. “Indeed. Only it drives the user mad when they activate it, unless they can control the flow of that blood around the artifact. That’s why Dagon needed a blood mage. He needed someone who could control the Marks and make them do what he wanted, that also wouldn’t go mad under their power. And, well, you were a blood mage, and we already had your sister, so...”

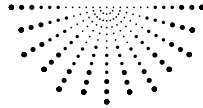
I tuned him out for a second. Was that why I had never gone crazy under the influence of any of the Marks before? Because of my blood magic? It would make a certain amount of sense.

“Of course, now that we’re getting out of the game, that doesn’t really matter anymore. There are a smattering of other blood mages on the planet. Or he can always just wait for the next generation. I don’t really care at this point. Until a blood mage actually wields a Mark for their own ends, the rest of it doesn’t really matter.”

Val wasn’t looking at me at that moment, and it was probably a good thing. A sinking feeling formed in the pit of my stomach. The Mark of Ammit. I’d wielded it. To heal Charly. Did that mean...

“Shit,” I said aloud.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



If I'd thought the previous conversation had been something, admitting to Val that I had used one of the Marks of the Underworld had been on a completely other level. The range of emotions that had washed over that man's face during *that* reveal...

"This is bad," Val said finally, shaking his head slowly as he sat back down at the table. The last few minutes had been hard on him. "Very, very bad."

"How bad?" I asked, biting slightly on my lip.

"Bad."

"Like, Buffy turning into a vampire bad?" I offered.

Val shot me a glare that was half-confusion, half-annoyance. "What now?"

I waved a hand dismissively. "Never mind that. It doesn't really matter. Suffice it to say it's bad. But how? How is it so bad? I haven't gone mad from it or anything. It's just like you said, blood mages don't go crazy when they use the Marks."

At least, I hadn't gone crazy yet. I felt like that was an important distinction. Though I didn't voice it.

Val stared at me for several seconds. He let out a long sigh. Possibly the longest, hardest sigh I'd ever heard him vocalize.

Oh no. That *was* bad. "How much trouble am I in, exactly?" I asked him.

For a moment, he didn't say anything. Finally, he cracked. "You should probably go to bed and get some rest. It might be your last for a while." He buried his head in his arms and laid it on the table.

“What?” I pressed. My mind was still reeling from everything Val had told me tonight. Not to mention I was bone-tired from the earlier exertion and blood loss. And to top it all off, I wasn’t even hungry anymore. But I still wanted answers more than all of that. “Was it something I said?”

Val didn’t move at all, just sat there. I thought about prodding his face with a finger just to get some sort of reaction out of him, but I didn’t want to make anything worse.

He was probably right. I probably should go to bed and worry about it tomorrow. But if I did that, I’d just spend half the night wondering about it anyway, so that idea was out.

“Sorry, boss,” Charly said suddenly.

I squinted at him and gave him a few light pets. He purred in response. “For what, my little buttercup?”

Charly gave me a pouty face. “It’s only cute when I do it,” he whined.

That made me giggle. I gave him a few more pets for good measure. “It’s okay. You’re worth it. No matter how much trouble healing you got me in.”

“You might not be okay when you learn just what it means that you used the Marks,” Val warned. Finally, he was talking to me again.

I glanced over in his direction. His head was still mostly buried, just barely peeking out over the top of his arms. “Oh? Have you deigned to join the conversation again, Mr. Broody?” Hey, if Charly could hand out nicknames like candy, I could too, gosh darn it.

“Mr. Broody?” Val complained, snapping to attention. At least it had got him animated again. “Oh, come on, you can do better than that, surely.”

“And you can tell me whatever it is you don’t want to say to me,” I countered with a slight huff.

Val rolled his eyes. “Fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn you. It has to do with an old prophecy. One that’s been kicking around since the time when the Marks were originally made.”

“Oh, geez,” Charly said with a snort. “One of *those*.”

Ignoring Charly’s outburst, I leaned forward, angling in closer to Val. “Prophecy, you say?” I’d never really been one to believe in prophecies, but then there were a lot of things that I hadn’t once really been into that had become more and more real to me lately. So I was willing to give it a shot.

Val nodded. “Yep. It’s a doozy, too. According to the prophecy, trying to use the Marks for your own interests will make the user go crazy and mad



with power. Unless they're a blood mage, of course."

"Of course."

"We know that part is true, but that's just the start of it," Val continued. "There's another bit. Should a blood mage use but one of the Marks of the Underworld—any one of them, mind—without forging the Crown of the Underworld after, then said blood mage will start to go insane just as surely as if they weren't a blood mage at all." He sighed again. "It goes on to say that the Marks will start to call to this blood mage, urging them to use them and make the Crown. Refusing that call could even kill you, if you're not careful."

He rubbed his chin for a moment. "Which, if you think about it, would explain why both of the remaining Marks made themselves known at the same time."

I supposed he had a point, there. I took all this information in stride, nodding occasionally. "So, what you're saying is, if I don't hunt down all the Marks of the Underworld, and use them, then I'm going to go crazy just like Soren and all the others did?"

Another nod from Val. "Yes. Or die in the process, of course. It's a little hazy on that part."

"Or die in the process," I repeated. "Does the prophecy say how long I have until that happens?"

Val shrugged. "Two months or thereabouts? Again, it's a little vague." His eyes took on a distant look. "Technically, it's two full moons from when you used the first mark. And if what you told me is correct, you used it on a full moon, so that'd give you almost two months exactly before you went crazy."

"Wonderful," I said aloud, not sure what else to say.

How long ago had I used the Mark of Ammit to fix Charly's form? Five weeks ago, certainly. Which meant I had three weeks and change left before I was the one going crazy and trying to end the world.

Lovely. Just dandy.

Charly let out a low whistle. "Wow. You really *are* screwed."

I glared at him, and he buried his face in his paws.

"Just calling it like I see it, mistress."

"Whatever," I replied, shaking my head. "You know I can't stay mad at you."

“And I abuse that knowledge whenever I can,” he added with a wry grin.

I laughed again, partly because what he said struck me as funny, and partly because I had no other idea what reaction to use after this night of revelations.

Not that long ago, I’d been hunting the Marks to free my sister. Now, I might have to hunt them and use them to free myself. Just my luck, I tell you.

I pushed away from the table and got up. “Well, with that amazing revelation, I think I’m finally off to bed,” I informed Val and Charly. “*Alone.*” I glared at both of them extra hard as I said that last bit.

For once, there were no arguments.

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“SO, LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT,” NOELLE SAID THE NEXT MORNING. We were sitting on the front deck of Val’s safehouse, drinking that civet coffee that everyone went all gaga over.

Had to admit, for coffee that literally came from crap, it was actually pretty good. I don’t know that I would have tried it if I’d known that tidbit in advance, but since I didn’t, I was able to look at it objectively.

Was it the best coffee I’d ever had? No. That distinction would go to the cup of joe I’d ordered once at Mei’s on a particularly hard morning. I’d needed the extra jolt of caffeine. My, but she really did make the best drinks no matter what you wanted. Though this was a close second. I savored another sip.

“We now have an anti-magic artifact to track down for Damian,” Noelle continued, “and a Mark of the Underworld to track down for you.”

I nodded. “Yeppers.”

“And only three weeks to do both.”

I lifted up a finger to correct her. “Three weeks to find *two* Marks of the Underworld. Only one of them is in Bali. And reacquire the other Marks. And assemble the Crown.”

“Okay, fine. Three weeks to find an anti-magic device and two Marks of the Underworld, and do all that other stuff. Got it.” She shrugged her

shoulders and settled into her rocking chair a little more. “Easy peasy. We can totally do this.”

I sucked in a deep breath. “I sure hope so.” I downed about half my remaining cup of coffee. It practically burned on the way down, but I enjoyed the feeling.

“So, which Mark do we think is here again?” Noelle asked.

“The Mark of Batara Kala. The Balinese god of darkness and the underworld,” I told her. “I mean, the only other one is the Mark of Hades, and we’re not exactly close to Greece, so it kind of makes sense that it’d be Batara Kala. Plus, that might explain the darkness we encountered yesterday in the waters off the shore.”

Noelle bobbed her head. “Makes sense. So, it’s another scuba expedition for us, then?” she offered with a wry smile.

I shivered instinctively. “Ugh, anything but that.” Even if it was somewhat likely.

“Relax, I’m just kidding you.” She nudged me in the ribs. “I wouldn’t do that to you so soon.” There was all too much emphasis on the “soon” bit, which did little to help settle my poor stomach. “Besides, I think I know of a different ruin that just might fit the bill for both the anti-magic device and the Mark.”

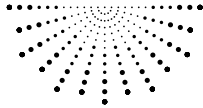
My ears perked up at that. Anything but more diving. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s over by the Subak irrigation system in an old cave. It’s said that Batara Kala ruled from within a cave, so there’s a strong possibility it’s over there.”

A wicked smile played across my lips. “You hear that, Charly?” I called over my shoulder. He was currently flitting about on the deck, smelling the flowers, of all things. As I called over to him, he stiffened up. “We get to go explore another cave!”

The look Charly gave me was downright golden. “Can’t wait.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“**T**his is it?” I said, scrunching my nose.

Noelle nodded. “Should be. If the map is right, that is.”

Don’t get me wrong, the Subak irrigation system was a sight to behold. Worthy of its label as a tourist sight to see for sure. Rows and rows of water troughs dug into the side of a mountain—or perhaps built into it; it was hard to tell from this angle—all cascading gently downward in a lazy, sloping pattern.

The architectural feats of the people that lived long ago never ceased to amaze me, and this was no exception. One of these days, I’d have to see the pyramids in Egypt. Maybe Val would take me, when this all calmed down.

It helped to have a goal to look forward to.

I stared at the series of caves opening up beneath the irrigation system. These were far less spectacular. Just a couple of rough-hewn openings in the side of the mountain. Volcano, technically. The mountain was a volcano, and an active one, although there hadn’t been any activity in a little while.

“You’re absolutely sure this is it?” I clarified.

Noelle shrugged. “Not really, but it’s worth a shot, right? Besides, it’s better than another trip under the water, eh?”

On that, I had to agree. I’d do almost anything if it meant I didn’t have to go under the water again.

I shivered slightly and rubbed my arms to recover some warmth. Somehow, it wasn’t nearly as warm in this area as it was in the surrounding bits, which was odd, given the fact that we were so close to the base of the volcano, erupting or not. I’d gone to Diamond Head once in Hawaii. It was

remarkably warm—warmer than the surrounding area—even though that volcano hadn't gone off in ages.

Maybe that was a sign that Noelle was right, and there really *was* an artifact here. One of them, at least. A girl could hope.

"Well, I suppose we should get going, then," I offered weakly. I turned to face Charly. "Any last words, my furry companion?"

"Caves are a bad idea?" he squeaked.

I laughed and gave him a few pets for comfort. "Just think of it like a really large basement or something. At least there probably aren't jackals in this one. Or scary old spirits of gods that want to eat you."

Charly snorted. "You don't know that for certain."

"You're certainly welcome to sit this one out if you like."

Charly glared daggers at me. He straightened to his full height. "I would never. I'm going in there with you, sugar lips, and that's final!"

Well, at least he couldn't be too upset about it if he was using a pet name for me again.

I took a step forward, but before I could get very far, Val stepped into my path, blocking me. "Hold up a second," he insisted, holding a hand out in front of him.

I rolled my eyes. "What now?"

Val pushed me back a half step. He brought his arms around me in what felt like a poor attempt at a warm embrace. I placed my arms around him as well. I wasn't going to turn down a hug from Val, even if it did feel a bit awkward with Noelle watching.

He pulled away a second later and regarded me for a moment, then nodded. "There. That should do it."

I cocked my head to the side. "Do what?"

"Track you." He held up a small electronic device in his hand. "You have a certain habit of getting lost on us sometimes, so Noelle and I talked about it, and we decided to put a tracker on you so you couldn't get lost on us again." He grinned from ear to ear. "It's good to a depth of a thousand meters and accurate to about six feet."

My eyes trailed from Val's hand over to Noelle's. She was sporting a similar tracker. I groaned at both of them. "Is this really necessary?"

"Yes!" they shouted in unison.

"Ugh," I moaned. "Fine. Just... turn it off if I have to go potty or something, okay?"

Val shrugged. No argument here.

To think they really thought I needed a tracker just to stay out of trouble in a simple cave. This whole place had probably been explored a half dozen times at least. What were they thinking? Was I really *that* hard to keep track of?

I thought back to the last several times I'd been in trouble and realized that I had been alone for most of them. Okay, so maybe they had a point. But did they have to gloat about their solution like that?

Whatever. I had a cave to explore. I wasn't going to let them spoil my fun.

I took a few steps toward the cave opening. No one stopped me. That was a good sign. I took a few more, sniffing all the while for any kind of strange magical signature. I couldn't sense any, but that didn't mean much. If the artifact or artifacts were deep in the cave, I wouldn't be able to sense any of it from here, anyway.

"All right, everyone," I said at the entrance. "Let's head on into this hole."

Val shot me a suggestive look. "I thought you'd never ask."

My cheeks burned crimson, and I tried to hide them to no avail. "I didn't mean it like that, you jerk."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I know. But it's so much more fun when I take it the wrong way anyway."

I shook my head and did my best to ignore him. It was going to be a long day if it was going to be filled with innuendo and jokes at my expense, and I didn't really have the patience for them today.

Without another word, I headed into the cave, plunging head-first into the darkness.

Yeah, I know. I really need to stop doing that. My head is my most precious resource. It'd be better to risk a pinky or something. Even if I *was* really attached to my pinky fingers... But I stuck my head in first anyway.

Thankfully, nothing came by to chop it off. It was just a normal cave entrance. Which made sense. We hadn't heard any stories of dangers from this cave or the locals running screaming from it, which was both good and bad. Good, in that it meant there'd be less to worry about, but bad in that it meant we might be in the wrong spot.

Only one way to find out and all that. I headed deeper into the cave.

We'd come prepared this time. Noelle always seemed to have the best tools at her disposal. I supposed since she didn't have all that amazing of a magic ability, she had to make do with more mundane tools a majority of the time.

Whatever the reason, I was grateful for it. I turned on my ultra-powered flashlight and shined it into the cave entrance. It lit the area up like it was midday.

Nice. I didn't know how many lumens there were in this sucker or anything, but it must have been a lot.

Hmm. The cave entrance certainly didn't look like all that and a bag of chips. It was kind of basic, honestly. Just a gaping maw in the side of a mountain. The walls looked to be mostly natural. I couldn't find any hint of tool markings or anything at this stage. Just roundish cave walls and a few stalactites in the ceiling.

"I guess this isn't too bad, sweet cheeks," Charly murmured on my shoulder.

Giving him a flick for good measure, I nodded. "Agreed, fluffykins. It's pretty standard cave fare. Nothing saying a dark god lives further in."

"Fluffykins?" Charly pouted. He brought his head a little closer to my ear and whispered, glaring at the others all the while. "I thought you promised never to call me that again."

I shrugged. "And you promised not to call me sweet cheeks."

The little ferret lowered his head in shame. "Fair game. Sorry, mistress."

No one else seemed overly chatty at the moment, so we headed further into the cave. We walked for several minutes before we came across anything of interest. The cave was gorgeous in its own right, though. The walls glistened with the promise of water, making everything sparkle under the light of the flashlight.

Our first obstacle stood before us. A fork in the road. Two different cave paths that each, presumably, led to a different area further in.

"That's strange," Noelle said in a voice barely over a whisper, frowning at the two paths.

"What's up?" I asked.

She rubbed her chin. "According to the cave maps I found online, we shouldn't have come to a fork this early. It should be another hundred meters in before the paths begin to multiply."

My shoulders tensed. This was it, then. The first sign that we might be on the right track. Any time there was something unexpected, it was a sure sign that there was magic affecting it. Most likely dark magic, in this case. Mark of the Underworld magic, perhaps.

We were close. I could sense it. I still couldn't sniff out any strange magical signatures, but the air was slightly cooler. That could be a sign of dark magic, too.

"What should we do?" Val asked. "Which path should we take?"

"Don't suppose we want to split up and cover more ground?" I offered.

"No!" Val and Noelle shouted in unison. The sound echoed off the cave walls.

I winced and ducked my head into my shirt. "Got it. No getting separated." To be honest, I was happier with that plan, anyway. "But which way should we go, then?"

"Look there," Val said, pointing toward one of the walls on the left path.

I squinted my eyes to try and make out what he was staring at. Was that... "Ancient writing?" I said aloud. It kind of looked like some sort of ancient rune or sigil, though what it could possibly mean was anyone's guess.

Val nodded. "It looks like it. Which means whatever we're after, it's probably that way."

He was right, but remembering my experience in the Egyptian temple in Olympia, I hesitated. If we'd read the hieroglyphs there before trudging forward, it could have saved us a lot of pain. Potentially.

"Can you translate it?" I asked Val. "The sigil or whatever, I mean?"

Val shook his head. "No can do. If it was an actual word in an ancient language, my gift of demon tongues should be able to make it out, but that's more of a random sign. A family crest or something, maybe. I can't make it out."

So much for that idea. With a lump forming in my stomach, I trudged onward, taking the lead in spite of Val and Noelle's protests. They really seemed intent on protecting me, but I couldn't sense any danger coming from that direction, so I went ahead anyway.

A few more strange markings adorned the walls of the new tunnel as we headed down it, but Val couldn't make out any of those, either. They were all similar in appearance, though. I took that as a good sign.



We walked on for several more minutes with nothing weird happening. I wondered how deep into the cave we might be at this point. It was slow going, because the cave walls were barely big enough for us to pass through—Val actually had to duck in a few places—but I felt like we were making good time.

On my shoulder, I felt Charly shivering. I reached up and gave him a few pets on his fur to help calm his nerves, reaching out via our familiar bond at the same time to try and calm him further.

*Rest easy*, I told him over the bond. *We're not in any danger down here.*

The words and the petting seemed to have the desired effect. He stopped shivering a moment later and instead nuzzled his snout closer up to my shoulder. He still wasn't comfortable down here by any stretch, but he was feeling better.

A moment later, the tunnel started to open up, getting wider and wider. Soon, it would be wide enough for us to walk two abreast. That was promising.

I steeled myself for what might be coming. In my admittedly short experience, when a cave opened up further, that was when something crazy was going to happen.

This instance was no different. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as one of the shadows moved. It was a slight flicker of movement, but it was there.

"Did you guys see that?" I called to my companions.

When neither of them answered, I glanced over my shoulder. Apparently, they were about ten feet back, staring at something else. They probably hadn't caught it, then.

I motioned for them to catch up, flashing my light at them. Val jumped a little and Noelle looked dazed. They nodded and covered the distance in no time.

Yeah, something freaky was definitely going on down here. Whatever we were looking for, it must be just around the corner.

"You two all right back there?" I asked my companions. I got a series of grunts and nods in return. No snide remarks. It left me slightly on edge. That wasn't like them.

But we had made it this far. We just needed to go a little further. I kept going, glancing backward a few times to make sure my companions were coming along. They were. They seemed in higher spirits than they had a

moment ago, so maybe it had all been a fluke. Maybe the long tunnel was just playing tricks on me.

It happened again not two seconds later. A shadow moved. It looked like it was dancing along the wall. I shined my light on it, and of course, it dissipated into nothing. When I removed the light, the dancing motion did not resume.

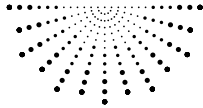
Weird.

I took another few steps forward, and the tunnel gave way completely to a massive cavern opening. It was so far across, my flashlight could barely see the other end.

“Whoa,” I uttered. “You guys seeing this?” I glanced behind me again, and all the blood drained from my face.

My companions were gone.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



**I**t's okay, Misty, I told myself. They've got to be back there, just a short way. I just have to go back and collect them, and everything will be fine.

I tried to take a step backward, but I had the distinct impression that in spite of the fact that my feet were moving, I wasn't going anywhere. It was surreal. And also freaked me the hell out.

Don't worry, Misty. They have a tracker on you. They'll find you soon enough. Just have to tough it out for a little bit. You can do this.

My free hand slid toward the pocket of my pants. My lancet. My trusty lancet. For once, I had it with me. I'd actually prepared this time. I'd known I might be facing dark magic, so I'd made doubly sure I had my lancet with me before I went into the tunnel.

Wrapping my fingers around the cool bit of pointy metal, my tension eased just a little. Quickly, I pricked my finger as gently as I could. I didn't want to do any damage or lose too much blood, just get enough out to summon up a small stream of magic to soothe me and calm my nerves.

My magic responded instantly, coming to my defenses. It felt warm and inviting, like a soft blanket on a fluffy bed, wrapping me up in its warmth so I could drift off into a comfy sleep. Only I was anything but tired, and still very on edge.

The slightest scent of orchids drifted into my nostrils, coming from somewhere in front of me, making my blood freeze.

Orchids. I only knew of one mage that smelled like orchids.

*Kyra.*

A cackling noise coming from within the mound of shadows in front of me confirmed my suspicions. She was out there, in the cave opening, and close by to boot.

“Come out and face me, coward!” I shouted at her. Not that I expected it to work, but I did it anyway.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Kyra shot back. She laughed again, a dark, evil laugh. “It wasn’t easy to get you all to myself like this, you know. I had to do... things.”

My heart lurched. My friends. Were they safe, wherever they were? Did Kyra already have the Mark of Batará Kala? Had she used it to send them to some version of hell or something?

Thankfully, Charly was still on my shoulder. Even if he was paralyzed with fear. I could feel it radiating off him through our bond.

*It’s okay, fella, I told him. I’ve got this.*

Now if only I could summon that kind of courage and optimism for myself...

I pressed the lancet deeper into my skin, summoning more magic power to my side. I was going to need everything I could get. The blood flowed freely, staining my brand-new pants. They were nice pants, too. I drew all the magic into me.

“What did you do to my friends?” I demanded. “Where are they?”

Kyra huffed. I caught a glimpse of... something. A hand, maybe, or a part of an arm. She was closer than I thought. “Don’t worry. They’re safe. I just want to play with you first. Then I’ll deal with them, too.”

Come on, Kyra. Get cocky. Show yourself. Then I’ll fry the hell out of you.

A tendril of darkness snaked up from the ground, wrapping itself around my flashlight. The light from it dimmed until it was practically nothing.

I wasn’t well versed in light spells, but I’d done them a few times. I summoned forth a ball of light and discarded the flashlight. Kyra’s shadow powers couldn’t extinguish a magical light source. At least, I didn’t think they could. If she had the Mark...

The room burst into brightness, chasing away several more tendrils of shadow that had pooled at my feet. A dark figure stood across from me, not twenty feet away, about my height and covered almost head to toe in black leather. It was Kyra. She was there.

Instantly, I lashed out with my magic, sending a jet of flame toward her. She shimmered and disappeared right before the flames slammed into her.

“Tsk tsk, little brat,” Kyra said from somewhere off to my right. I spun. Somehow, she’d reappeared right next to me.

Something metallic flashed in Kyra’s hand, and then it was sticking into my arm. A dagger. She had impaled me with a small dagger.

I grasped at the wound and used a burst of air to fling her away at the same time. Kyra hissed as she flew into the far wall of the cave, several yards away. She crashed into the wall with a loud thud and slunk down to the floor.

As much as I wanted to follow that up with another attack, I had to see to my own wound first. It was deep, and blood was flowing out of it fast.

Biting down hard on my own tongue, I grabbed the dagger and pulled it free. More blood oozed out, making me feel weak in the head. I ignored it, using some of that blood to try and boost me up instead.

A strange power flowed into my body. It felt kind of like when Val gave me an energy shot, but not quite the same. It was electrifying. I felt like I could move at double speed.

Unfortunately, that meant the blood in my arm flowed out even faster.

Freaking out, I grabbed a poultice bandage from my pack and slapped it onto the wound, not even bothering with sizing it right first or anything. The bulging bandage held into place, sealing over the wound and stopping the blood flow. For now. The thing was unwieldy, and I worried it would fall off in a prolonged fight. But for now, I was okay.

I turned off the power to my strength-boosting spell before it could do any lasting damage. One of these days, I’d have to practice more with those. They could be invaluable in battle, if you could do them right, but for now, it was more of a liability.

My wound tended to for the moment, I turned my attention back to Kyra. Only she was gone. Her body wasn’t where I’d seen it last.

I scanned the room, looking for where she might have gotten off to. Half the room was covered in odd shadows that danced and defied my magic light orb. Somewhere in that mess was Kyra. I was sure of it.

“Air,” my magic told me. Its desire was clear. Use air magic to try and clear away the shadows. Then I’d see Kyra.

Fortunately or unfortunately, I had a lot of blood to work with. I summoned a blast of air and sent it hurtling into the center of the mass of

dancing shadows. The wind gust kicked up several of the shadows, obliterating them in the process.

No Kyra, though. She wasn't there. Where was she, then?

"Looking for me?" Kyra whispered into my ear. It sent chills down my spine.

I ducked, pressing myself down close to the ground, and spun around just in time to watch another dagger fly through the area where my other shoulder had just been. If I hadn't acted so quickly, that dagger might have gone straight through my arm and into my chest.

With all the force I could muster, I sent another jet of flames flying right into Kyra's smug little face.

Kyra screamed and faded from existence once again. I had scored a hit. Even if it was a glancing one, it was something. I'd gotten her.

All around me, the shadows danced and reformed into different patterns. One of them came for me, wrapping itself around my torso. Its icy touch drained away at my strength and resolve, making me feel hopeless.

I tried to shake it off as best I could, stirring Charly in the process. He clung to my shoulder for dear life, digging into me with his claws.

The bite of pain coming from those little pinpricks was all I needed to get back into the right headspace. I could do this. I just needed to focus.

I formed a small wall of air in front of me and used it like a knife to sever the tentacle that had coiled around me. It shimmered and dissipated a second later. Then I pushed out with several air walls all at once in different directions, hoping to catch Kyra in one of them.

Somehow, she was twisting and moving through the room, never in one spot for very long. I didn't know how she was doing it, but I was hoping the brute force approach would do the trick.

A grunting noise came from off to my left. I looked and saw Kyra pressed up against the wall there. My air wall had hit her again.

She let out a scream and pushed against my wall of air with her shadows, sending them out in wide arcs and forcing my air backward. We fought like that for a second before my air wall lost and her shadows won.

With a grim smile on her face, she glared at me. She sent her shadow tendrils out again, wrapping them around both of my arms and holding me fast.

"Is it true?" she asked me through clenched teeth. It was obviously costing her a lot to keep the shadows up.

“Is what true?” I fired back. All the while, I prepped another spell. A nice air spell, with Val’s dagger at the middle of it. If I aimed it right, I could send the piece of metal right through her chest and end her sorry existence. Let’s see her dodge that.

Kyra huffed. “The Marks of the Underworld. Do they really make everyone go crazy?”

I cocked my head to the side. “What now? Why do you care?”

The shadows were sapping my strength again, making me want to give up and lay down. But I fought against them. This wasn’t the time. Just a little bit longer. Just another moment or two, and I’d have the spell lined up.

The summoned air whipped at my chest, picking the dagger up by the hilt and slowly aligning it the right way to do what was needed. To kill Kyra.

Just a little bit longer, body. That’s all you need.

“Answer me!” Kyra demanded.

“Pfft!” I spat at her. “What does it matter? You’re just going to go after them anyway, aren’t you? To do your little master’s bidding like a good little mage? To live up to Tristan’s twisted ideals?”

The dagger was in the right spot now, but I was almost out of power. Even with the tremendous amount of blood that had been spilled earlier, I could barely keep the dagger steady.

Massive walls of air were one thing. They weren’t precise. It was easy to send a giant gust somewhere. Much harder to keep a small piece of metal still in the air pointed in one direction. Some mages spent their whole careers training to do things like this. And here I was on my first attempt, mostly rocking it.

Just another few seconds. Then I’d send it flying.

Kyra huffed. I could see the wild craziness in her eyes starting to die down. Her tone changed. “Roman, he... I didn’t believe it, but he went crazy when he touched that infernal metal. Did the same thing happen to the others?”

“Yes,” I told her plainly. “It did. They all went crazy, just like Roman.” And soon, you’ll be dead before you get a chance to find out yourself, you soddy bitch.

There. The dagger was in the right spot. I summoned my last bit of magical energy and sent it flying, straight for Kyra’s black little heart. This

was it. She was a goner. There'd be no escaping my attack. Not at this close range. Not while she was so focused.

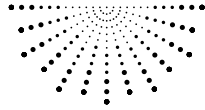
"Thank you," Kyra said. Then the impossible happened. She shimmered and disappeared again, and with her went all the shadows in the room.

Val's dagger smacked against the far wall, clattering to the ground. I'd finally cast the spell, but once more, I'd been a moment too late.

Shaking, I glared at the spot where Kyra had been a moment prior. She'd won again. Somehow, she'd managed to escape. And I knew it wouldn't be long before she came back.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



With Kyra gone, the rest of the darkness surrounding the cave dissipated rather quickly. Soon enough, I could make out the walls of the cavernous space once more. I ran over to the wall and snatched up Val's dagger, inspecting it closely.

Humph. Not even a tiny hint of blood on the blade. I'd missed her completely. Or rather, she'd disappeared completely. But how? Kyra was an expert at using darkness and shadows to their full effect, and there was certainly plenty of both to work with in a cavern of this size, but this experience had been... different.

One moment, she'd been right in front of me, and then the next moment she'd been gone, or somewhere else, faster than I could even blink. It was uncanny. I knew it was possible to use magic to make yourself faster and stronger than an ordinary human, but first off, *she* shouldn't have that ability, and second, even with faster reflexes, she was moving too fast for that.

And now? Now she was just... gone. Vanished completely, no trace at all.

Did she have the Mark of Batara Kala already? I couldn't rule it out, but the way she'd been talking about the Marks, the questions she'd been asking... if she'd already had access to the Mark's powers, she wouldn't have had to ask. She would have just known.

Ugh. There was no point in worrying about it for the moment. Right now, I needed to locate my friends and either figure out how to get to the end of this tunnel, or back out of it. Something told me neither direction would be easy going.

“Are you all right?” Charly asked from my shoulder. He finally let go of his vice grip on me. The shoulder underneath him hurt something fierce and felt a little wet. I think he’d managed to draw blood.

I brushed slightly at the shoulder, wincing all the while. “Yeah, no thanks to *you*.”

Charly bowed his head. “Sorry, mistress. When the others disappeared, I feared... if I left you, too, I might... you might...”

A sigh escaped my lips. I gave Charly a few light pets. He had a point. “Thanks, buddy. For not abandoning me.”

Charly was hiding his face underneath his paws, but he brought it out to look at me. “You’re not mad, then?”

Pain flared in my shoulder. I would need a poultice for it. At least I’d come packing this time around. But it was a minor thing. Kyra was still out there, somewhere, as were the Marks and the anti-magic device.

“No, I’m not mad,” I admitted. A little disappointed, maybe, but not mad. “You could have at least *tried* to scratch Kyra in the face, though, you know.”

“Understood,” Charly replied with a stiff nod. “Of course. Next time, I \_\_\_”

I cut him off. “Don’t make a promise you can’t keep. Besides, you were just trying to protect me in your own way.” I flicked my fingers at Charly to get him to take flight while rummaging around in my pack for a small poultice wrap. Finding one quickly, I fit it over the claw marks on my shoulder. It went to work right away, soothing the pain and discomfort.

“Ahh,” I said aloud, “that’s better.”

“There you are!” a voice boomed from off to my left. My whole body perked up instantly. Val. He’d found me.

“Where else would I be?” I fired back as I turned to face him. There he was, with Noelle fast on his heels. The two had ragged looks, almost like they really had been sent to hell and returned.

Val embraced me immediately, his warmth radiating off him and into me. I let myself lean into it, throwing my arms around him as well. We clung to each other so tightly I could feel his breath through his hardened chest. It was heaven.

“What happened to you?” Noelle pressed. I’d almost forgotten she was there, lost in Val’s embrace like I was.

I extracted myself slowly, painfully. I wanted to sink back into Val's grasp, but there would be time for that later.

Smoothing myself down a bit and standing as straight as I could, I addressed Noelle. "What do you mean? I've been here the whole time. It's you two that disappeared on me."

Noelle's eyes narrowed. "No? We were all headed down the same path, and then you disappeared. Val and I must have run a half a mile in just a couple minutes to try and find you in these infernal caves." She put her hands on her sides. "You were gone."

"Ran a half mile?" Noelle nodded. I glanced at Val. He nodded as well, confirming the tale. "But... that doesn't make any sense. I only walked a handful of yards, I..." my voice trailed off. I had no idea what to say. "Are you two okay?"

Val and Noelle looked at each other, and both nodded again. "Better, now that we've found you. It was scary as hell when you disappeared from the tracker," Val admitted, "but we found you quick enough."

Tracker? Oh, yes. I'd forgotten that they'd placed a tracker on me to make sure they could find me later. I'd thought it much ado about nothing earlier, but now? Now I supposed I was glad for it.

"But how? How did I get so far away in just a few seconds?"

Val shook his head. "Does it really matter? It could have been the Mark calling to you for all we knew. We don't really know a lot about the Mark of Batara Kala's powers. Maybe it works different from the other Marks." His face paled. "You didn't run into it, did you?"

"Gods, no!" I insisted. "Ran into Kyra for a bit, but that was all." Her name felt slimy in my mouth as I said it.

"Kyra?" Val and Noelle said in unison. Both of them knew all about her antics, and neither of them looked pleased by the revelation.

I nodded, waving a hand dismissively. "Yeah, but it was no big deal. I sent her packing."

My companions didn't seem convinced. Noelle shot me a concerned glance as she noticed my bandages. "Are you hurt? Do you need help?"

I shrugged, which sent a wave of pain through my body. "It's nothing major. Promise." I gave her the best fake smile I could muster.

She shook her head but said nothing.

"Was Kyra acting stranger than usual?" Val pressed. "Crazy, perhaps?"

The implication was clear. “I don’t think she’s found the Mark, yet, if that’s what you’re asking. Though I do think she was sent here to get it.” I glared at him. “Could have asked about my injuries first, though, you know.”

Val winced. He lowered his head. “Sorry.”

I sighed and patted him on the arm. “It’s okay.”

“Still, it makes sense, though,” Val said. “I’m just glad she didn’t kill you.”

Heh. You and me both. “But if she doesn’t have it either, and she was down here, then maybe...” I bit my lip. “We’re on the right track?”

Noelle shrugged. “It would seem that way, at least.”

“Never mind that. Not right now. *Are* you okay?” Val asked, finally turning his protective gaze on me. He sized up the bandages on my arm and lightly fingered the one over the dagger wound like it was going to bite him or something. “Not too worse for the wear, I hope?”

I huffed. “Nice try, but you already failed that test.”

“Oh, come on, Misty. Just let me check you over. Please?”

“Fine.” I didn’t really want to sit around here any longer than we had to, considering Kyra could come back at any moment, but it might actually be faster to let him check me out than it would be to sit here and argue about it.

Plus, it had been my first time using augmentation magic, and it was always possible I could have done something to mess my system up that I wouldn’t immediately notice. Val’s trained eyes would be useful in that regard. If a little too... sultry at the same time.

I could feel the heat and intensity of Val’s gaze as he sized me up and down, lingering just a tad longer than necessary at my chest. Like I wouldn’t notice. Not that I minded. His eyes caught mine and I looked away, trying to focus on something else so he wouldn’t see the color in my cheeks, but I ended up looking right at his package.

Blushing even harder, I looked at Charly. His goofy grin and overall demeanor cleared those thoughts from my head real quick.

“This arm wound isn’t great, but nothing my magic can’t handle,” Val mused as he lifted the bandage. Before I could even say anything, I felt his warmth penetrating me there as he went to work. A moment later, I felt less light-headed, and the pain in my shoulder was down to a dull throb.

“Thankfully, nothing else appears to be broken or bleeding too much,” he said, patting me lightly on the back. “Still have all your fingers and toes

and everything.”

“Oh yeah?” I replied, gazing up into his gorgeous eyes. “Would you miss them if one weren’t there?”

Val leaned in a little closer, his mouth hovering mere inches from mine. “Very much so.” His hot breath fell onto my chest, causing me to shiver involuntarily.

“Okay, that’s enough of that,” Noelle quipped, clearing her throat.

Heh. Fair enough. Val pulled away, and I looked downward, my eyes settling on Val’s chest. Oh, I wanted to sink back into it right now. Damn, but having him this close in this damp, dark cave, radiating warmth all over the place. Especially now that the temperature had dropped a bit more...

Nope. Don’t think like that, Misty. There’ll be time for that *after* the mission.

“You got it,” I told Noelle with a stiff salute.

“What about me?” Val asked.

I shot him a devilish grin. “Oh, you’ll get yours later.” That made his eyebrows quiver.

Great work, Misty. Just throw yourself at Val’s feet while Noelle is watching. Well done. Still, it had been worth it to watch Val squirm.

“Ahem,” she said, glaring at both of us. “Like I was saying, if we can all just keep it in our pants a bit longer, we can complete this mission, yeah? Or need I remind you that we still have two magical artifacts to find.”

My cheeks turned a bright crimson. We were down here for me. Even if I wanted something else right now. “Right. Of course.” I averted my eyes, unable to look at her fully. “Shall we go onward, then?”

“Yes, please,” Noelle replied.

We all resumed our trek. The cavern we were in was nice and wide, so we were able to fan out a bit. Which was nice, because I was fairly certain I couldn’t stand close to Val without my insides melting. Even if he was nice and warm at the moment.

I shivered a little, rubbing my arms for comfort and taking care not to hit the bandaged part of my shoulder. “Why is it so cold, anyway?”

“Dunno,” Noelle admitted. “We should still be relatively close to Mount Agung. This cave is supposed to go right through it. But it feels more like we’re several feet under water instead.”

That was the name of the volcano we’d been walking under. Supposedly. Mount Agung. If we really were that close to it, the cave

should be getting hotter, not colder. It really was a mystery.

“Here,” Val said, approaching me. He took off the jacket he’d been wearing and placed it lightly on my shoulders, causing me to swoon more than was healthy. “That should help a little.”

“I couldn’t possibly,” I insisted, waving him off. “You’ll get cold yourself.”

“Don’t be silly.” Val patted his chest. “I’m made of hardier stuff than all that. As you’ll soon find out.” He gave me a wink at that last bit that made my insides melt even further.

Maybe he could teleport us out for a quickie, and then...

No, Misty. Bad Misty. Think about the mission. Kyra’s already one step ahead of us. Need to find the Mark first.

“Good to know,” I said finally, feeling like a complete idiot. Gods, but men could be such distracting creatures.

“Up there,” Noelle said, pointing at something in the distance.

“Thank the gods,” I whispered, thankful for anything that would distract me from Val. I followed the trail of her finger. It led right to... “A spherical depression in the wall?” I said, scrunching my nose as I stared at it.

Noelle nodded. “Uh huh. And not one that looks natural, either. Look at what’s to the sides of it.”

I did as she asked. Something was etched into the walls next to the spherical depression. No, not something. Writing. Early Balinese writing. It wasn’t anything I could decipher, so I turned to Val, trying to look and act all business. He wasn’t going to have the pleasure of watching me squirm. Not right now, at least. Later, though...

“Can you translate it?” I asked. “The writing, I mean.”

Val frowned and squinted at the marks on the walls. “Maybe. This doesn’t look like a more modern dialect, but that shouldn’t matter too much.”

He took a few steps toward the wall, frowning all the while. “It’s a puzzle, of some sort,” he said finally. “We’re supposed to put something in the hole in the wall to unlock the door. Though what that something is supposed to be isn’t that clear.”

I looked at the depression again. It was an almost perfect semicircle about a foot across. “Some sort of ball, I guess?” I offered. “Though I’m sure it must be a very specific ball. I doubt we could stuff a beach ball in there or something.”

Noelle laughed. Her laugh was slightly nasal. I realized then that I didn't think I'd ever really listened to her laugh before. I liked it. "Not hardly," she said. "I'm sure it needs a very specific key."

"But where would we get one from?" I gestured toward the rest of the room. "It's not like we found any balls in here to speak of."

"Valid point," Val admitted. "I guess we can fan out and look, though. But a ball that size should be pretty obvious."

Fair enough. I didn't have any great hopes of finding it, but I wasn't leaving here without at least doing a thorough search, first. We'd come all this way. I'd hate for it to be for nothing.

The three of us each took a section of the room and started searching for some sort of sphere that might fit into the recess in the wall. I begged Charly to separate from me and look as well, but he was having none of it. He'd "almost lost me once already today and that was one time too many," according to him. He hadn't even thrown in a nickname when he'd said it. I let it drop. At least he was no longer digging into my shoulder.

I spent probably half an hour hunting through the room for some kind of sphere in my section of the room, but all I could find were a couple of oddly shaped stones. The one currently in front of me had a smooth, rounded edge on two sides and a thin strip of stone in the middle, connecting the rounded bits. It was about a foot wide and didn't look the least bit natural, so I figured it might have something to do with the puzzle, even if it wasn't the complete answer.

Lifting the stone, I found it to be heavier than I would have expected. It was all I could do to keep it in my arms as I practically dragged it back over to the recess in the wall.

"A little help here?" I said, glaring at Charly.

He looked taken aback. "I'm not that strong, *mon cheri*," he huffed. But he flew down and grabbed onto one of the ends anyway, adding what little effort he could.

With the two of us working at it, it was a little easier to walk with the thing. We brought it over to the rounded hole, where Val and Noelle were waiting, holding similar stone pieces in their hands.

"Any idea what these are for?" I asked them as I approached.

Val shrugged. Noelle was the one that spoke. "Part of the puzzle, I'm guessing." She hefted her piece with remarkable ease and stuck one of the rounded edges into the recess. I wasn't the least bit jealous of her strength.

Nope. “This edge lines up pretty much directly with the curvature of the wall, and it’s the right size. There’s no way that’s a coincidence.”

I nodded. “Agreed. That still doesn’t tell me how it all fits together, though.”

Noelle sighed. “Yeah, that’s where we’re stuck, too. Even putting all three of these pieces together, it wouldn’t come close to filling up the hole in the wall.”

“Could we be missing more pieces?” I asked. It seemed like the obvious answer.

“Probably,” Noelle said. “It’s not like we’ve searched the whole room yet, and when we did, we’d been looking for a full sphere, so it’s probable we missed a few things, too.”

She had a point. Ugh. That meant more searching of the room. I was already cold enough down here. Why were Val and Noelle so unaffected by it? Lucky ducks.

“Well, let’s get to it, then,” I offered darkly.

Val and Noelle grunted, and we all got back to work, making our way around the room again. It took probably another hour, but by the time we were done, we must have had a dozen or so pieces of smooth stone that looked like they might fit into the puzzle somehow or other.

“So, now what?” I asked, gesturing toward the pile of pieces.

“Now we figure out how to make something useful out of all of this,” Val chimed in. He didn’t look any happier about that than I did.

A small part of me wanted to smack him for being a smart-ass, but I held back. It wouldn’t help anything at this juncture. “Anyone have an idea where to start, then?” I said instead.

“Maybe.” Charly flew into my field of view. “Just maybe.”

I was slightly taken aback. He’d shocked me with the sudden movement. I’d half wondered if he’d forgotten how to fly completely, what with his lack of movement today.

Okay, that was going a bit far. Was it just the cold and damp making me irritable, or was there something more to it? Either way, I hoped we’d be out of here soon.

I motioned for Charly to fly over to the stone pile. “Yes, cutie pie?” I asked him, watching him wince at the nickname. “You have an idea?”

Charly cleared his throat and pointed down at the stone pile. “As a matter of fact, I do, sweet cheeks,” he replied in a haughty tone.



I glared at him. He knew I hated that one. But I *had* called him a cutie pie, so I suppose fair is fair...

"These pieces by themselves might not look like much, but I saw something like it on the internet once a while, back before Misty could talk to me. Had to do something to fill the time when she and Brennan were... otherwise engaged."

My cheeks only burned slightly at the memory. It had been a while since I'd thought of Brennan that way at all. I hoped he was doing okay, wherever he was. I really did. I hadn't done right by him, and that was my fault. He deserved happiness.

"Go on," I told him, suddenly feeling glad that no one else could understand him, even if he was talking to everyone.

"Right." Charly continued. "Anyway, there's this ball puzzle on the InterTubes that's been all the rage the past couple years." He beamed at me. "And yours truly knows just how to solve it."

I smiled back at him and gave him a little scratch on his chin. "Would you be willing to show us the solution? There'll be some treats in it for you." I produced a ferret treat from my pocket as I spoke, holding it up for him to see.

Charly eyed the treat greedily, a tiny bit of drool dripping out of his mouth. "Is that... the extra beefy flavor?"

"The one and only."

He surged forward and snatched the treat out of my hand before I could retract it, munching on it happily. "Of course, my mistress. I'd only be too happy." He burped, then flew down toward two pieces that looked identical. "Start with these. Put them together like this."

With Charly's guidance and me translating for him, we instructed Val and Noelle on how to build the ball using the pieces at our disposal. I hoped we had all of them, but then, Charly hadn't said otherwise, so I figured it would all work out okay.

Soon, the ball started to take shape. It had started as just a couple of weirdly shaped stones, and it was slow going, but I could definitely tell that it was supposed to be a ball now. Just a couple more pieces to slot into place and...

"There," Val said, hefting the thing. He needed both hands to keep hold of it, a testament to the combined weight of the object. "That should do it."

All four of us stared at it. It was a sphere, all right. You could barely even tell where the seams in the stone were. If I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes to begin with, I would have assumed the thing had always been a sphere.

Remarkable.

"Now what?" Noelle asked, frowning at it. "We just put it in the hole or something?"

It was my turn to shrug. "Anyone have a better idea?" I looked around, but everyone shook their heads. Even Charly.

"Okay then," Val said. He took a few steps toward the recess in the wall and held the stone sphere up to it, trying to fit it in properly. It took a moment, and a little steadying from Noelle and I, but we managed to get it situated in the right spot.

A harsh clicking noise reverberated through the cavern as we finally slid the sphere into place. Then a rumbling occurred, both on the wall and underneath our feet. Something was happening. Something big.

We all took a step back, though I stayed in front of the wall right where the sphere was. It was starting to move on its own, twisting and turning. Finally, it stopped with another loud click.

The wall continued shaking. It started to part, right where the sphere was, coming apart slowly yet gracefully to reveal a passageway beyond it.

I couldn't make out much of the passage, only that there was something bright and orange behind it, lighting the way onward.

A small smile crept onto my face. We had found it. This was the way forward. The way to get the Mark. Or the anti-magic device. Either way, it would be a victory.

My shoulders tensed as I waited for the doorway to open fully. Half of the sphere somehow went with each side of the wall, even though that should have been impossible based on how we'd put it together. Magic could be weird like that.

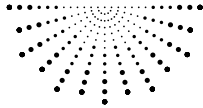
Come on, doorway. Just a little further. Then we can grab our prize.

The orange glow grew brighter. It was practically all I could see now.

Wait. It wasn't a glow. Not really. More of a flame. Fire.

A massive fireball erupted from in between the doors, and it was headed straight for my head.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“No!” Val cried. His body slammed into mine at the last second, forcing me away from the opening. The scent of burning clothes and flesh assaulted my nostrils as I was pushed hard into the ground. Dirt flew into my nose and mouth as I skidded across the cavern floor. But at least I was alive.

Something hard and heavy laid on top of me. No, not something. *Someone*. Val. He’d saved me, but at what cost?

“Val?” I asked, my voice hesitant. Something was wrong. He wasn’t moving. “Val?”

Still there was no response. His body was impossibly heavy. I tried to gently move him to the side so I could get up and assess the situation, but he had me pinned tight.

Wait. His chest. It wasn’t moving. Or at least, I didn’t think it was. Was he...?

No. No, it wasn’t possible. He couldn’t be... couldn’t be d... dea... Not now. Not after everything. Not like this.

“Help me!” I pleaded to Noelle and Charly.

They got to work immediately, pulling Val’s weight off of me and helping me get back to my feet. There was a little bit of blood on my palms and knees from the fall, but it was nothing. Just a trifle. Barely even enough to power a few spells.

Val, though, he was much worse. I frowned down at him. His back was charred and smoking. It was black. So much black. And the stench of death hung heavy in the air. Tentatively, I checked his chest once again for movement. It was much too still.

Noelle squeezed my shoulder. Hard. The pain kept me from losing it entirely.

Charly started to cry. "I'm sorry, mistress," he said while wiping his nose. He landed on my other shoulder and nuzzled up close against my neck.

My face paled. I felt even colder than before. How could this have happened? How could I have been so stupid as to have just stared down the doors while they were opening? After the temple in Olympia, I really should have known better. And now it had cost me dearly.

I looked down at Val again, unmoving. His body still had quite a bit of color to it, underneath the charred skin. Inching my way closer to his body, I knelt down and checked for a pulse. Looks could be deceiving sometimes. Maybe, just maybe there was a slim chance he'd be okay.

There. It was there, albeit only barely. A pulse. "Alive!" I shouted, pointing at Val. "He's alive! Help!"

Noelle sprang into action. We pulled Val to a calmer spot further back in the room, and I cradled him in my lap while Noelle started applying my poultice bandages to his wounds. It was slow going, since there was a lot of wounded Val to cover and not a ton of material to work with. Plus, I wasn't even sure if the poultices would be enough anyway. He had taken quite the hit. For me. He'd done it to save me.

"Hang in there, Val," I urged him as I gently stroked a non-burnt portion of his head. "Hang in there. I'm doing everything I can to save you."

I felt his pulse start to steady as his chest rose and fell in rapid succession, then calmed to a much more normal pace. It was working. We were bringing him back.

More. He needed more. I pulled on the life force of the blood on my palms and some of Val's blood as well to power a healing spell, channeling every ounce of energy I could into Val's injuries. I'd never attempted to heal a wound as grievous as this one before—not even the poison incident in Olympia came close to this one—but I would do my best. Nearly half of Val's body was covered in charred, smoking skin.

Even if it took all my strength, I would heal him. He'd saved me. It was the least I could do to repay him.

Pricking my finger with my lancet, I pulled on more of my magic. With every ounce of power I poured into his body, his skin smoked a little less, the charred husks retreated just a little bit more. But there was far more

injured Val than there was magic in my veins. Even with his blood and mine, I wasn't sure it would be enough.

More. I still needed more. Val was recovering, but we were deep in the cave, and he was our only way out of here. I needed to do more.

That's when I remembered it. Demon draughts. Val had used one before to pull me back from a serious injury. If he had another one on him, now, maybe it could do the same for him.

It felt weird and slightly scummy rifling through his pockets, but it was for his own good. I searched both of his remaining jean pockets, but all I could find was a wallet and a now-broken phone. No luck.

Easing back slightly and sighing, I stuffed my sore fingers into the pockets of Val's jacket. Gods, but it was still cold down here, and my fingers were feeling pretty stiff.

My right hand impacted something cold and smooth. Like glass.

Could it be? I wrapped my hand around the object and pulled, bringing it up into the light. A demon draught. He had one after all. And had placed it with me.

Part of me swooned once more. Even half-dead, he'd been thinking of me. And it was a good thing, too, because now I could use it to help him.

The bandages were mostly in place now, so I had Noelle help me turn him over, then I cradled his head in my lap and opened his mouth, pouring a little of the draught down his throat.

Val coughed, and most of the first sip came back up with it, though some of it made it down his gullet.

"Shh," I said, stroking his head again. "Drink up. I'm saving you here."

I poured more of the viscous liquid down his throat, and this time, he drank it. Soon, the entire thing had been emptied into his body. I watched as it went to work, erasing many of the burn marks and charred skin, replacing it with fresh, pink growth.

Before long, he was mostly back to his usual self. There were still some strong burn marks on his extremities and part of his back, but he looked a lot more like normal Val. I smiled down at him right as his eyes started to flutter open. "Hey there."

"Are you an angel?" he asked me.

I lightly nudged him on the cheek. "Nice try, but you know damn well I'm not."

Val tsked. “If this isn’t heaven, then how did I end up with my head in your lap?”

I giggled, making Noelle shake her head. But Val was back. And even slightly burnt, he was sexy.

Leaning down, I planted a kiss right on his big, full lips. Those had been spared from the fireball and seemed to be working properly. His taste was delicious, and slightly musky. I leaned further into it, easing my tongue into his mouth as his lips parted to let me in. Our tongues intermingled for a moment, sharing in the ecstasy before we parted.

“If this is how things go when you save my life,” Val said in a breathy tone, “you can do it anytime.”

“Oh, shove it.” I shoved his shoulder playfully, making him wince. “Sorry!”

Smooth move, Misty. Shove the injured guy. He was *so* going to make me pay for that later. And the great part about that was that I wanted him to.

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IT TOOK VAL PROBABLY A HALF AN HOUR BEFORE HE WAS WELL enough to walk without serious help. Noelle and I had spent that time searching the area beyond the door with the spherical lock.

There was nothing there. Well, nothing of interest, at least.

Oh, there was a little altar where it looked like something *should* have been, but there was nothing actually on it. Maybe at some point, the place had been something of importance. Maybe the Mark or the anti-magic device had been there once upon a time.

Now? Now it was an empty husk.

I couldn’t put the thought out of my mind that Kyra had made off with the Mark. She’d been here first, after all, so maybe she’d found it and left, leaving that little trap behind specifically for me. It would make sense. She’d tried to kill me a few times on her own, now, or at least severely maim me, and it hadn’t worked. Why not do it with a trap?

The sad thing was, it had almost worked, too.

But if Kyra had the Mark, why hadn’t she been using it? I was somehow positive she had not actually drawn from its powers. The way she’d talked about it, she had seemed all too hesitant to actually wield it.

Something about the whole scenario just wasn't adding up.

It didn't matter, though. That was all behind us. After a little more harried searching, we left the underground tunnel and headed back to Val's place on the island. He'd teleported us there so we didn't have to chance walking out and getting separated again.

Once we were back at his place, he'd pulled out another demon draught—his last one, apparently, and downed it as well. After that, he'd been right as rain and full of energy, so he'd suggested a night out for the two of us.

A date, so to speak, though he hadn't used that term. But it was a date all the same. We were at a nice, cozy little restaurant not too far from his place, in fact.

"Care for something to drink?" Val asked from across the table, beaming at me.

"Oh, whatever you recommend," I replied, batting my eyes at him. Butterflies were having a field day in my tummy, and I felt kind of cute and flirty. It had been a while since I'd been on an honest to goodness date that hadn't been a total disaster.

Noelle and Charly were back at Val's, munching on leftovers from the previous night, so the two of us were completely alone. We hadn't even managed that in the few times we'd gone out after my sister had gone missing. Charly, at the very, least had always been there on those rare occasions Val had taken me out, interrupting us at odd moments.

I'd made sure he stayed back this time, though. I'd threatened to tell everyone that nickname I'd come up for him that one time I'd come home drunk three years ago, after a disastrous date with Brennan. The one he really hated.

That had sobered him up *real* fast. Apparently, there was still one way I could get some alone time. I wasn't about to squander it.

Come to think of it, the last time Val and I had been truly alone had been in that little restaurant in Seattle near Mei's. *The Capital Grille*. That was when my sister had texted me about Val's untruthfulness.

My expression soured a little at the memory. I guess she'd had reason to be suspicious. Val had been lying to a lot of people for a while, apparently. Just not for any bad reasons.

"Something wrong?" Val asked, his expression suddenly worried.

"Hmm?" I looked up at him, only then realizing how terrible I must have looked. Shame on me for worrying him like that. Right after he'd

almost died, too.

I grinned a little too broadly until it was practically goofy. “Nothing,” I lied. “Just happy to be here with you.”

Val eyed me curiously. He arched an eyebrow. “If you say so. We can go somewhere else if you like, or—”

“No!” I blurted out feeling foolish as I did so. “No,” I repeated in a more even tone. “It’s not that. I’m sure this place is lovely.”

Gods, but I was acting like an idiot. What was I, sixteen? Ugh. Everything was coming out all wrong. I felt a flash of heat in my cheeks, and I fanned myself off with a hand. “Is it hot in here or is it just you?” I said weakly.

Really, Misty? Really? Make it more awkward, why don’t you.

The waiter came by a moment later, and Val gave him our drink orders, along with ordering an appetizer. He did it in the waiter’s native language, so I didn’t catch most of it, but I was pretty sure it had something to do with cheese.

Thinking about food made my mouth water. I hadn’t realized I was so hungry. My tummy growled a bit, betraying me.

Val chuckled. “Let’s hope they come back quick with that appetizer, huh?”

I gave off a nervous laugh. “Yeah. Let’s hope.”

We spent several seconds staring at each other in silence after that, neither of us really sure what to say to the other. I wanted him badly, and I was pretty sure he wanted me, too, but somehow nothing on this little date of ours was going as well as I’d hoped. Almost like we’d been cursed or something.

Not that that made any sense, either. Practically no one knew we were even here, and there was no way Kyra would waste magic on a curse like that, even if she could manage it.

Nah, it was just stupid nerves getting the best of me.

Our drinks came a second later. Something whitish in a wine glass. I downed half of it before I’d even realized it, barely even tasting it. Some sort of zinfandel, maybe? I had no idea.

“Glad you like it,” Val said, nodding toward my half-empty glass.

I snorted and put the glass down, suddenly feeling embarrassed. “Sorry. Guess I was really thirsty.”



“Let’s just hope you’re still level-headed enough for dessert,” Val offered with a wink.

“Dessert?” Heat rose up in my core at his sultry gaze. In that moment, I desperately wanted to skip the rest of this dinner and go straight to whatever he had planned for “dessert.”

But my stomach growled again, betraying me once more. “Damn it, stomach!” I groaned at it. “Enough of that!”

Val laughed again. It was somehow still sexy. If that were even possible. “Don’t worry, I have plenty of sustenance planned for you, too, little one.” He reached forward, across the table, and patted my tummy gently.

His touch was electrifying, and I felt heat rise up to meet him once more. I wanted him so badly I could practically taste it.

Val leaned over the table, his lips coming toward mine. I felt myself rise, my own lips inching forward to meet his. Oh, how delicious his lips looked. I remembered how they’d tasted, just a few short hours ago, and wanted more of it. A lot more.

A plate thunked down on our table not a second later, spoiling the moment.

“Enjoy,” the waiter said in a broken accent.

“Huh,” Val added, backing away and sitting back down in his chair. “That was...”

“Bad timing?” I offered. He nodded. “Yeah, I know.” I stared down at the dish in front of me. “So what’s this, then?”

Val perked up once more. “A regional dish that most people don’t know about. A lot of Balinese people are vegetarian or vegan, so it’s kind of fallen out of fashion. It’s sort of a cheese platter.” He pointed at a white hunk with black spots running through it. “That bit is a peppered goat cheese. Very smooth. Very tasty.”

I grabbed a cracker and broke off a piece of the cheese. The plate hadn’t come with any silverware, so I had to use my hands. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Go ahead, try it yourself. I’ll wait to see if you like it first.”

How very generous of him. I lifted the cracker to my lips and took a hesitant bite. The cheese smelled good enough, but I’d never really been a big fan of goat cheese. I’d tried it before on a couple of occasions and always found it a bit grainy.

This, on the other hand, was lacking nothing. Heavy peppery notes met with a smooth, silky texture from the cheese and just a little crunch and bite

from the cracker. It was heaven. I ate the whole cracker without even thinking.

“Well?” Val asked, staring at me expectantly.

“Mmm,” I practically moaned. “Is everything on this island just so damn delicious?”

Val’s eyes grazed down toward my core for a half second before returning to my face. “Hope so.”

The implication sent my senses reeling as I melted just a little bit more. Just wait a little bit longer, Misty. Think about it this way. A full tummy will give you plenty of energy to...

I found myself gazing at Val’s crotch and quickly pulled my gaze away, shielding my eyes with my hand. Had I really just done that? Gods, but I was an idiot.

“It’s okay,” Val insisted, waving a hand dismissively. “I don’t mind. Just hope you like it as much when the clothes are off.”

Another memory came at me then, this one much more pleasant. One of Val naked, after a shower. His package had been... impressive, to say the least.

“Let’s just order another course, shall we?” I offered weakly. In reality, there was nothing I wanted less than that right now.

Val nodded. “Of course.” He motioned to the waiter, who showed up quickly. He whispered several things into the waiter’s ear, and the man was off like a cheetah, running toward the kitchen.

I shot Val a curious glare. “What did you offer that guy?”

The corners of Val’s lips curled up in a devilish grin. “You’ll see soon enough.”

I couldn’t shake the thought that Val was up to no good, but I had amazing food in front of me, and the promise of more on the way, so I let it go and took another few bites of the goat cheese. It really was fantastic.

All around us, the other patrons got up to leave, one at a time. Some of them even left their meals half-eaten, like they’d completely forgotten about them.

“What did you do?”

Val shushed me. “Don’t worry about it. I didn’t do anything illegal.”

The way he said it made me think it was the farthest thing from the truth. “Really?” I shot him a bit of a glare. “Why do I not believe you?”

He shrugged. “No idea. I’m half-demon, remember? Can’t lie for the life of me.”

I barked out a laugh. “Now that’s rich. You have more secrets than anyone I’ve ever met.”

Val rocked backward in his chair, putting his hands behind his head. “Maybe, but I think you’ll like this one.”

Not a moment later, a man playing what I thought was a violin came in, slowly circling our table as he played his tune. I didn’t recognize it—It was something classical. But the tune was catchy enough, I supposed.

I smiled at Val. “That supposed to impress me?”

Val clapped and shouted something at the violinist that I didn’t catch. He changed his tune up a moment later. *More than Words* by Extreme. A classic nineties love song.

“Okay,” I said, leaning forward and resting my head on my hands, “I guess I’m a little impressed.”

“Just a little?” Val huffed. “You have no idea how hard it is to find a violinist in Bali. Let alone one that knows nineties songs. They’re not exactly popular.”

“For shame.”

My insides melted just a little bit more. He must have been planning this for some time, right? Had to be. There was no way someone could pull this off last minute. But where had he found the time to do so? Val could be so mysterious sometimes.

And sexy. Don’t forget the sexy.

Two more platters arrived shortly thereafter, while we were being serenaded by another of my favorite songs. One of the few that didn’t remind me of... Nope. Not gonna think about that. Not now, with such amazing eye candy in front of me.

I glanced down at the platters. One of them looked like suckling pig. Another local delicacy, I presumed. The other was full of slabs of... “Beef?” I said, my mouth watering.

“Only the best for my date,” Val insisted.

I couldn’t help myself. I tore into the roast with reckless abandon, taking several large gulps of the stuff. Gods, but it was amazing. The flavor was on point. For people that didn’t cook beef very often, they sure seemed to know how to do it.

Val watched me eat with a curious expression on his face. “Enjoying yourself?” he asked after a moment.

I nodded. “Very much so.”

He leaned forward just a little. “Did I happen to mention that this place is also a hotel?” he asked just a little too suggestively.

“Is it now?” I replied, my interest definitely piqued.

Val nodded. “It is. And it just so happens that I booked us the best suite in the place.”

“Really?” Now *there* was a suggestion I could get behind.

All at once, Val was standing, staring down at me, his hand extended. “Shall we?” He looked at all the food. “I can have this all wrapped up and brought up later if you want. *Much* later.”

Well, how was a girl supposed to turn down an offer like that? I got up, placing my napkin gently on the table after wiping my lips and accepted the hand. “Yes, I suppose we shall.”

Val led me up a set of steps I hadn’t seen before toward a room on the top level. He fumbled with the keys for only half a second before opening the door and guiding me in.

I didn’t even catch sight of the room’s interior, only that there was a giant bed along one wall, complete with satin sheets.

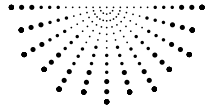
Val quietly shut the door behind us, and I led him over to the bed. I sat on the edge, feeling up his shirt, working it off his body as he did the same to mine.

I brought my lips up to his and kissed him hard, our lips hungering, searching for each other. Before I could even catch my breath, we’d gotten each other’s clothes fully off and we were both naked. I laid on the bed, seductively, hips moving ever so slightly, and let him come the rest of the way to me.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” Val whispered in my ear. His package rubbed up against the inside of my thigh, sending a jolt of pleasure up through my core.

I leaned my head forward until my lips were against the side of his head, pulling him in closer. “Not nearly as much as I am.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



“M mm,” I said as I woke up, my eyes fluttering open. I reached over to caress Val’s bare chest.

Val. In bed. With me. I could still hardly believe it had happened. And yet, it had. Twice, as a matter of fact. It was a wonder either of us got any sleep last night.

Alas, exhaustion, coupled with the fact that we were both recovering from various injuries, had finally done us both in sometime around midnight.

What time was it now, I wondered? A small beam of light was filtering through the curtains into the room, illuminating our surroundings. Now that it was morning and I was... sated, at least for the moment, I was able to make out the room in all its glorious detail.

The bed took up the majority of the main room, but there was a long, white, plush couch along the far wall next to a flat screen TV. I almost felt bad for the TV. Normally, it’d be a main feature for someone in a room like this. It wouldn’t get much use from us, though. Not if we played our cards right.

A small hallway led to another room that had a small table and a couple of chairs sticking out, and of course a bathroom that, if I was seeing things correctly, had one of the largest tubs I’d ever laid eyes on. A small balcony overlooking the town—the one where the light was filtering in from outside—rounded out the room.

Said balcony was going to have to wait for a bit before I explored it further. I wasn’t about to go out there without any clothes on, and I wasn’t

sure if I wanted to put them on again before breakfast. I had... other things on my mind. Things Val would need to wake up for.

I thought about shaking him, but he looked so peaceful laying there, all cuddled up under the blanket, that I let him be for a moment while I went to the bathroom and started up a pot of coffee. We were both going to need our energy this morning. Might as well start the morning off right.

A few moments later, cup in hand, I strode back into the bedroom to see Val stirring. He stuck his hand out half-mindlessly toward where I'd been laying the night prior and frowned. "Hmm?"

I laid my free hand on top of his chest, letting it get lost in the maze of hair there. "Hey, you," I said, smiling down at him.

Val's eyes opened, settling firmly on my own chest, and a big smile played across his lips. "I could get used to waking up like this, you know."

It was only then that I realized I hadn't bothered to cover up at all. Not even in a robe or a bed sheet. He'd gotten the full view. Of course, I supposed he'd seen it all last night, so it wasn't that big of a deal. More than just seen it, if I was being honest. I could still almost feel his tender touch on my...

I giggled, smiling back at him. "Like what you see, do you?" I slid my hand under the blankets, forcing them downward until he was similarly out in the open. I eyed his package hungrily. I guess it was true what they said about mornings and men. "Hoping for another round, are we?"

Val practically growled with hunger. He pulled me forward, and I landed on the bed with a phwump, almost spilling my coffee. "Am I ever."

I leaned down and kissed him on his lips, tasting his sweet manliness and reveling in it. It was better than the coffee, even.

"Mmm." Val inhaled deeply. "Is that fresh coffee?"

Frowning at him, I said, "Which one are you more excited for?"

"Do I have to choose?"

I gave him a gentle shove back down onto the bed and kissed him again. "Maybe," I admitted playfully.

"Coffee it is, then," Val fired back. "Then you. That way I'll have the energy to treat you right."

Heh. Hard to argue with that. I handed him my cup of coffee, which he accepted gratefully, and went to go grab another one for me. Thankfully, the pot had finished brewing by that point, and there was plenty available.

I liked my coffee black, with no frills, so I just poured it and took a sip, the steaming liquid burning my throat as it slid down it. Briefly, I wondered how Val liked his coffee. I'd have to ask him. He'd accepted the first cup without asking for any changes, but that was probably just him being nice to me.

If things were going to continue like this—and I wanted them to—I would need to figure out his coffee order. There were few things we Washingtonians took more seriously than our coffee orders. The big mega coffee company based there got that part right, at least.

It was crazy, really, how things could work out. Just a few months ago, we'd been about as hostile as you could get with each other while still working together. And now? Now I found myself wanting to find little ways to make him happy. I could hardly believe it. My relationship with Brennan had been many things, but it had never been quite like this.

At the very least, he'd never been able to... please me in the ways that Val had last night. Not as effectively, at least. It was really something.

I found a bathrobe hanging in the bathroom and slipped into it before I started back toward the bedroom. Toward Val. I decided it would be fun to make him work for it a little bit before we just dove right into the fun stuff again. Maybe I'd make him untie the bathrobe with his teeth...

A rumble hit the floor of the hotel, shaking everything and making me drop my coffee cup. It splattered onto the ground, sending brown liquid and white chunks of ceramic flying everywhere.

"Damn," I muttered. I held onto the counter to steady myself. Whatever was going on, it was something major.

As a resident of Tacoma, I'd always been warned about earthquakes. One of these days, a massive earthquake was going to come through and wipe out the entire city of Seattle. We'd all been told a million times. Supposedly, we were way overdue.

Of course, I never imagined it would actually happen, so I never paid that much attention to all the warnings and drills.

Was that what I was experiencing now? An earthquake? Could an island this small even have an earthquake?

"Val?" I called to the other room, making sure he was okay. He'd been on the bed when I'd left him, which should have been plenty safe, but still.

"Misty?" he called back, sounding hesitant. "Do you feel that?"

The shaking stopped a second later, and I breathed a big sigh of relief. “Yeah, I felt it. Created a huge mess, too.” Stupid quake. Now there was barely enough coffee in the pot to fill another cup. At this rate, I’d have to brew another pot soon.

“Don’t worry about it,” Val insisted. “They’ve got a great maid crew. They’ll come take care of it.” He must have heard my cup shatter earlier.

I poured the last dregs of coffee into my new cup and headed into the bedroom, accentuating my hips as I walked to make myself look as sultry as humanly possible. “Oh, is that right?” I said, giggling. “Should I pretend to be a French maid for you, then?” I channeled Sevin, putting on my best fake French accent. “What can I do for you, Mr. Val? Can I clean your *hon hon hon*?”

Val started laughing too. That’s when the room shook again.

Once more, I dropped my mug, letting it smash into the floor. Val spilled his coffee, too, making a giant mess on the bed. Well, there went that plan...

“Another quake?” I whined as the shaking came to a stop.

“Quake?” Val wrinkled his nose. “Misty, I don’t think that was an earthquake.”

“What was it, then?”

His eyes trailed over to the balcony. “Be right back.” He darted out of bed and over toward the curtains, pulling them wide open and stepping out.

“Hey, wait a minute! You’re naked! Don’t you want some clothes, first?”

Val didn’t answer, so I followed after him, pulling the robe a little tighter around me to make sure I wasn’t showing off anything to whoever might be out there. Val seeing me naked was one thing, but a random villager? Nope, not going to happen.

“Honey?” I hesitated at the edge of the balcony. Val was out there, studying something in the distance. I stepped out onto the ledge and put my hand gently on his shoulder. “Everything okay?”

Val shook his head. “See that?” he said, pointing at a rather large human strolling down the street.

“See what?”

No, wait. That wasn’t a human. It was similar, but much too big, and he had a kind of stout dog face instead of a normal one. He was carrying a rather large club that was probably as big as I was in his hands. Every so



often, he'd slam the club into the ground, causing everything to shake like it had earlier.

And the worst part was, he was headed right this way.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Ogre," Val told me. He pulled on his face. "We have an ogre heading right for the middle of downtown." He turned to look me right in the eye. "We have to stop it before it destroys everything."

Well, damn. Guess we really would have to put sex on hold a bit longer.

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NOT FIVE MINUTES LATER, WE WERE BOTH DRESSED AND DOWNSTAIRS in the lobby of the hotel, heading out in the last direction we'd seen the ogre heading. I was wearing the same clothes from last night. Val had promised to take me shopping for more clothes today—a promise I still intended to hold him to, assuming we made it out of this okay—but for now, it was yesterday's rags.

"Where did it go?" I asked, looking around. The ground shook again, a little harder than the last time.

"This way," Val said confidently.

I followed his lead, and we both bounded down the street. As we traveled, I pricked my finger with my lancet device, calling on my magic to come to my aid. It responded to my call right away, filling me with hope. Gods, I loved being in control of my magic.

A loud growling noise from off to our left beckoned us onward, followed by an ear-splitting scream of terror. Seemed the ogre had found its first victim.

We sped down the street, running the opposite way from everyone else. It was tough going, because we were running into so many people that were trying to escape the ogre's wrath that there wasn't much room. I just hoped we'd get there in time before anyone died.

Too late. That same scream came again, breaking through the noise of the escaping villagers. It was closely followed by the stench of death. I'd been around enough of it lately that it was unmistakable.

At least that meant we were close.

The path cleared up before us not two seconds later as the last of the fleeing civilians ran off, revealing a grisly scene in front of us. Three bodies lay at the feet of the rampaging ogre. An elderly man, and what I assumed were two of his kids, all lying in a pool of their own blood. That same blood was smeared across the ogre's massive club, leaving no mystery as to who had killed them.

"Stop!" I yelled at the ogre foolishly.

It turned its head, glaring at me with two dark, beady eyes. The thing's eyes were deep pools of inky blackness that seemed to suck in all the light around them. It was all I could do just to stare into them for a moment, dumbfounded, while the creature focused on me and started its approach.

He—I felt like the ogre was a he, though I couldn't say why—let out a wail. The sound was such that I had to cover my ears to keep them from bleeding. I'd seen and heard a lot of strange creatures in my day, but this one had them all beat.

Val stepped out in front of me, putting his whole body in between me and the ogre. He put out his hand to keep me from approaching and stared down the beast. "Stand down," he ordered with more bravado than I felt in that moment.

The ogre huffed. It lurched forward, lumbering toward us.

"Run," Val commanded, sparing me a half a glance. When I didn't respond, he shoved me backward. "Run!" he repeated.

This time, I took his advice. I ran, keeping my eye on Val and the ogre all the while. I wasn't going to let him sacrifice himself on my behalf again. Especially not so soon.

Val and I both ran in the direction the villagers had gone previously. They were all far ahead of us now, so it was easy going. The ogre leapt after us, catching up quickly.

I could tell things weren't going well. At this pace, the ogre would reach us in a matter of seconds. Then what? We'd be sitting ducks.

Summoning my magic, I pushed out with a short wall of air, toward the creature's legs. The air surged forward, slamming into the ogre's feet. It let out another wail as it tumbled forward, careening into a nearby building and crashing through its roof.

Oops. There went someone's livelihood. Hopefully they had insurance.

It was enough, though. It stalled the ogre for a few moments while it got back up to its feet and kept after us. I just had to hope it had bought us

enough time.

Ugh. Where was Noelle when I needed her? She would have shot the thing a dozen times by now. Not that I know if that would have done any good or not, but at least it would have been something. Next time, I'd make sure Noelle and Charly were staying right next to us so they'd be ready at a moment's notice.

Well, okay. Maybe not *right* next to us. Val could get a little loud, and I hadn't exactly been quiet last night, either. I didn't really need either of them hearing that.

But thoughts like that could wait until we were safe. For now, I had to get out of here.

"This way!" Val shouted, pointing down the pathway to our right.

I headed in that direction, all the while watching the ogre warily with one eye. It was back on its feet now, howling and bounding after us. If I'd thought it had been angry before, that was nothing compared to how it was acting now.

"Do you have a plan?" I asked Val as we ran.

He shrugged. "Maybe? I've never really faced an ogre before. They're usually such docile creatures."

Docile? Really. This one was anything but. It was like hell incarnate. It had already killed three people, and likely would have added dozens more by now if I hadn't gotten its attention.

I pricked my finger again, letting more blood flow. Thankfully, I was still in fairly decent shape, so I wasn't running out of steam yet, but the ogre was still a lot faster than us.

A loud roar shattered my hearing, making my ears ring as the ogre rounded on us. I sent another short wall of air hurtling toward it, throwing in a lightning bolt for good measure.

The beast stumbled again and howled as the lightning singed its skin, but it got back up quickly enough and kept coming. It seemed the thing was unstoppable.

"Whatever your plan is," I told Val, "it'd better be happening soon."

"It is," he assured me. Not that I felt very reassured.

We turned another corner, and that's when I saw it. A cliff. We were maybe twenty feet away from a giant cliff overlooking the ocean. As we neared the edge, I could spot some sharp rocks near the bottom.

Val put his hands on my shoulders. "Go stand over there," he ordered. "I'll lure the thing to me and duck out of the way at the last second, sending it over the cliff. Then you hit it with more lightning."

"You're going to lure it?" I balked. "What if it attacks you?"

Val shrugged again. "Probably won't happen."

"No," I insisted. "Not going to happen." I put my foot down literally.

Val shot me a pained look. Then he gave me a hard shove, sending me sprawling out of the way.

"No fair!" I shouted as my face hit the dirt. But it was too late to change things. The ogre was already practically on top of us.

The great beast swung his club in a mighty arc. It sailed right through the building to Val's right like it wasn't even there, breaking through wood and stone and continuing its arc straight for Val's head.

At the last second, he ducked out of the way, sending a ball of demon fire into the giant's groin.

The ogre howled once more, grabbing its crotch with both hands, and letting its massive club slam into the ground with a loud thud. The ground shook again as Val struggled to get around the creature while it spasmed and flailed about. For a moment, I thought Val might get hit by one of the ogre's elbows and end up flying off the cliff instead, but he deftly dodged the beast's movements, remaining unscathed.

Not two seconds later, Val was in position. He sent another blast of demon fire into the ogre's behind. The giant clutched at his bottom, which put them off balance. It stumbled forward as it grappled with both impact points, hurtling over the edge of the cliff just like Val had hoped. The ogre let out a wail that shook the ground again as it struck the waves below with a loud crash.

"Now!" Val ordered.

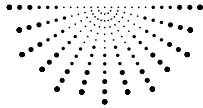
Summoning as much magic as I dared, I poured it into the clouds, sending bolt after bolt of jagged lightning into the creature. The ogre shook and spasmed a few times, its huge mouth opening wide to let out a scream, only for it to suck in a bunch of water instead.

Coughing and wailing, the beast sunk beneath the choppy waves as I hit it with one last bolt of super-charged lightning. The water churned for several moments as the beast struggled to stay afloat, then finally, it all went still.

I waited for several moments, but the creature didn't resurface.

We had won. The ogre was dead.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



“An ogre?” Noelle said.

It was a little bit later on the same day, and we were back at Val’s place, filling everyone in on the day’s happenings.

As luck would have it, the ogre had managed to smash through the dress shop Val had been planning to take me to when I had made it stumble, so that particular outing was just going to have to wait a bit. Sometimes I really hated my life.

“Yep, an ogre. Just one, thankfully. There must be dozens on the island,” Val replied. “I know. I was shocked, too, but there you have it.”

“Huh.” Noelle scrunched her nose. “They’re usually such docile creatures. I’ve never seen one go on a rampage before.”

“That’s what I said,” Val agreed.

So Noelle knew about ogres, too? Was I the only one that had never seen one before? I had half a mind to ask Charly if he knew about them as well, but he’d probably just say he did, and then I’d really feel like the odd man out. I left it alone.

“Do you know where it came from?” Noelle asked.

Val shook his head. “No idea. Unfortunately, by the time we saw him, he was already well into the town. No way to track which direction he came from.”

How did Val know it was a male ogre? I mean, I hadn’t exactly checked his pants, but Val hadn’t, either. Still, he’d known that tidbit. Maybe he was assuming, like I had. I’d have to ask him about it later.

“Not even a little?” Noelle pressed.

Val's expression soured. "If I could tell you, I would. Sorry, but we were a little preoccupied when the attack came."

"You were, huh?" Noelle shot me a suggestive glance. "Oh, I bet you were."

I rolled my eyes. "It wasn't like that." I mean, it *was* like that, but I found myself not wanting to admit that to Noelle at this moment. I felt like it would cheapen things somehow.

"Uh huh." Noelle gave me a wink. "Sure it wasn't."

"Anyway," I said, groaning slightly, "we need to stop these ogres from going crazy before any more of them decide to attack the town. I don't want to kill more of them if we can avoid it."

Didn't want to face them at all, really. That thing had been practically impervious to my magic until it had hit the water. My first lightning bolt had done all of nothing, and while the air bursts had slowed it for a moment, even those had been less effective than I'd hoped. Facing another being like that? I shuddered. Not my idea of a good time.

Plus, if they really were docile most of the time, I didn't want to hurt them unnecessarily.

"We need to find the Mark, then," Val surmised.

I cocked my head to the side. "How do you figure?"

Val shrugged. "Easy. Batara Kala was the master of the ogres back when he was alive and active. If the ogres are starting to act out like this, it must be the work of the Mark. Find it and control it, and it'll bring the ogres back in line."

"Be a lot easier to do that if you'd seen what direction the ogre had come from," Noelle quipped.

"Hey!" Charly chimed in. "Cut them a break. I'm sure they did the best they could."

"What Charly said," I agreed, even though no one else could understand him. Noelle and Val shot me dirty looks. "Umm... basically he just agreed to cut us all some slack. Arguing amongst ourselves isn't going to do any of us any good."

"On that, I can agree," Noelle said at last. She sighed. "Are you sure you don't have even a slight idea as to where the ogre might have come from?"

Val rubbed his chin. "Perhaps. When we first spotted him, he'd been on the southern edge of the village. Not much to go on, I know, but it's all I

have at the moment.”

“South, huh?” Val nodded and Noelle rubbed her chin. “I might have an idea, then. There’s another cave network on the southern tip of the island, hidden underneath an old ruin. The Garuda Wisnu Kencana park has ruins underneath it. It’s possible the ogres have made their home there. And the Mark as well.”

Charging into the ogres’ home? Lovely. That sounded like a grand idea. Not.

“Garuda?” I said, lingering on the name.

Noelle nodded. “Yep. The giant bird of legend. There’s a statue of him there.” She put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’m ninety-nine percent sure it won’t come alive and attack us.”

Only ninety? For some reason, I didn’t much like those odds...

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WE WERE HERE. GARUDA WHATEVER PARK. THE PLACE WAS CRAWLING with tourists of all kinds, and large stone monuments. Did none of them know there were killer ogres underneath their feet? How nice it must have been to be one of them, without a care in the world, unaware of the dangers that lurked just a stone’s throw away.

Sometimes, I wished I could be one of them again, just for a moment. Let myself get lost in the beauty of the ancient civilizations around me. That would be something.

But here we were, trying to avert another disaster instead. There’d been a few too many of those in the past few months. Fingers crossed this wouldn’t turn into another one.

“So, where do we start?” I asked, looking at Noelle. She seemed to know more about this place than any of us.

She pointed toward the giant statue at the end of the park. “Over there. The caves are right behind that statue of Garuda.”

I took in the statue in all its glory. It looked kind of like a giant cartoon bird, with a larger-than-life beak. Not nearly as lifelike as I would have thought, and thankfully, not moving in the slightest. Maybe my worries had been all for naught. Still, it was pretty cool to look at, and it looked



relatively new, which according to my quick Google search was because it wasn't really all that old.

The rest of the park was much older, of course, but that statue had only been added in the last couple of decades.

We headed down the pathway, past several crumbling stone walls covered in ancient markings, toward the statue in question. The light struck it at an odd angle, and I swore for a few moments that it was moving, but of course it was just a trick of the eyes.

Don't get me wrong. I really wouldn't have been shocked if it had turned alive right then and there and tried to eat us, or several of the tourists, but nothing of the sort happened. It was just a statue, after all.

A freaky statue, but just a statue.

Directly behind the statue was a small cliff with a path down one side that led to a small beach. I could see from the top of the cliff that a small cave entrance jutted out just underneath it. The area was cordoned off with ropes and such to keep people out. Ropes and warnings we, of course, deftly ignored.

"Want to scout out the area for us?" I asked Charly, who was clinging onto my shoulder again.

"Want to?" Charly said, suppressing a shudder. "I will for you, mistress, but I don't really *want* to."

I rolled my eyes and gave him a light shove. "Just get down there, already."

While he flew off, we got to work making our way down the cliff. I supposed Val could have just teleported us to the bottom, but I didn't want any of us using up our magic reserves yet, just in case.

The cliff proved to be only a minor obstacle, anyway. Soon enough, we were on the small, sandy beach, facing the cave entrance.

"Anything of note?" I asked Charly.

He shook his head. "Nothing much, pudding pop. Looks like a normal cave to me. At least, as far in as I dared to go in without you."

I stroked his fur gently as he landed back on my shoulder. "Good familiar. There might be more treats in it for you if you keep this up." He purred. "Let's head into the hole," I told the others.

"Don't need to ask me twice," Val said with a suggestive wink.

My cheeks flared crimson, but I didn't dignify that with a response. Somehow, I'd fallen for that trap twice in two days...

Without another word, the four of us headed into the cavern proper.

Darkness greeted us almost immediately. There should have been a little light filtering in from the outside, illuminating the first thirty or so feet of the cave, but it went full dark on us after only ten feet.

I scowled at the darkness. Something about it didn't feel quite right, like it was there against its will or something.

My shoulders tensed. Darkness. Shadows. Kyra could be close. I'd have to stay on guard.

Val summoned forth a light ball and sent it out in front of us. It cast away the shadows for about half the length it normally would, but that was it. Even it seemed to be having a hard time giving us much-needed brightness.

"Hmm," Val uttered, rubbing his chin, "that's odd."

It was, at that. Kyra's shadows had been chased away easily enough when I'd cast a light spell. If this was her doing, Val's light orb should have had the same effect. This darkness was too thick and stubborn to be hers.

"What do you think is causing it?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "The Mark, probably. We must be close to it. Batara Kala was the master of darkness and the ogres, in addition to the Balinese underworld."

"Well, at least we're on the right track, then."

"Just be careful, everyone," Noelle chimed in. Her hand slid to the pistol she always carried at her hip. "If something like an ogre does come out to attack us, we won't have a lot of time to defend ourselves before they'll be on top of us."

Good point. Not that I really needed the warning. I decided to prick myself and pull up a little of my own magic just in case, though. She was right. Our line of sight was severely limited here. An ogre could literally leap out of the shadows at any time, and we'd be none the wiser.

We trudged onward. The darkness remained stubborn all around us, closing in on us as we kept going, making it impossible to see where we'd been any more than we could see what was in front of us. It was starting to make my skin crawl just a little bit. I thought I would have been used to it after the number of cramped, dark places I'd been in recently, but this was just a little too extra.

Up ahead, the walls gave way slightly. I could tell because I could no longer see the edges of them.

Fantastic. Now instead of stumbling along a dark corridor, we were stumbling in a potentially massive dark room. So much better.

“Ow,” Val muttered a second later. I spun so I was facing him to see what it was. He was facing a stone column and had apparently slammed into it somehow.

Glancing at the column, it was smooth, and slightly bigger at the top and bottom, like a stalactite and a stalagmite had grown and met in the middle. In fact, right there in the very center was what looked like a little disk.

“Odd,” I said aloud, staring at it. “That doesn’t look like it belongs there.”

“Agreed,” Noelle said. She fingered it lightly, and it moved underneath her touch. She backed away quickly, yelping a tiny bit. “Sorry. Probably shouldn’t touch things like that.”

“No, it’s okay,” I insisted. “It appears to be mobile enough. Maybe it’s part of another puzzle or something.”

“Maybe. Still, we should probably leave it alone for now.”

I did as she requested, and we kept moving forward. It wasn’t long until we came across another smooth column much like the first one. Only this one, instead of having a small disk in the middle, had a small, diamond-shaped crystal. The crystal was giving off a tiny amount of light. Just enough to illuminate maybe ten to twelve feet in any direction. Not much more than our light ball, to be honest.

Still, somehow, the light seemed to cut through the darkness around us in ways that our own magical devices just could not. It was fascinating to say the least.

“What do you think it’s there for?” Val asked.

Noelle and I both shrugged.

“Probably another part of a puzzle, mistress,” Charly chimed in. “A light puzzle, maybe?”

I nodded appreciatively. “Could be.”

“What did your little friend say?” Noelle asked.

“He said there could be a light puzzle at play here. It would make sense, given we have a light source to play around with.” I pointed at the glittering crystal.

Noelle nodded. “Smart little ferret,” she said, patting him on the head. He leaned into it, purring loudly. “I like how you think, but how do we

activate it?”

We all thought in silence for a moment. I was the first one to talk. “Maybe it has something to do with the little disk we found earlier? Maybe they’re connected?”

“Of course!” Val exclaimed. “I’ve seen puzzles like this before in video games. Never expected I’d find one in real life, though.” He motioned for us to follow him.

Video games, huh? I hadn’t taken Val for the type. I supposed we all needed hobbies, though. I hadn’t played anything in a while, though I’d been a massive Zelda fan back in the day before I ran my tea shop.

With all my free time now, maybe I’d have to get back into it. Of course, gaming wasn’t all that cheap of a hobby, and I had no real money, so there was that...

We made our way back to the original pillar we’d found that Val had smacked into. It turned out it was maybe only fifteen feet away from the crystal.

“Here,” Val said, pointing to the spinning disk. “I’m willing to bet this will reflect the light from the crystal if we point it in the right direction.” As he spoke, he spun the disk slowly in a clockwise direction.

At first, it looked like nothing was going to happen, but then a beam of focused light appeared, jumping from the crystal to the little disk and illuminating it as well. Light filled the immediate area, pushing away the shadows and revealing more of the room.

The place was massive, though. I still couldn’t make out the sides of the chamber, although I could see a couple more pillars sticking out in various places, each with their own little spinning disk in the middle of them.

“See?” Val said. “Easy peasy.” He pointed at the next closest column. “Now all we need to do is line up all the disks at the right angles and the light should bounce from one to the other until—”

“Until we find the treasure at the end,” Noelle finished for him.

He nodded. “Right. So let’s get to it.”

We went over to the next column and repeated the ritual from before, slowly spinning the disk in a clockwise fashion. Soon enough, it caught the light from the previous column, a small, concentrated beam shooting out and connecting the two spots. All at once, more of the room became visible. I could see one of the edges of the place, now. It was smooth, like it had

been carved purposefully. And there were markings all along the wall. Some sort of ancient writing or symbols of some type.

This wasn't a cavern so much as it appeared to be some sort of ancient temple.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on edge. I readied myself for another trap. I was positive there'd be one somewhere in here.

In spite of my unease, lighting up the rest of the pillars went by practically without a hitch. There were perhaps a dozen of them in all, and it was slow going, because we had to be incredibly precise with some of the angles, but soon enough, the entire room was illuminated. Val spun the last disk into place and a beam of light shot out, eliminating the last of the darkness.

Well, almost all of it. The last light beam shone upon one particularly intense bit of blackness on the far end of the room, situated on top of a small dais. The Mark of Batara Kala. It was here. It had to be. Nothing else could be emitting such intense darkness in such a small area.

I couldn't make out the Mark's features, because it was still emitting too much darkness, but I was positive I was right. I could feel a slight pull in the object's direction, like it wanted me to reach out and touch it.

"Misty," a tiny voice played in my head, taunting me, "come for me."

The whole thing was eerie, and I reared back a step instead, a shudder of revulsion coursing across my face.

Noelle started forward instead, toward the Mark, but I put a hand out to stop her.

"Wait," I urged.

Noelle frowned. "What is it? It's the Mark. We need to go get it." She held up a gloved hand as if to say, "I'm not a complete idiot, I know the dangers."

"Yeah, I know," I said. "But hasn't this all seemed a bit too easy? There's got to be more to it."

She shrugged. "Not everything is full of traps all the time," she countered.

That was true, but I still had a terrible feeling in my gut. I glanced around, my eyes finally settling on a large, lidless eye set into the far wall, above the dais. "There," I pointed at it. "Look at that. It could be a trap, waiting to kill us."

The lidless eye brought back chilling memories of the Temple of Ammit in Olympia. That thing had almost killed us. All of us. If there was any chance this thing was the same as that one...

Noelle shook her head. "What would you have us do, then?"

An idea came to me. "What if you tried it now?" I told her. "Invisibility. What if you tried to go invisible and then make your way over there? That way, the giant eye wouldn't see you."

"Invisible?" Val chimed in, sounding surprised. "Can you really do that?"

A little side note—actual invisibility was a rare talent in the magical world. Very few people ever managed it. Mental mages could do it, of course, by making you forget they were there, but there were few enough of those, and it wouldn't keep them from showing up on a video or anything, so it likely wouldn't hide them from magical lidless eyes, either.

For most others, the only way to do it involved bending the light around them in very precise ways such that you didn't realize they were there. That would work on tech as well as humans. It was theoretically possible for those with tons of practice in light magic to do it, but so hard to accomplish that it was basically never seen. I'd never even heard of my mother doing it, and she was the most powerful mage I knew.

Noelle's method of going invisible, if it worked, would be a heck of a lot simpler. She just had to turn her own color to translucent instead of red or green like she normally did.

"Don't know. Haven't tried yet," Noelle admitted.

"No time like the present?" I offered dryly.

"Ugh." Noelle glared at me, but she got to it anyway. The scent of candy canes in the air became almost overwhelming for a moment. Then, just like that, Noelle was gone. Disappeared completely, like she'd never been there. "How's this?" I heard her asking.

It was surreal, not seeing her but hearing her voice quite clearly. "Perfect!"

"Remarkable," Val admitted, staring open-eyed at the spot where she'd been.

"And I chose *you* for a sidekick?" Charly huffed. "That there is something else."

"Hey!"

Charly buried his face beneath his paws. "Sorry, schnookums."

“Well, I guess I’ll go grab that Mark, now,” Noelle said matter of factly. I imagined her nodding or something, but seeing as I couldn’t see her at all, that’s all it was.

I gave her a stiff salute anyway, even though I didn’t know if she could see it, and then I waited. Several moments, I waited, wondering what was going on. It was crazy. Noelle could still be right next to us, or she could be halfway to the Mark by now, and I’d be none the wiser.

Staring up at the lidless eye, I watched it for movement instead. It gave no indication of anything, just hung there in the air, completely still.

Of course, I didn’t know whether or not it even could move, but that was beside the point.

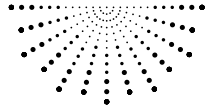
“Almost there,” Noelle called out from wherever she was. I thought it sounded like she was by the Mark, but acoustics could be weird, so I couldn’t be sure. “Just a little bit further now, and this thing’s mine.”

My whole body tensed, and I found myself leaning in just a little closer. The eye still hadn’t budged. Nothing had budged. Still, I could feel it. The tiny voice in my head was getting louder, more insistent. Just another few seconds, and the Mark would finally be ours.

“Got it,” Noelle exclaimed.

Then everything went dark.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



**T**he scent of candy canes in the air quickly dissipated along with all the light. I caught a hint of brackish water and ozone in the air, but mostly all I could smell was... orchids.

Kyra. She was here after all. Must have been lying in wait for us to find the Mark, only to swoop in at the last moment. How had she hidden herself, though?

It didn't matter. My blood froze. Kyra was here now. Finally, we would finish our fight. And this time, I had allies to help me out. I just needed to find her first.

I thrust my finger into the lancet, pulling out more blood and power. Using that, I funneled it into a light spell to try and banish the darkness. I pushed out as hard as I could in every direction, and the shadows went with them.

The room looked much like it had before, except this time, Noelle and Kyra were both highly visible on the platform at the end of the room, holding onto the Mark of Batara Kala. Both of them had their gloved hands on the small bit of metal, trying to wrest it away from the other as best they could. The two appeared to be evenly matched.

Beside me, Val prepared a ball of demon fire to send at the two. I put my arm out in front of him to stop him. "Wait!" I insisted. "You might hit Noelle by accident."

Val hissed, but he dropped the spell. "Fine. But we need to find a way to help her."

On that, I could agree. I thought about trying to call lightning or air, but again, I had just as good a chance of hitting Noelle as I did Kyra. If I could



just stop both of them in their tracks somehow without killing either, maybe I could swoop in and steal it out from under their noses.

“Earth,” my magic said in my ear.

Of course! An earth spell. They were dangerous in places like this, but a well-placed one could easily knock them both off their feet.

While I prepped my spell, I watched Val start to sneak forward, Charly close on his heels. Seemed they had their own idea for how to wrest the Mark from Kyra without hurting Noelle. I’d leave them to it. The multi-pronged approach was probably for the best, anyway.

“Get off me, you bitch!” Noelle spat at Kyra. Kyra growled in response.

The two kept fighting, vying for control of the tiny metal object in their hands. Neither even dared to let their grip go for a second lest they lose it.

The scent of orchids intensified as shadows began to converge around Kyra. She was just about to lash out with another attack.

It was time. I finished prepping my spell. Just a small, localized quake underneath their feet. Just enough to knock them both over. That should do it. Come on now.

“Stop!” a gruff voice called out, right when I was about to unleash my spell.

A sour taste filled my mouth at the sound of that voice. I dropped my spell, fearing what was going to come next.

“Tristan,” I seethed, my voice practically sounding like gravel. I spun to face the sound of the noise. It had come from behind me. Everyone else spun to face it, too.

Standing there, next to his little portal mage lap dog, was Tristan in all his twisted glory, his dark red eyes glaring at me. He was wearing his Lightless Seven finery today, no doubt in an attempt to exude power and influence. It just looked sad on him instead.

“That’s right,” Tristan said. He shot me an icy look. “You’ll all do as I say, or I’ll wipe out Noelle with a fireball right here and now.” As he spoke, he formed a massive ball of flames that danced on his fingertips. It was at least a foot and a half wide.

Kyra gasped. “But... you’ll kill me too with that! You can’t!”

Tristan tsked. “A small price to pay for victory, don’t you agree?” he said with all the coldness of a snake.

I craned my neck to look at Kyra. She was staring daggers at Tristan. Couldn’t blame her. Tristan’s betrayal had finally come full circle.

While the war played out between them, I changed tactics with my magic, refocusing my earth spell for under Tristan's feet instead, and increasing the intensity. He was the bigger fish to fry, so to speak.

Keep the act up a little longer, Tristan, and you'll be as good as done for.

"You can't!" Kyra repeated. "You... I've sacrificed everything for you!"

Tristan shimmered, reappearing a few feet away from Kyra a moment later. That damn portal mage was still right next to him. He must have portaled him over there.

Maybe that's how Kyra had been moving around so easily earlier. The portal mage. I'd have to kill him, too.

Once more, I refocused my magic, trying to center it under Tristan and the portal mage.

Tristan shot Kyra a sorrowful look. "My dear Kyra," he said, regarding her coolly, "you've been so wonderful, helping me all these years." He took in a deep breath. "It's true what you say. You have sacrificed *everything* for me." His expression went from sorrow to hardened. "And you'll continue to do so. Even giving up your life for my ascension."

The flames in Tristan's hands flashed and flared. Kyra's eyes widened in horror.

Before the flames could do their work, I finally unleashed my spell, putting a little more power into it than I'd intended.

The ground shook. Everything shook. The pillars around us started to crumble, sending parts of the room back into the darkness that had encompassed it originally. Tristan stumbled, his fireball going wide and slamming into the wall instead of Kyra or Noelle.

All at once, the room broke out into chaos. Noelle kicked Kyra in the shin, forcing her backward. Kyra wouldn't let go of the Mark, though, so they both tumbled to the ground, rolling around in a hail of limbs as they continued to fight for control.

Val sent a jet of demon flames right at Tristan, who countered with an ice wall of his own, guarding both him and the portal mage from getting hit.

Meanwhile, Charly flitted around like mad, not sure who to target, and I stood there looking dumbfounded, equally confused.

"Kyra!" I shouted at Charly. "Claw her freaking eyes out!"

Charly gave me a stiff salute and flew over to where Noelle and Kyra were battling it out. But it was no easy feat. The two were changing places

on the ground so quickly it would be a miracle if Charly could actually get a hit in. Still, it at least gave him a purpose.

I drew forth more blood and focused my efforts on Tristan and the portal mage. They were the bigger threat for now. I added some of my own fire into the mix with Val, and soon, his ice wall had disintegrated into a puddle on the ground.

Tristan hissed and blinked out of existence along with his portal mage, disappearing completely for several seconds.

I glanced about, trying to find them. "Behind you!" I shouted at Val as Tristan appeared a moment later, a menacing dagger in his hands.

He lifted the dagger, poised to strike out at Val and end his life. If it hadn't been for my warning, he would have been successful.

Val spun, channeling a burst of air that sent Tristan flying backward into another of the pillars. It cracked, sending more of the room into shadow. Maybe half the room was still lit at this point, which would only play further into Tristan's hands.

I summoned more light, but it had no effect. This was the Mark's magic at play, and my own feeble attempts were nothing in comparison.

Tristan grunted and bolted for the nearest shadow right as I sent another jet of flame right for his head. Sadly, it missed him completely.

He reappeared a moment later, on Val's right side, lashing out with his own fire.

The blaze shot past Val, aimed at me instead. I ducked, falling to the ground before it could consume me. Face met dirt, and for the third time in as many days, I got a mouthful of the stuff for my efforts. But at least I was alive.

I channeled water, moving the position of the puddle from Tristan's earlier ice wall until it was right beneath him, then sent lightning to that spot in an effort to electrocute him.

Tristan's body lit up for a half a second, and smoke rose from his extremities. A direct hit.

He stumbled about for a moment, then lashed out with flames in every direction, sending them flying into anything and everything they could touch. It was all I could do to set up a protective wall of air in front of me and my allies.

"Enough!" Tristan cried.

In the same instant, I heard Noelle scream. “Get off me!” she cried, her arms flailing about.

Oops. Charly. He was flying in the air right above Noelle and Kyra. He must have nicked her by mistake somehow.

The effect was immediate. Kyra pulled on the Mark, wrestling it free from Noelle’s grasp at last. Then she summoned shadows and disappeared into the darkened room.

A moment later, she reappeared by Tristan’s side, glowering at all of us. “Guess we’ll be taking this,” she spat, mostly at me. “Thanks again for finding it for us.”

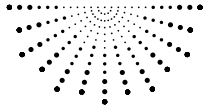
I groaned. “Come on, Kyra. Don’t go with him. You don’t want to live like this, do you?”

But it was no use. She was with him, and I knew I couldn’t dissuade her. She was too far gone. Had been his servant for too many years. Maybe if things had been different...

Kyra placed the Mark in Tristan’s gloved palm, then laid her hand on his shoulder. Tristan gave us all a big, gloating smile, then he nodded to the portal mage. Right as another burst of demon fire was about to engulf all of them, they disappeared, off to who knows where.

The Mark. We had lost it. Again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



“**D**amn it!” Val swore.

“Son of a bitch!” I added.

“Ugh,” Noelle chimed in. She was still laying on the ground over by where the Mark had been.

I raced over to her, Val hot on my heels. She had her hands covering her face and was curled up slightly into a ball. I looked her over. She had a claw mark on one of her cheeks, but other than that, she didn’t look any worse for the wear.

“Are you okay?” I asked. I held my hand out to her.

She groaned but accepted my hand. “Thanks,” she said in a hoarse voice. With a little effort, we got her back into a standing position.

“What happened?” I asked her, glaring slightly at Charly all the while.

Charly whimpered, hiding his face behind his paws as he floated in the air just out of reach. He was probably afraid I was going to flick him again. And for good measure, I probably would have.

Noelle shrugged. “Things were going fine until...” she glared at Charly as well. “Until that little fiend of yours clawed Kyra across the arm.”

“Clawed... arm?” I repeated.

Noelle nodded. “Yep. Got her good, too. I thought it was going to be enough to turn the tide and finally get control of the Mark, but that’s when that little bitch friend of yours went crazy. She took off one of her gloves and clawed me across the face with those nails of hers.” She ran her fingers across the mark on her face as she spoke. “Got me nice and good, too.” She huffed. “I was so shocked, and the pain stung. I reacted poorly and let go of the Mark. I’m so sorry.”

I placed a hand gingerly on her arm. “No, you did your best. We can’t expect any more than that,” I offered. At the same time, I mouthed “sorry” at Charly. Seemed his actions hadn’t caused us the loss of the Mark, after all. At least, not directly.

Charly gave me an appreciative nod and flew over to land on my shoulder. I stroked his fur gently a few times, and he let out a little purr.

“So, what now?” I asked. “Where do we go next?”

Val held out his hand to both of us. “We go after Tristan and Kyra, obviously.”

I stared down at his hand. His implication was obvious. He was going to teleport us out of here and presumably to where he figured the Lightless Seven mages would have gone off to.

Noelle placed her hand on Val’s arm and nodded. “Let’s get those sons of bitches.”

I hedged, staring at the hand like it was a gift I didn’t want to receive. “I’m not so sure that’s wise. Not yet, at least.”

Val groaned. Noelle shook her head. Charly nuzzled up closer to my neck. “Whatever you want and wherever you go, I’ll follow you, my queen,” he whispered in my ear.

I appreciated the sentiment but ignored him. He was just trying to get a treat out of me, and I knew it. He hadn’t earned one yet, though. I couldn’t just give him treats all day or he’d get fat.

Could magical ferret familiars get fat? I wasn’t sure, to be honest, but I didn’t want to risk it. He was already lazy enough, spending most of his time on my shoulder. He didn’t need any extra help.

“What now?” Val thrust his hand at me again. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“It’s just...” I paused for a moment, looking deep into Val and Noelle’s eyes. I got where they were coming from, but this whole thing was going to come down to me anyway. I just knew it. I was the one that needed the Marks, or I was going to go crazy. Not either of them. So I wanted to be good and ready when I faced the Lightless Seven next, even if that meant a slight detour in the meantime.

“What?” Val growled.

“The ogres,” I said finally. “If the Mark can control them, then we have to assume that Tristan and Kyra will be able to control them as well, by proxy.”

Val opened his mouth. I expected him to yell at me, but it was anything but. His face softened. “Valid point. One of those suckers was hard enough to take down. Could you imagine facing down six of them?”

“Nothing my trusty weapons can’t handle,” Noelle chimed in, patting her pistol at her side.

Val regarded her for a moment and huffed. “Maybe. But let’s not count on that. Ogres are hardy creatures. Discretion really is the better part of valor here.”

Noelle bobbed her head. “Very well. But then, what do we do instead?”

“Well,” I started, “remember why we came here to begin with? The anti-magic device?”

“Yeah?”

“I was thinking, what if we found it, and turned it on the Lightless Seven? It’s a long shot, but maybe it would be strong enough to negate the Mark’s magic. Even for a little bit. Then we wouldn’t have to worry about rampaging ogres or them portaling out of the way of our attacks.”

Val frowned. “That would leave us pretty vulnerable, too, though.”

“And that’s where I come in,” Noelle said, patting her gun again. “I’m used to fighting without magic where they’re not.” She tsked. “Without their magic, they’ll be sitting ducks.”

That brought a twinkle to Val’s eyes. “Sounds good. So does anyone have an idea as to where this anti-magic device is located?”

Noelle’s expression darkened. “I do. Sort of. But... Misty, you’re not going to like it.”

“Where?” I pressed. “Where is it?”

“You’ll see.”

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NOELLE WAS RIGHT. I DIDN’T LIKE IT. NOT ONE BIT. IN FACT, I HATED everything about it. But I was running out of both time and options.

“You’re sure it’s down there?” I asked, a bit of a whine in my tone.

Noelle shrugged. “As sure as ever. There are only so many ancient ruins and cave systems in Bali that go anywhere, and we’ve already explored the other two.”

She had a valid point. Still...

“But underwater?” I let out a groan. “You promised no more scuba diving.”

“That was before I knew it was our only option.” She clapped me on the shoulder. “It’s okay. Nothing should happen to your oxygen supply this time hopefully, and it’s a quick dive. Just like five minutes, tops. We’re already right on top of the entrance.”

As she spoke, she pointed toward a large coral structure beneath us. I couldn’t tell from this angle, but supposedly there was a cave entrance hidden beneath the coral there, right below us. The cave itself was filled with air, just the entrance was underwater.

I’d always wondered how structures like that could exist in real life. I’d seen them in video games in water temples plenty of times but had always assumed that was just games being fantasy. But apparently, they existed in the real world, too.

Was it magic? Could be. Powerful magic, of course. Although I’d heard caves like that did exist in nature all on their lonesome, so it didn’t have to be magic. Either way, I didn’t really want to do it, but I knew that wasn’t really an option.

“Fine,” I said with a humph. “We’ll go underwater to this cave of yours.” I turned to Charly. “You’ll have to wait up here with the boat again,” I told him.

“Mistress?” he whined, tears welling up in his eyes. Could ferrets even cry? I supposed this one could. He was doing it. “Surely you can’t mean that?”

I shrugged. “Unless you know of a way for me to transport you underwater without you drowning on me?”

Charly shuddered. He was many things, but fond of water was not one of them. “No, I suppose not.” He gave me a grand bow. “I shall await you in our grand carriage, my princess. May you return posthaste.”

I rolled my eyes at him. Always so dramatic.

“We ready to go, then?” Val asked. He squeezed me lightly on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, I won’t let you out of my sight for even a second.”

I stared at Val. Even wearing a wetsuit and with a giant pair of goggles on his head, he was a little bit sexy. It was all those bulging muscles under the fabric. It couldn’t hide them very well.

“Ready as you are,” I said with a wry grin.

“Let’s roll!”



With that, Val fell backward out of the boat into the water. Noelle followed suit. I shot Charly one last wistful look and put my goggles on, then went with them.

The warm water engulfed me immediately, swarming all around me. It was more pleasant than I'd expected it to be. A hint of panic started to set in as I sank downward and the light grew dimmer, but there was Val, holding me, protecting me, wrapping his arm around my middle.

I grabbed onto him a little harder than I probably should have. He winced, and I relaxed my grip slightly, unwilling to let go completely. It was nice having him there.

With his help, I steadied myself, getting my feet behind me and into a proper position to dive further under the waves.

Noelle looked at both of us for a few seconds and shook her head, then pointed downward.

Right. The cave. It was down there somewhere. Noelle started downward, and we followed. I wasn't willing to let go of Val, so we ended up holding hands as we drifted downward through the water.

The coral was pretty. I could say that for it, at least. Pinks and yellows and a bit of orange here and there, floating gently in the water. It was hard to believe it was all alive. I wanted to reach out and touch it, feel it under my fingertips, but I'd heard that could be detrimental to the coral, so I left it alone, admiring it from a distance instead.

We made our way under the coral as quickly as we could with me not willing to let go of Val and use my hands to help our speed. Which was to say, not all that quickly.

Soon enough, the cave entrance was before us. We had to go under a lip of coral, then come back up on the other side of it. As my head cleared the little barrier of water, it came into contact with air.

The air felt a little stale and smelled of dead fish, but it was air, all right. Honest to goodness air.

I figured there must be small holes in the ceiling of the cave somewhere further in that let the air in so it didn't lose all its oxygen, but I wasn't a scientist, so it was just a guess.

Quickly, I flopped my way onto the shore inside the cave, feeling a little bit like a beached whale. I'm sure it wasn't sexy in the slightest. I heard Val chuckle a little at my grand attempt.

I pulled off the flippers and slid out of the rest of the scuba gear as quickly as I could. I was glad to be rid of it. The trip down had been uneventful, but even the thought of that stuff was more than I could bear for too long.

“See?” Noelle said. She was already up and holding her hand out to me. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Just tell me there’s no more water in this cave,” I begged.

She shrugged. “Wish I could, but I haven’t actually been in here myself. So I don’t really know. It’s not like this is a UNESCO World Heritage site or something.”

Ugh. Now she tells me.

“Whatever. Let’s just get going. The sooner we’re out of here and back on dry land, the better.”

I took Noelle’s hand and got up into a standing position. The cave was only a little taller than I was, meaning Val had to crouch a bit to stand properly. It was kind of cute in a way.

“How was the dive?” I asked him.

“Fine,” he replied. “To be honest, water isn’t my favorite, either, but I can deal.”

I reached out and took his hand in my own, squeezing it. “Glad to know we have something in common, then.”

He grinned at me and squeezed me back.

Noelle glared at both of us. “If you two are done making kissy faces, we still have an artifact to find.”

I gave off a nervous laugh. “Right.”

Taking stock of the cave, there was really only one path forward. We took it, moving slow. The ground beneath us was sandy, so it would have been slow going regardless, but after the last few caves, no one was in a hurry to surge forward.

Before long, the sand gave way to hardened stone. I glanced around at some of the markings on the wall. They were glowing, even though I couldn’t find any light source around here other than Val’s glowing ball.

No, not markings. Creatures. The walls were alive, and the creatures along them were bioluminescent. I’d never seen anything like it before. It was enchanting. If it hadn’t been for Noelle being with us, goading us onward, it would have felt like another date with Val.

Maybe we could come back here when things died down and...

Don't think like that, Misty. Not now. Fun times come when the mission is over. Besides, I'd heard that sand got everywhere when you did things like that. I didn't want to think about sand grating down there.

Ugh. Yeah, that was the shock I needed to get my head out of the gutter.

We kept going. We'd been traveling for several minutes when the cave started to shift. Gone were the creatures lining the walls, replaced with smooth stone. This part of the cave looked purposeful, like someone had gone to great lengths to carve it out of the surrounding rock.

I wondered if once, long ago, this cave had been a temple, and there'd been an above ground entrance to it that had disappeared in the annals of time. It would make a certain amount of sense.

There were more markings on the walls here. These had the distinct look of writing. Some early Balinese language, much like the ones that had been in the first cave with the fireball trap.

My blood froze. The fireball trap cave. There were likely other traps here. I put my hands out to the sides to stop my companions.

"Wait! There's something wrong here, I can feel it."

"What is it?" Val said, wrinkling his nose.

I could feel something there, near the edge of this place. Something... sinister. "The writing on the walls, can you read it?"

Val rubbed his chin. "I can try." He stared at the markings for several moments, grunting to himself all the while. "It's a trap, all right, but I can't quite make it out."

"What? What's the trap?" Noelle asked.

Val threw his hands up. "I can't quite tell. The markings on the wall. They should be repeated on the floor up ahead. One of them is good. The other bad. Step on the wrong one and..."

"And?" I pressed.

"I can't tell. It's been rubbed out or faded with time. Suffice it to say it's probably bad."

Noelle took a hesitant step forward. "He's right. There are markings on the floor." She pointed ahead of us, at a spot on the ground. I could make out two distinct marks, each taking up about half of the floor.

The marks were five feet across in each direction, making them impossible to step over. Jump over, perhaps, but the ceiling was still low here, which would make jumping near impossible. We'd have to pick one marking and go with it.

On the left, the mark looked a little like a dancing bear on a ball. I was positive that wasn't what it really was, but it sure looked like it. On the right, it was a tiger eating a deer or something.

Neither marking immediately said danger to me, but neither seemed all that safe, either. A pit formed in my stomach. We were screwed.

"Any ideas?" I asked.

Val and Noelle both shook their heads. Val finally spoke. "One of us is going to have to step on a panel and see what happens."

"And if we pick the wrong one?"

He sighed. "Death, I'm assuming."

"I'll do it," I offered, without skipping a beat. I was a strong girl. I could handle this. Everyone was in this mess because of me, anyway.

"No!" Val and Noelle shouted in unison.

"Sorry," Val pressed, "but no can do. You're too vital to the overall mission." He sucked in a sharp breath and stared down the floor. "I'll do it."

Noelle shot him a fiery glare. "Nope. *I'll* do it. You two love birds can barely stand to be without each other. If one of you died, I'd just have to deal with the fallout constantly. I'm the expendable one in this scenario."

"Absolutely not," I insisted. "You are the furthest thing from expendable."

"Oh, come on!" she replied. "There's three of us. One of you can teleport out of here. One of you is needed for the Mark things. It's obviously me."

"Wait!" I said. "Teleport! We can teleport over the tiles!" I can't believe I hadn't thought of it before.

Val rubbed his chin. He nodded. "Assuming my magic isn't blocked down here, that's the best idea we've had yet."

Noelle clapped me on the shoulder. "Good call."

Val held out his hand and we both took hold of it. "Hang on for a second, this could get bumpy," he said. He closed his eyes and focused.

I blinked, then we were on the other side of the marks on the ground, all in one piece. Nothing bad had happened.

"Phew!" Val wiped at his brow. "That was a close one. I didn't think I'd have the power for it for a moment, but we made it out okay."

"Yeah." Noelle nudged him on the arm. "That was something awesome."

"Hella cool is what it was," I agreed.

While we were congratulating ourselves, I slipped, falling slightly backward. I put out my foot to steady myself, ending up stepping lightly on the tiger marking in the process.

I yelped as Val grabbed me, pulling me forward harshly right as a jagged harpoon-looking thing flew through the air, passing through the spot where I'd just been.

"Guess it was the bear, then," Val said breathlessly as he held me up against his chest.

I stared up into his eyes, grateful for his presence. That had been a close one. "Guess so," I replied.

We kissed, short and sweet, just happy that both of us were still alive to do it. It made my toes tingle with the promise of things to come, but I shut that thought out. Later, Misty. Later.

"If you two aren't busy, there's more cave up this way," Noelle teased.

"Right," I said, trying to sound all business. I slipped out of Val's grasp, keeping my hand tied up with his, and we all started forward again. "Just look out for tiger markings along the way," I said with a slight giggle. Val's kiss had left me feeling slightly light-headed.

"Sure thing," Noelle said.

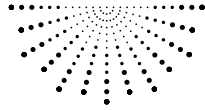
The path up ahead got slightly narrow, so we had to go single file. After a lot of arguing, I ended up taking the last place. Of course. Those two friends of mine wouldn't let me get into any danger if they could avoid it.

We entered a new area of the temple. The markings changed here, though what they were saying was anyone's guess. Even Val couldn't interpret them any longer.

We stepped into another room that was larger than the last. Probably a good ten feet across, and twenty feet wide. There were a few columns in the middle of the room, but otherwise, it was empty.

As my feet crossed the threshold into the chamber proper, I heard a faint click. Behind me, a door whooshed shut, trapping us in the room.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



“**S**hit!” Val swore. He roughly grabbed Noelle’s and my hand and concentrated, then swore again. Nothing happened. We stayed put.

“What?” I asked him.

He swore yet again. “I’m trying to get us out of here, but my magic seems to be blocked in this room. I can’t teleport out!”

My stomach lurched. If he couldn’t teleport us out of here, then... “The other doorway!” I pointed at the opening on the far side of the room.

We all bolted, surging forward toward the door. It slammed shut long before any of us could reach it, trapping us in this room. We were stuck.

“Shit!” Val said again. He sure was colorful today.

A wet feeling tickled the bottom of my feet, like the room was sinking or something. No, not sinking. Filling. With water.

“Damn it,” I swore. “This place is trying to drown us!”

“Ah, fuck,” Noelle chimed in. “Now what do we do?”

I glanced around. There wasn’t anything obvious. “A button. There’s got to be a hidden button or lever or something in here. Some way to stop the water and disarm the trap. We’ve just got to find it.”

“There doesn’t *have* to be,” Noelle griped.

“Just try to find it!” I yelled, glaring at her. She was right, but I wasn’t willing to accept that answer. Everyone put a failsafe in their traps in case they tripped them on accident. At least, I hoped they did.

Couldn’t think like that. I had to stay positive. We’d make it out of here, we just had to.

Noelle gave me a stiff salute and got going. Val and I spread out as well, searching the walls and the columns for anything that stood out or seemed

out of place. It was agonizingly slow going, and so far, none of us had turned up anything.

The water was up to my ankles now. It didn't seem to be coming in very fast, but it didn't have anywhere to go, so it'd only be a matter of time before it overtook us.

I scanned the walls again. There were plenty of markings, but they were all the same—just some strange wavy pattern, no doubt telling us that the room fills with water. Like that was a surprise. There was nothing out of place that I could find. No depressions in the wall that were suspicious, or bits sticking out like a sore thumb. I pressed my hand on the wave symbols anyway, hoping maybe that was part of the solution.

Nothing happened. The water kept coming, and we were still stuck.

Ugh. We needed a way out of here, and fast. Hadn't this happened in one of the movies I'd watched with Damian back in the day? Some sort of water room that was supposed to drown the heroes? How had they escaped?

I think they'd had someone on the outside to help them out. Technically, we *did* have one member of our team outside, but he wouldn't be any help here. Even if I'd wanted to involve him, there's no way we'd get in touch with Charly from in here.

No, it was better that he'd live through this. At least someone would.

There I went again, being all depressed. Snap out of it, Misty. You'll find a way out of here.

"There's just got to be something we're missing!" Val spat.

"Just calm down, everyone," I insisted. "We'll find a way out. We have to."

The water was up to my knees now. It was getting hard to keep making my way around the room. Every time I went anywhere, I had to slosh around, like there was a weight dragging at my feet. Much more of this, and it would be quicker to swim everywhere. I shuddered. No, I had no desire to swim at the moment. I'd avoid it as long as possible.

"Anything?" I called over to Val and Noelle. They shook their heads. "Don't suppose anyone has any bright ideas?"

Noelle took out her gun and shot at the door in the far wall. The first few shots did nothing, but the last one went through, forming a small hole in the stone. Unfortunately, it wasn't anywhere near big enough to fit through. Maybe big enough to wiggle a finger in, but that was it.

She shrugged. "That was all I had, sorry."

The water was up to my chest now. A little bit of it was no doubt swirling out the hole in the far door, but the outlet was nowhere near fast enough to counter the influx. The water level kept rising.

If only I could make that hole in the door bigger somehow. At least that would buy us some time.

“Of course!” I yelled. “The door! Let’s all push on the door, try to break it apart.” It was a longshot, but it was all we had. The door’s integrity would be lower, even with just that tiny hole. If we could capitalize on that and topple it, somehow...

We all practically swam over to the door. Val crashed into it as hard as he could. I followed suit, as did Noelle. We all put all of our weight into the door, but it wouldn’t budge. It was no use. The thing was as good as stuck.

“Damn it!” I slammed on the door again with my palm. By this point, I was already treading water, meaning my efforts to put force on the door were practically worthless. It wouldn’t be long now, until...

No. Don’t think like that. There had to be something. If I could just summon earth to break apart the door. But Val had tried his magic, and it had been blocked.

That’s when an idea came to me. Magic. Val’s magic had been blocked in the Egyptian temple, but mine had worked just fine. Maybe the same thing would hold true here as well.

I put my hand into my pocket, literally fishing for my lancet, and pushed down hard. Blood flowed right away, staining the water around me.

My head was barely over the waves. I was only going to get one shot at this, then we’d all drown. I supposed I could try to force an air bubble around us, but with the weight of the water crashing in, I wasn’t sure how long I could hold it.

Taking hold of my magic, I pushed air into the crack in the door, forcing it to expand outward, to create new fissures in the stone.

Slowly, it started to work. The door became more and more brittle as I poured more power into the spell.

Finally, the door cracked and crashed to the ground, sending the water out into the hallway, and taking us with it. We were dragged along from the power of the swell, landing probably ten feet down the hallway.

Coughing and spurring, Val got to his feet and practically dragged the two of us with him. The water was still coming, and there likely would be no stopping it anytime soon. We still needed to get to safety.



Thankfully, the path here seemed to lead upward, away from the water. Maybe it was a part of that failsafe I'd hoped for, for the people that had built the drowning room. A way to make sure they could get to safety if things went wrong.

Whatever it was, I was grateful. Soon enough, the water and its promise of a painful death was behind us, and we were in a new room. This one was far different from the rooms we'd been in previously. It was filled to the brim with various things. Mostly bits of treasure.

Markings adorned these walls, too, once again different from before. Some of them, I thought I recognized. There was the dancing bear I'd seen earlier, along with another tiger. And a drawing of what looked like a giant diamond.

No wave markings, though. There was no more water here, thankfully.

What there was was a large floor filled with markings of every kind. The tigers I already knew to avoid, but the rest? The rest I wasn't sure. I wasn't even honestly sure if the dancing bear signs were safe or not. We could assume they were, but an assumption could end with a harpoon in someone's gut. That wasn't a risk I was willing to take.

On the far side of the room, amidst a pile of treasure, was a rather odd-looking urn. It had an eye marking on it that had been crossed out, and a pair of muses facing the crossed-out eye. There were other markings, as well. Was that a googly-eyed ogre I spotted on the side of it? From this angle, it was hard to tell, but it certainly bore a crude resemblance to the drawing Damian had shown me at Mei's.

Power was radiating off the urn. Great power, unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. And it was hungry. It was like the urn was pleading for my magic and wouldn't be sated until it had all of it.

Yet at the same time, it felt benign. Like perhaps the device wasn't armed just yet. There was the promise of great power there, but it was muted. It was the strangest thing I'd ever experienced.

"Is that...?" Val asked. He looked hesitant, like he was no more in a hurry to touch it than the rest of us. Maybe even less so.

I nodded. "I think so. I think it's the anti-magic device." I bit my bottom lip. "It matches the description Damian gave me, at the very least."

Admittedly, that wasn't a ton of evidence to work with, but it's not like there were any other urns in this place, and certainly nothing that radiated that kind of power.

“So, how do we get to it?” Noelle asked. “Walk on the dancing bears? There don’t seem to be enough of them.”

Frowning at the floor, I had to agree. There were two dancing bear sigils on the floor. That was it. The rest were different markings. And those two bears were probably eight feet apart, with the last one still falling a good ten feet short of our goal.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “If we knew which symbols were the safe ones, we could just use those, but...”

“But we don’t know enough to know which ones those are,” Noelle finished. “Damn.”

“If only we could fly over them,” Val huffed. “Or teleport past them, but the markings go all the way up to the urn, and even under it. So that’s a no-go.”

“Damn,” I agreed. Flying. I’d tried flying a few times and always failed miserably. The ceiling here wasn’t high enough to manage a good attempt at it anyway. No, flying was definitely out. Unless...

“Wait,” I said, an idea coming to me, “I think I know what to do.”

Val shot me a curious glance. “Yeah?”

I nudged him on the arm. “Charly can fly, and I’m willing to bet he could lift that urn. You think if we went and got him, maybe he could fly over there and get it for us?”

“Maybe,” Val agreed, “but the water, and...”

“What if you tried to teleport out and get him, then come back. Do you think that could work?”

He shrugged. “Teleporting didn’t work in the trapped room, but it worked in one other spot. It’s worth a shot. Hang on.”

Val concentrated, then disappeared for several seconds.

“Unhand me you cretin!” Charly shouted a second later as Val reappeared, swathed in flame and holding onto the little ferret a little tighter than was probably necessary. “Mistress!” Charly quipped, seeing me. “Rescue me, please!”

I giggled. “It’s okay, Val. Go ahead and let him go.”

Val did as I asked. “Of course. Just making sure he was fine for the trip.”

Charly glared at him. “Just making sure I was fine. Humph.” He crossed his paws over his chest. “That’s the last time I let him manhandle me like that, no matter what he says about you being in trouble.”

My eyes shot from Charly over to Val and back again. What had gone on during those few seconds, anyway?

I shook my head. It didn't matter. "Look, Charly. Do you see that urn over there? Do you think you could fetch it for me? There'll be a couple treats in it for you."

"Treats?" Charly's eyes took on a greedy look. He gave me a stiff salute. "Your wish is my command, darling. I shall do as you request."

With that, he was off, flying over the markings on the floor. I tensed for several seconds, wondering if he would activate the symbols anyway, but nothing happened. He was just fine.

Charly sized up the urn for several seconds before huffing and wrapping his little claws around one of the handles. Heaving, he managed to get it into the air.

I waited several more tense seconds for him to return with the urn. At one point, I thought he was going to drop it, and we all prepared for whatever fresh hell would unleash, but he made the trip safe and sound, plopping the device into my outstretched hand.

It was heavier than I thought it would be, but other than that, I couldn't sense anything untoward about it. It felt much like an ordinary urn. I didn't see any buttons on it or anything to activate it, and it wasn't sucking the magic out of my fingertips or anything, but even so, I was positive it was the right object.

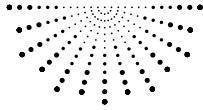
"That was easy enough," I said, smiling.

Val and Noelle both groaned.

"What? What?" I asked them.

A faint clicking noise from behind me wiped the smile from my face.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“Aww, shit!” Val swore again.

In front of us, I watched as the small altar with all the treasure on it started to sink into the ground below. My tummy, and my hopes, sunk along with it. We were all going to die here.

Val roughly grabbed onto Noelle’s and my hands, and the world erupted into flames.

A few moments later, we were deposited back at Val’s place, panting and huffing, and most importantly, far away from that death trap of an ancient temple.

Teleportation. Right. Val could teleport. Thank the gods.

“Everyone okay?” Val asked. He was still breathing fairly hard.

I took stock of my body and nodded. No injuries to report on my part. I glanced over at Noelle and at Charly. Both of them seemed fine, as well.

“Yep,” Noelle said. “Just peachy, now that we’re out of there.”

Three more sets of scuba gear short, no less. No one was ever going to rent to us again at this rate, not that I blamed them...

“So, now what?” Charly asked, nuzzling close against my neck.

“Now I try to figure out how to make this device work so we can stop the Lightless Seven,” I told him.

“About that,” Val said, fingering the urn. “Don’t suppose you have any ideas?”

I bit my bottom lip. Not really, no. This whole time, I had been hoping it would be kind of obvious, but of course it was anything but. Why would it be?

Anti-magic wasn't even supposed to exist. Oh sure, you could drain a mage's health, and by proxy keep them from using their spells, but you couldn't actually cancel out their magic altogether. It came from the patron god or goddess they worshipped, or in rare cases, from their own biology.

Or could you? I turned the urn around in my hands. It was definitely powerful. Something about it ate at me in a way I couldn't describe. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe everything I'd been taught was wrong. Maybe it could do exactly what Damian had described. Not that I had any idea how to go about it.

"I was kind of hoping there'd be runes on here for you to translate or something," I admitted after a moment, "but I don't really see any."

Val stared at the urn and frowned. "No, there's really not."

Noelle leaned in close, putting her head in between ours. "Well, whatever you decide to do, we need to do it quick."

I studied her face for a second. "What makes you say that?"

"The sky, of course."

I looked up at the sky. It was dark out, but other than that, I didn't see anything obvious. "It's night. What's the big deal?"

Noelle groaned. "That's what I thought at first, too." She pointed at the watch on her wrist. "But it's three pm."

"Shit," I swore. It seemed appropriate.

"Yeah."

The Mark of Batara Kala. It controlled darkness and ogres. We hadn't seen any more of the latter, yet, but this unnaturally darkened sky could only mean the former was well under way. Which meant the Lightless Seven had activated it.

I sucked in a deep breath. "Okay. Here's the plan. I'll stay here and try to figure this thing out. Val, you go and find where the Lightless Seven have gotten off to. They can't be that far. Noelle and Charly, you two prepare for war."

A series of nods greeted me. Val got up and distanced himself a little, then frowned at the horizon. "Uh, boss? I don't think I need to go hunting for your mage friends. I think they're already here."

I followed his gaze. There, cresting the nearby hill, were at least a dozen ogres, all of them carrying giant clubs. One of them beat it against the ground, and the earth beneath us began to shake.

"Ah, hell," I said. "Try to stall them, then. I need time to think."

“Stall a dozen ogres?” Val said incredulously.

“Got a better idea?”

Val pulled on his face. “Noelle, come with me. Let’s see if that peashooter will actually stun them or not.”

The two quickly took off toward the ogres, leaving me alone with the anti-magic device. Well, mostly alone. Charly was still with me.

“What’s that crossed out eye for, mistress?” Charly asked. I got the feeling he was trying to be helpful.

I shrugged. “Hell if I know. Could be an ancient god’s symbol, could be graffiti.”

“Not that helpful, then,” Charly huffed.

“No, no it’s really not.”

I glared down at the urn in my hands and gave it a smack on the side. Nothing happened. Of course nothing happened. I’m not sure what I’d expected, but I should have known better than to have expected everything to magically fall into place just because I’d angrily smacked an artifact. I smacked it again, on the two muse symbols next to the crossed-out eye, and it glowed for half a second, then that, too, went away.

To be honest, I wasn’t even completely sure it had glowed. It could have been the light glinting off it or something from a nearby lamp.

“Ugh,” I growled. “It’s useless. This thing is as good as useless to us unless I can turn it on.” I set the urn down and walked a few feet away, pacing and staring at it all the while.

Charly landed softly on my shoulder. He nuzzled up against my neck, expecting some pets. I gave him a mindless pet, stroking his soft fur and scratching his head at the same time.

“Yeah, yeah, baby. That’s the spot. Keep it up, luscious,” he purred.

I gave him the stink eye. “Luscious?”

Charly laid his paws bare. “It’s what came to mind, sorry.”

Shaking my head, I gave him another couple pets, then set the urn down on the ground in front of me. There had to be a way to activate the damn thing.

A loud roar shattered the air, bringing my attention away from the urn. The ogres. Val and Noelle had begun to engage the ogres. I couldn’t make out a ton from where I was standing, but it looked like one of them was holding its eye and waving its club around like mad.

The ground shook again, and I had to work to steady myself, almost using magic to aid me. The tremors were really something else with all those ogres up there.

The ogre managed to strike another of his friends in his blind rage, and that one started swinging his club around as well. Pretty soon, it was all I could do just to stay upright as the ground shook even harder than before.

I ended up pricking my hand on a splinter while trying to brace myself against a nearby wall.

Magic. Yes, that was a good idea. Maybe I could use it to even out the ground a bit where I was, and at least get some concentration. I summoned forth my powers, letting them wrap against me like a warm blanket, and called out to the earth to steady it. My magic went to work immediately, and standing became easier.

Except under the urn. For an area of about three feet around the urn, the ground was still shaking. It was like my magic had no effect on it or its surroundings at all.

Maybe it was just a big siphon, then? Maybe it just sucked the magic from the air and ground around it and used it to... what? That, I wasn't sure. But at least it was a starting point.

I grabbed the urn and started toward the ogres, a small plan forming in the back of my head. Maybe if I could get close enough to them, I could use the urn to siphon out whatever magic was working to make them go crazy and nullify it. It would involve getting really, really close to the ogres, though.

Not much of a weapon, this urn, but based on the screams and the quakes, it was better than anything else we had going for us.

All twelve of the ogres were still standing tall. A few of them looked more annoyed than the others, and one of them was still holding one hand over one of its eyes, but mostly they looked no worse for wear. My guess was that Noelle's "peashooter," as Val had called it, had done very little, and there were no cliffs in the area for us to use to our advantage.

Anti-magic it was, then.

The urn was heavy, so I pricked my finger with my lancet and summoned a strength boosting spell, only to find that it, too, was sucked into the urn. I knew because instead of boosted strength, I felt drained. Simply drained.

A bummer, but what could I do? I'd just have to hope I could make it to the ogres in time to keep Val and Noelle alive.

"Come on, Charly!" I called to him. "Go make some ogres mad. Scratch their eyes out or something!"

"Scratch their..." Charly huffed. "You don't honestly expect that to work on me, do you?"

I smiled. "Guess not. Come on, anyway. We have to help our friends."

He simply nodded in response. I supposed it would have to do.

The ogres were getting closer now. I could see Val struggling against one of them. He had the thing's club in his own hands, straining against the weight of it, trying to keep it from crushing him.

Noelle was nowhere to be seen, but then she'd probably turned invisible. Couldn't blame her.

To my left, an ogre howled as a line of blood opened up across its legs. Yep, that was Noelle at work, all right. Invisibility could really come in handy sometimes.

I reached the nearest ogre a moment later, hefting the urn and holding it in front of me like it was a shield or something. In reality, I had no idea how fragile the thing might be, but if it had survived this long, then I had to hope it would make it through this conflict, too.

The ogre raised his club, bringing it down over my head. I didn't have any magic and couldn't summon it, so I had to try and dodge it all on my own. I leapt to the side, out of the way of the death device with mere inches to spare.

In the same motion, I threw the urn at the ogre's feet. It clattered on the ground, stopping right in between its two giant legs.

The ogre howled and roared, but its roar was different somehow. Muted. Not as crazed or insistent. It dropped its club, sending the earth around us rocking, but it wasn't trying to swing it at me again.

Slowly, the ogre turned around and started heading in the opposite direction. Huh. Guess the anti-magic device had worked, after all. It just had to be super close to the ogres, just like I'd thought.

Another roar shattered the air from off to my side. Val. I had to get to Val. He was still struggling with his ogre and starting to slip and lose ground. I picked up the urn and sped over to where he was standing.

"Need a little help?" I offered as I sidled up next to him.

Val groaned. "Get out of here. I've got this."



“Yeah, I can tell,” I said with a half giggle.

Val and the ogre were locked in their struggle, so I strode up to the ogre and brazenly placed the urn underneath the feet of the hulking beast.

The urn’s magic went to work right away. Slowly, the beast let his club fall, almost splattering Val in the process. He managed to skate away at the last moment to avoid certain doom.

Oops. Guess I should have warned him first.

Dazed, the ogre started to walk the other way, looking for all the world like it was lost or something. Val raised his hands, a ball of demon fire at the ready to burn the beast in its retreat. I held my hand out to stop him.

“Wait,” I said. “It didn’t mean any of this. It’s just the Mark’s magic making it go crazy. Let it leave.”

Val shot me a hardened look, but he nodded and let the fire die on his fingertips. “Very well. You’re right. He seems harmless now.” He gestured toward the urn. “You figure out how to work that thing, then?”

“A little bit.” I shrugged. “If you get close enough to it, it cancels out your magic. Well, mine and the ogres’, at least.”

“How was I able to teleport us out, then, back at the temple?” Val asked.

Good question. I had no idea. “Maybe it doesn’t work on demons?” I offered. Or maybe I had done something to activate it back at Val’s place after all. It had glowed for that half second...

“Let’s keep that in mind just in case,” Val said with a wink.

“Hey!” Noelle called from off to my left.

I spun to face her, but I couldn’t see her. I could, however, see an ogre that was wrestling with something invisible around its neck.

“Little help, please?” Noelle begged.

“I got it,” Val said. He picked up the urn with one hand and tossed it at the ogre’s head.

Noelle deftly caught it out of the air, becoming visible again the moment she caught it. She pointed the top of the urn at the ogre’s eyes, and they instantly lost their dark, terrible look. The ogre swayed several times, finally falling to the ground with Noelle on top of it.

She swung down off the ogre, handing the urn back to me. “That thing has ick written all over it. I want no part of it.”

“Fair enough,” I replied. “But it sure works wonders on those ogres.”

“Which is a good thing,” Val said, “because we’ve still got several of them to deal with.”

Heh. Fair point. We'd subdued three of the ogres, but there were still nine more in the area going on a rampage and causing the ground to shake beneath us. I felt like I was going to continue shaking for several minutes after it ended, at this rate.

As if on cue, one of the ogres swung his mighty club right for my head. I freaked out, knowing there was no way I could dodge it in time. Not without magic.

Val picked me up and tossed me to the side, throwing me out of harm's way. The club slammed into him instead, and he went flying, landing against a nearby building with a loud thud. He gave me a thumb's up sign, letting me know he was still okay.

The ogre lurched forward, raising its club to strike at Val again and end him for good this time. I used that moment to slip underneath the ogre's guard and plant the urn at his feet. The great beast swayed for a moment, then let his club drop and walked away, much as the others had.

Part of me wondered just how much juice this thing could suck up; if it had enough room in it to subdue all the ogres. One could only hope.

Another ogre came for us, then, but Charly came to our rescue, flying in the thing's eye range and swiping at one of the dark orbs with his tiny little claws.

The beast roared and tried to swat him out of the air, but Charly was much too fast for the lumbering ogre. I used that distraction to place the urn under his feet and disable him as well.

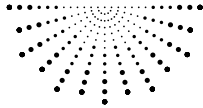
Five ogres down. Things were looking up. The ogres' numbers were thinning, and we were winning. Working as a team, we managed to disarm the remaining ogres in a similar fashion, one at a time. At the end of it, only a handful of buildings had been destroyed, and there were no casualties on either side.

Still, we were all starting to feel the effects of the battle. I, for one, was barely staying upright at the moment. It felt like the urn was draining me more than Noelle or Val. Was it draining my magic even when I wasn't using it? I couldn't be sure, but it felt like it.

Huffing, I beamed at my companions. "We did it."

A slow clapping noise from off to my left told me Val and the others weren't the only ones that were impressed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



**T**ristan. My thoughts went instantly to Tristan. He was there. He just had to be. I spun to face the new threat, only to be shocked once more.

That was no Tristan standing there. It was the portal mage. I'd recognize his look anywhere. Only, it wasn't him. He was different somehow. The Mark. It was there, embedded in his thigh. Tristan had given it to him. The portal mage had gone mad with power, just like the others.

And there, at his side, arms crossed over her chest, was Kyra, looking a tad on the crazy side herself.

"Kyra," I said slowly, choosing to address her. She'd be the less insane of the bunch. I hoped. "Come on. You can see it now. They all go crazy. Come to me, and we'll take this guy out together."

For a split second, I saw a war play out in Kyra's head. It looked like she was going to agree with me. But then her face hardened, and her expression soured. "Lies!" she spat. "You are full of nothing but lies! I will see your end myself."

Damn. I had hoped maybe I'd be able to convince her, after Tristan had basically considered her life forfeit. But nope. This was how it was going to be.

"Thought we'd fall that easy, did you?" Portal Mage sneered. "You're nothing but a pathetic excuse for a blood mage."

Well, he wasn't completely wrong there, but I wasn't about to let him know that...

"Fine," I said through clenched teeth. "Do your worst. We're ready for you."

Kyra attacked first. She lashed out at me with her shadowy tentacles. One of them wrapped around my leg, but it withered and died away quickly enough.

The anti-magic device. It had saved me.

Kyra scowled, bringing out a pair of daggers instead. She flung them at my head.

That was harder to dodge, especially without magic. Normally, I would have summoned a wall of air to push them away, but that option was out, so I lunged to the side instead, far away from the urn.

I landed on the ground with a hard thud that jarred my bones, scraping the tender skin of my arm in several places.

Power flared to life as I left the little circle surrounding the anti-magic device, and I called on it instantly, sending a jet of flame hurtling toward Kyra and Portal Mage.

But they were ready for me. Portal Mage grabbed Kyra, and the pair blinked out of existence, appearing instead slightly behind me.

Portal Mage laughed and produced a long blade, which he aimed at my heart. He thrust downward, and I braced for impact. This close to me, there was nothing I could do but wait.

A loud shot rang out, and Portal Mage dropped the sword to grab his arm.

Noelle was there, holding her pistol in her hands, pointed right at Portal Mage's head. "Don't move," she threatened, "or the next shot will be aimed better."

I had to keep myself from snorting. She was normally such a crack shot. I wondered why she'd hit his arm instead of his skull. Heat of the moment miscalculation, maybe?

Portal Mage hissed, and the pair disappeared again. I searched around for them but couldn't see them anywhere.

Once more, the ground rumbled. An ogre. One of the ones we'd subdued earlier most likely. It was headed back this way.

Noelle fired, emptying her clip into its head as it lumbered onward, threatening to crush us all with its mighty club. The beast didn't slow. If anything, this one was even crazier than before.

Val picked up the anti-magic urn and sped toward the ogre. "I got this," he insisted.

I left him to it, trying to figure out where Portal Mage and Kyra had gotten off to. I didn't need to look that hard. I found them just a moment later, right in front of me.

This time, I was prepared. I'd summoned magic earlier just for this moment. I lashed out with a burst of air, sending both of them sprawling, apart from each other.

Portal Mage hissed and blinked again, but this time, Kyra didn't go with him. She was mine. I was going to end this here and now.

Summoning fire, I formed a big ball of flames at my fingertips, then sent it straight for Kyra. She screeched and summoned a wall of shadows.

Flame met shadow in mid-air. Flame won. I heard the sound of Kyra's cries as the flames licked at her skin. Then the screaming stopped.

Slowly, the shadows dissipated. I looked around, trying to figure out what had happened. But of course, it was obvious. Portal Mage had rescued her again.

I spun around, looking for them, only to find Val wrestling with the mad ogre. Noelle was once again roped around its neck, trying to suffocate it as Val danced underneath its feet, trying to place the urn in a good spot and having trouble. This one was moving too fast to make it easy on them.

Air. I needed air. I let more blood flow and summoned a wall of air, surrounding the ogre with the stuff to try and keep him in place. It worked, effectively trapping both it and Val in one spot.

Finally, Val planted the urn, and the ogre's magic was drained from it. It shook its head and started off, like it had no idea why it was even here in the first place.

Poor thing. I would make Portal Mage and Kyra pay for this.

Val shot me a thumb's up, then everything around me went dark. Shadows. They were everywhere. Thick, like soup, blocking out everything. I summoned forth a burst of light, but it had no effect. I was trapped tight.

Pain shot up my arm. I looked at it to see a dagger sticking out of the skin there. It looked like one of Kyra's.

Blood flowed freely from the wound. I used it to summon strength to my side. Between the previous exertion and the blood loss, I was starting to feel a bit woozy.

Kyra's laughing, menacing form appeared in front of me. I lashed out with fire right away, but she danced out of the way. Or maybe portaled. It

was hard to tell, and it didn't really matter. Either way, she was far away from me, and I was as good as dead.

If I couldn't see anyone else, then they couldn't see me, either.

More pain. A wound opened up on my other arm. I used this blood to summon even more strength, but it was a losing battle, and everyone knew it. I was only so-so with strength boosting spells, and Kyra had the upper hand anyway. She was toying with me. Her and her little portal mage. Nicking me here and there. Causing me harm.

She had me right where she wanted and could end it at any time, but she didn't want to. Not yet. If only I could figure out how to use that to my advantage.

"Come on!" I taunted them, shouting at the darkness for all the good it did me. "Come and finish it! You know you want to!"

But my shouts were met with nothing. There was nothing. Just darkness. And a sudden silence. I could no longer hear anything.

Was it my strength finally giving way? Was I about to die? I'd heard Val and Noelle shouting for me earlier, but now? Now there was nothing. Just emptiness. This was the end. I could feel it.

Kyra's laugh came again, and I knew this was it. I fell to one knee right as her blade sliced through the air where my head had just been.

With the last of my strength, I lashed out with my own dagger. Val's dagger. Right at the spot in front of me, where I imagined Kyra would be.

I heard a hiss and a yelp, and finally, the darkness around me was a little less empty.

"You bitch!" Kyra spat. "I'm going to make you pay longer for that!"

"Come and face me without all your tricks," I fired back with a strength I no longer possessed. That had been my last trick, and we both knew it.

Something hard clanked against my feet. Hard like stone. I glanced at it with blurry eyes, wondering what it could have been. Not Kyra, certainly. No. The anti-magic device. It was there. Protecting me. Guarding me. Val must have thrown it at me.

All at once, the darkness around me dissipated. I could see clearly. Kyra. Portal Mage. They were fighting with each other. Kyra was grabbing for the Mark, but he was having none of it. Somehow, they'd forgotten about me. At least for the moment.

How odd. I tried to grab my dagger and stab at one or both of them, but I lacked the strength to do so. All I could do was watch while my

surroundings shifted and blurred, and the two mages fought over a tiny piece of metal.

“This has gone on long enough!” Kyra was shouting. “You need to stop this before we both disappear into nothing.”

“Nonsense!” Portal Mage fired back. “I am one with everything. I am a god!” He had his hands out to his sides and was calling on more darkness to lash out at Kyra, who was barely holding her own against his onslaught.

What were they fighting about, exactly? I couldn’t tell. My surroundings were a blur. Everything was a blur. At least nothing hurt anymore. There was that.

I wanted to end them both, right then and there, but I was as good as dead myself. A thought came to me, then. What if I could enhance the magic of the urn? Make its area of effect bigger? Then I could drain the magic from both of them at the same time, bring them to the same glorious end I was about to reach.

What the hell, it was worth a shot. I grabbed onto the urn with both hands, barely able to wrap my fingers around it, and closed my eyes. I willed the last of my magic power into the urn.

All at once, it was like stars exploded in my brain. Power flooded me, filling every ounce of my body and charging me unlike anything I’d ever experienced.

I stood, feeling like I could take on the world, as magic power from ages past flowed through my body, sealing up my injuries and making me feel unstoppable.

Was this the secret of the urn? It wasn’t just a siphon, it could grant power too? Was that why it had been secreted away? To keep people from using its terrible power?

It was of little consequence. Everything was of little consequence. I glanced over at Kyra and Portal Mage. They were still fighting over the Mark. Kyra had wrapped her hands around it and was pulling.

I gave her a nudge. Just a tiny little nudge with the back of my hand, and she went flying, hurtling through the air, slamming into a nearby building with a crack and a thud.

Portal Mage screamed, then, as the power of the Mark left his body. He held out his hands to the sides and let out an ear-splitting howl, withering slowly away until he was nothing but a husk of his former self.

In the blink of an eye, I was there by his side, easing my dagger into his heart. He glared up at me with an intense hatred. Then his eyes lost all their light, and he slumped against the ground.

The power fled me just a moment later. All of it. It had been there one moment, and now it was gone. Maybe the urn only gave in equal to measure to what it had gotten, or it was spent for the moment. Whatever. It had been enough to turn the tide.

Val was there. And Noelle. And Charly. All of them were staring at me like I was superwoman or something.

Who knows? Maybe I was.

I grabbed the urn. It couldn't stay here. Not with me. It was too powerful. I didn't want it to taint my brain any more than it already had. I had to get it away from me as quickly as possible. And keep it out of the reach of others who might use it for their own purposes.

I thrust it at Val. "Take this," I said. "Take it and give it to Damian. It's his to command, now." I glanced at Noelle. "Go with him. Get some rest. You've earned it."

"But Kyra..." Val said, gesturing toward where she lay, unmoving. "The Mark."

"I've got this. You two go. The sooner you do, the sooner you can come back and get me," I promised.

Val seemed none too sure about it, but he nodded and did as I asked. In a bright flash, the two of them were gone.

Charly landed on my shoulder and nuzzled my neck. "I'm glad you're okay, mistress," he said softly.

I gave him some light pets. "Me too, buddy. Me too."

Together, we headed over to where Kyra lay on the ground. Her body looked broken. One of her arms was hanging at an odd angle, and I could see bone sticking out of her leg. She was in bad shape, and likely didn't have long left.

In her hands, she was clutching the Mark of Batara Kala. It glowed softly.

"Here," she said, shoving the Mark in my direction. "I don't want it."

"But your injuries," I insisted. "You'll die without it."

Kyra coughed. There was a little blood in it. "I'll go crazy with it. I know that now. Seen it with my own eyes with both Roman and Alaric."

Alaric. That must have been Portal Mage's name.



“Take it. Do whatever you want with it. Just do me a favor.”

I took the offered Mark and knelt down closer to Kyra, leaning in as close as I could. I probably should have kept my distance. For all I knew, it was a last-ditch attempt to kill me. To take me with her. But I sensed no malice coming off her. On the contrary, she seemed at peace.

Kyra licked her cracked lips and lifted her head ever so slightly toward me. “Kill me,” she whispered in my ear, “before I go crazy.”

I shook my head. “Nonsense. You gave up the Mark. You’ll be fine.” I pricked my arm and let some fresh blood flow. “Here,” I said, summoning my magic, “let me heal you.”

I sent my power into her body, letting it fill her with strength. She sputtered and coughed, then slugged me in the gut. I let my power stop.

“Please,” she begged. “I can already feel it. The Mark. It’s there, on the edge of my mind, trying to take me over. If you don’t kill me soon, I’ll be lost. Just please, do your enemy this one last favor.”

Tears were stinging my eyes. I couldn’t believe it. After everything, why did it have to end like this?

“I can’t,” I insisted. “I... I just can’t.”

“Please!”

With a heavy heart and enough tears running down my cheeks to start their own river, I grabbed Val’s dagger. I lifted it over her heart, then closed my eyes and tried to summon the strength to do it. To end Kyra’s life at her request.

But the strength wouldn’t come. I slumped and let the dagger fall to the ground.

“I’m sorry,” I said, crying anew. “I can’t do it.”

Kyra glared at me one last time, then summoned what was left of her strength to spit in my face. I wiped it off almost without thinking, brushing away several tears at the same time.

“Weakling,” Kyra accused, the word coming out as more of a whisper.

Her body shook, then, and she took one sputtering breath as blood filled her mouth and stained her shirt. Her heart. Someone had pierced her heart with a dagger. But it hadn’t been me, and it wasn’t Kyra, either. She lacked the strength, among other things.

Who, then? Who had done it? Was it Portal Mage? But he was dead. I was sure of it. Still, there was no one else around.

“How?” I asked the air, blinking tears out of my eyes as Kyra bled out beneath me. She had maybe a few moments left before death took her.

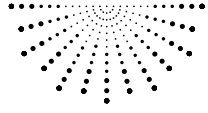
A tsking noise caught my attention. “Well, that was awkward,” a silky-smooth feminine voice called from somewhere behind me.

My blood chilled. I recognized that voice. Even after all this time, I would never forget it. I’d begged to hear that voice for so long. But here? Now? It was unexpected to say the least.

I spun to face the source of the voice, my lips trembling as I eked out a single word in response. “H-hello?”

Right before my eyes, my sister Elaine appeared out of nowhere. She waved at me, a broad smile on her grim face. “Hi, sis!” she said, her tone bubbly and overly sweet. “Miss me?”

## AUTHOR'S NOTES



MARCH 30TH, 2023

First off, thank you so much for reading this book and staying with me for the author's notes. This is my one chance to talk to you, the reader, directly, and I love that you're here for it.

If you liked the book, please leave a review. They really do mean the world to me. Someone recently left me a review saying I was one of their favorite authors. Me. I was over the moon. I think I told just about everyone. So yes, they do make a difference.

What a rush with that ending, huh? I didn't know it was gonna happen until I got almost all the way there. I mean, I knew Elaine was going to come back into the books at some point, but not exactly where or when. Or how. Guess we all know the answer to those questions now, though. Or do we? I guess you're gonna have to stick it out for one more book. :)

How about a favorite scene? Definitely when Misty and Val got back together. I had been waiting five whole books for that moment to happen and I was so happy when it finally did. Their relationship has been rather tumultuous. It was nice to see Misty finally get some joy and comfort in the harsh circumstances foisted upon her constantly.

What about you? Do you have a favorite scene? Something that made you cry happy tears, or shout at your screen? Drop me a line and tell me about it. I love to hear from my fans. It's even better than getting a review (though honestly, both is even better, so please do both).

Or maybe you'd like to get a character named after you or someone you love? I've had both requests before, and I'm always happy to oblige. Means one less trip to the baby name boards for me. Believe me, those places can get kind of crazy. You don't want to know just how many ways there are to spell a name like Kayleigh. Trust me. You're better off without it.

Anyway, just let me know and I'd be happy to use your name in a book. Drop me a line at [peter@peterjglenn.com](mailto:peter@peterjglenn.com) and ask and the world shall be your oyster, so to speak.

At any rate, thanks so much for sticking with these books (and me) until the very end. At the end of the day, I really do write these books for my happy fans.

Auf Wiedersehen.

## ALSO BY PETER GLENN

### **Blood Magic is Thicker Than Water**

Sisterless in Seattle (1)  
Damned in Dallas (2)  
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Dragon Dearest (6)  
There's a Bad Moon on the Right (7)  
Fae and the Single Dad (8)  
Fae Weddings and a Funeral (Coming soon)

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